



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE.**

Adults

Matthew 14–28

Commentary

Spring 2026



WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

If you're an adult of a particular generation, you'll probably remember a toy called The Magic 8 Ball™. For those who aren't as familiar, this was a foolproof tool for getting answers to any questions about the future . . . sort of.

In one sense, the 8 Ball guaranteed you an answer to every question. If you asked about your future spouse or whether you were going to pass your history test, the 8 Ball had an answer. The problem was that the Magic 8 Ball carried about as much prophetic authority as a fortune cookie. At best, the answers were vague. At worst, they were irrelevant.

Then again, it was designed for entertainment. No one with a modicum of sense would entrust their future to an oversized pool ball.

Of course, human nature still longs to know what's ahead. Whether we're thinking about this life or the next, we seek clarity. We want to see what's just around the bend.

Jesus understood that. That's why He often talked with His disciples about what would happen in the short term and in the distant future. Throughout the Gospels, including Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminded His followers that He holds the future. He is God. He loves us more than we can imagine. He remains in control, and His people can trust Him.

Jesus might not give you every answer you've ever wanted, but He has promised to give you peace for today, tomorrow, and eternity. That starts with a personal relationship with Him. If you're seeking answers to the most important questions in life, here's what you need to do . . .

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus as God's Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross. Jesus also rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: "Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen."

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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*Evangelistic Emphasis

MEET THE WRITERS



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FROM THE TEAM LEADER



Timeless Truth

Two weeks ago, I stumbled across a box that held jewelry and small trinkets that once belonged to my grandmother. My task of organizing a closet suddenly felt like a treasure hunt. Somehow, I'd forgotten about putting this box away, meaning to sort through it "someday." Unpacking each item slowly, I took time to inspect each piece. While some pieces of jewelry were very familiar, bringing memories quickly to mind, others were less so. Each one felt like a prized possession. Every piece was dear to me because of its original owner.

The Gospel of Matthew provides us with a look at the key teachings of Jesus. We get a glimpse into Jesus's ministry in Galilee, His time spent in Jerusalem, and the week leading up to His crucifixion and resurrection. Matthew described the morning of Jesus's resurrection when the women arrived at His tomb only to find it empty. Not bound by death, Jesus arose! Time spent in this Gospel reminds us of Jesus's identity as the promised Messiah.

This quarter, we will examine several of Jesus's important teachings. Each one is valuable. Each teaching offers us a deeper understanding of Jesus's earthly ministry. Together, these teachings show us how to live as faithful followers of Christ, giving daily guidance and continual encouragement. Like the cherished possessions I recently discovered, each biblical truth turns our attention to the One we received it from. I hope this quarter leads you to a deeper appreciation of God's Word and the One who gave His life to bring us salvation.

In Him,

Amber Vaden

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Explore

Discover



BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Matthew 14–28 calls us to radical trust in Jesus, to faith that walks forward even when it’s hard, and to a surrender that sees beyond earthly loss to eternal gain. The question remains: Are we willing to follow Christ, no matter the cost?

WRITER

While Matthew did not identify himself as the author of this Gospel, he did leave clues to his identity. Most scholars acknowledge the author as being a Jewish Christian because they see his knowledge about the Jewish law, customs, traditions, and language throughout the Gospel. The Romans normally hired people from the local population who could speak both Aramaic and Greek. Such individuals could communicate with the locals and relate well with Roman officials. Matthew would have fit the bill.

This Gospel’s content points to a Jewish author, and most scholars include Matthew as the likely candidate. This is indicated by the strong early tradition supporting Matthew as the writer, along with the vocabulary and writing style, the Jewish themes, and the financial references. Matthew’s inclusion of the genealogy tracing Jesus’s ancestry from a Jewish perspective (1:1-17) provides additional support of him as being the author of this Gospel.

The early church fathers, including Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, and Eusebius attested to Matthew as the human writer of the Gospel that bore his name. Written in relatively good Greek (and better than Mark’s Gospel but not to the level of the native Greek writer Luke), Matthew’s contacts with Gentiles as a tax collector would have made him culturally educated and capable of writing in the style found in this Gospel. Given his Jewish background and his familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures (Matthew contains more Old Testament quotations than any other Gospel), Matthew presented Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. His frequent use of Jewish terminology, for example “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God,” suggests the author wrote for a Jewish audience and is consistent with Matthew’s background.

As a former tax collector and also known as Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), Matthew’s training in meticulous record keeping and organization fit the structured nature of this Gospel. He included specific financial references not found in other Gospels, such as the temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35). The calling of Matthew (9:9-13) with its personal details indicates the author was writing about a firsthand experience.



DATE

The exact date of the Gospel of Matthew remains a debated topic, but scholarship generally places it prior to AD 100. Some scholars suggest it was written between AD 70–85. The three strongest pieces of evidence for this dating include: the final separation between the church and the synagogue sometime after AD 70; the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in AD 70; and the generally held belief of Matthew’s use of Mark’s Gospel. The church father Clement (late first century AD) claimed Mark wrote while Peter lived in Rome (AD 45–65), which requires a date for Matthew’s Gospel later in the first century. Irenaeus (second century AD) also said Matthew wrote his Gospel while Peter and Paul were evangelizing in Rome (mid AD 60s). Others favor a date in the 60s–70s.

Most scholars see the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and identify Mark as the earliest of the three, written somewhere between AD 50 to 70, possibly just before or during the fall of Jerusalem. Furthermore, scholars also agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark’s Gospel extensively as one of their sources.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Matthew wrote to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the promised Messiah and to instruct Christians—especially Jewish Christians—on what it means to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. Therefore, he saturated his Gospel with Hebrew Scriptures, referring to the Old Testament 129 times (fifty-three direct citations and seventy-six allusions) taken from more than half of the Old Testaments books. He drew from every part of the Jewish Bible: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. These believers would have included Gentile Christians who also had an interest in the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus as Messiah. The original readers, who may have included Hellenistic Jews and Jews of the Diaspora, probably struggled with their identity. Most likely some of the Jewish leaders sharply condemned what they would have called apostates who had defected from Judaism.

THEMES

The last half of Matthew’s Gospel contains a rich mix of narratives and teachings that reveal both who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. Here are the major themes found across these chapters:

Jesus’s Divine Authority and Identity. From walking on water (14:22-33), healing the sick (15:29-31), providing food for thousands

from a little bread and fish (vv. 32-39), casting out demons (17:14-20), healing the blind (20:29-34), and even His own death (28:6) and resurrection (vv. 18-20), Jesus consistently revealed His unmatched authority. These miracles combined to demonstrate His authority over creation, spiritual forces, and death. Matthew progressively revealed the nature of Christ's divine authority and identity, culminating in Peter's confession (16:16-19) and the Transfiguration (17:1-8). Even in His trial and death on the cross, Jesus exercised quiet control, fulfilling Scripture and declaring His kingship (26:52-56; 27:50; 28:6).

The Nature of True Discipleship. Matthew weaved a thread of discipleship throughout these chapters. Jesus called His followers to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Him (16:24-26). Additionally, Jesus warned that greatness in the kingdom comes through humility and service (18:1-5; 20:25-28), not status. The example of the rich young ruler (19:16-22) showed that following Jesus may cost everything, but doing so will lead to eternal life.

The Kingdom of Heaven Reorders Everything. Through parables and interactions, Jesus painted a radically different picture of the kingdom where the first are last, and the last are first (19:29-30; 20:1-16). Jesus elevated children, outsiders, and the poor, while He often rebuked the religious elite. Jesus's teachings and parables on judgment (21:28-45; 22:1-14; 23:1-39; 24:1-25:46) revealed that those confident of their position in heaven might be surprised to find themselves excluded, while the marginalized find themselves welcomed.

Conflict with Religious and Political Powers. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, tension escalated. He cleansed the temple, confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees, and exposed their heresy (21:1-23:39). He taught that external religion without internal transformation had no worth (23:27-28). His arrest, trial, and crucifixion reflected how the corrupt religious and political systems opposed true righteousness.

Suffering, Death, and the Mission of the Messiah. Jesus predicted His suffering and death (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19) to prepare His followers. His crucifixion fulfilled God's redemptive plan. While betrayed by Judas Iscariot, abandoned by His followers, mocked by the religious leaders and soldiers, and crucified under Pilate, Jesus remained obedient to His Father's will (26:47-27:50). His cry from the cross (27:46) and the tearing of the temple veil (v. 51) revealed His role as the sin-bearing Savior.

His Triumphant Resurrection and the Mission to the World. By His resurrection (28:1-10), the turning point of all history, Jesus conquered death, thus validating His claims and authority. Matthew concluded his Gospel with the Great Commission (vv. 16-20), Jesus's commissioning His disciples to make disciples of all nations. He fueled this mission with His authority and sustaining presence, "I am with you always" (v. 20).



Gospel of Matthew

- I. **Birth and Infancy of Jesus**
(Matt. 1:1-2:23)
- II. **Beginning of Jesus's Ministry in Galilee**
(Matt. 3:1-4:25)
- III. **Discourse One: The Sermon on the Mount**
(Matt. 5:1-7:29)
- IV. **Jesus's First Miracles**
(Matt. 8:1-9:38)
- V. **Discourse Two: Ministry of Jesus's Disciples**
(Matt. 10:1-42)
- VI. **Responses to Jesus's Ministry** (Matt. 11:1-12:50)
- VII. **Discourse Three: Parables about the Kingdom**
(Matt. 13:1-58)
- VIII. **Close of Jesus's Ministry in Galilee**
(Matt. 14:1-17:27)
- IX. **Discourse Four: Character of Jesus's Disciples**
(Matt. 18:1-35)
- X. **Jesus's Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem**
(Matt. 19:1-20:34)
- XI. **Jesus's Ministry in Jerusalem**
(Matt. 21:1-23:39)
- XII. **Discourse Five: Olivet Discourse**
(Matt. 24:1-25:46)
- XIII. **Betrayal, Crucifixion, and Burial**
(Matt. 26:1-27:66)
- XIV. **Resurrection and Commission**
(Matt. 28:1-20)

Courage

JESUS IS GREATER THAN ANYTHING WE FEAR.

While attending seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, I also pastored a church about 110 miles to the west where my wife and I lived in the parsonage. This meant making a couple of trips each week for classes and returning on Wednesday and Friday afternoons to go about my pastoral responsibilities. This schedule posed numerous challenges for us, especially in our first pastoral experience. Preparing for sermons and classes while also doing evangelistic visits and pastoral visits in homes and hospitals in this rural setting completely filled my schedule.

One of the more memorable hospital visits happened on one of the return trips from seminary for the midweek prayer meeting. I stopped to see Jesse, one of our deacons, who had been hospitalized with diverticulitis. Although this condition generally affects people who are older, this young man with two young children suffered from severe pain. As he talked with me about the fear he faced during the previous sleepless and pain-filled night, Jesse told me that he learned the meaning of faith. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Pastor, faith is stepping out there where there ain’t nothing but God.” That pastoral visit took place more than forty years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

The Spirit of God had given Jesse the courage he needed to face his illness. His experience prepared him to trust God for the future challenges he would face in his life. In today’s session, Peter learned that he must not focus on the troubles around him but had to keep his eyes on Jesus. The account of Jesus walking on the water reveals several truths about the greatness of His power and authority available to His followers. At first Peter thought he had mustered enough courage to leave the boat and walk out toward Jesus. However, he only took an abbreviated walk on the water. When Peter took his eyes away from Jesus, and instead looked at the raging waves surrounding him, he sank beneath the storm in fear.

This study of how Peter and the other disciples reacted to Jesus’s demonstration of authority over the storm can serve to encourage us whenever we go through the storms of life. We can trust Jesus to walk with us and come to our aid when we become overwhelmed.

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 14:1-36

Matthew 14 opens with a flashback to the beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas (14:1-12). John had dared to call into question Herod's relationship with Herodias, his brother's wife. This led to a twisted series of events involving the daughter of Herodias dancing at Herod's birthday celebration. This pleased Herod, so he offered to give her whatever she wanted. Herodias told her daughter to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. With regret, Herod ordered John's execution.

Having learned about John's execution, Jesus withdrew to a remote area (v. 13) because He likely wanted to avoid any confrontation at this point in His ministry. As Jesus left by boat, the crowds saw Him leave and followed by running along the shore of Galilee, arriving ahead of Him (vv. 13-14). Although He and His disciples needed rest (Mark 6:31), the sight of the great multitudes of people in need of healing moved Him with compassion, and He healed them (Matt. 14:14).

One of Jesus's most famous miracles, the feeding of the five thousand (vv. 15-21), demonstrated Jesus's mighty power. The disciples wanted Jesus to send the people away so that they could buy food for themselves, but He told His disciples to "give them something to eat" (v. 16). But all they could find was "five loaves and two fish" (v. 17). Jesus used this situation as an opportunity to teach His disciples about the need to rely on what only Jesus could provide. After He prayed, He distributed the loaves and the fish to the disciples, who in turn distributed to everyone in the crowd. The enormity of the miracle was seen as the disciples collected more food than they had at the beginning.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

Jesus's Presence (Matt. 14:22-27)

Of the four Gospel writers, only Luke did not include the striking story of Jesus walking on the water. After He dismissed the crowds and ordered His disciples to go ahead and cross the Sea of Galilee without Him, Jesus went up a mountain to pray. During the night, a sudden storm churned the lake into a frightening, dangerous situation. Jesus approached His disciples, walking on the water.

VERSE 22

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

Jesus responded quickly to the crowd's enthusiastic response to the miracle of the loaves and fish. John reported that they declared Jesus as "the Prophet who is to come into the world" and desired to make Him king (John 6:14-15). Jesus wanted to no part of their forced attempt to make Him king. Always in control, Jesus **dismissed the crowds** and **made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side**. The Greek verb for *made*, which means "forced" or "compelled," is a strong term which suggests Jesus wanted to avoid the crisis due to the crowd's intentions of a messianic revolt by insisting His disciples leave the area immediately.

Matthew did not identify the precise destination of the disciples' evening excursion, but the phrase *go ahead of him* suggests wherever they were going Jesus would join them later. Mark reported that the disciples went ahead of Jesus "to the other side, to Bethsaida" (Mark 6:45), but both Matthew and Mark detail that Gennesaret (a fertile valley on the northwest side of the lake) was the boat's final destination (Matt. 14:34; Mark 6:53).

VERSE 23

After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Well into the night, he was there alone.

After Jesus finished sending the people away, He remained and **went up on the mountain by himself to pray**. He likely intended to spend time in prayer after receiving the news about John the Baptist (v. 13), but the crowds had hindered Him. Jesus found solitude *on the mountain* where He could be *by himself* to pray, knowing His time of suffering was drawing closer (see 16:21). He needed the strengthening that His Father could provide so that He could focus on the mission of the cross.

Jesus had dismissed the crowds, and the disciples had left by boat before sunset. **Well into the night** echoes the phrase "when evening came" (14:15). Matthew may have used the phrase to note the lateness of the hour, a time when most people would have settled down for the evening.

Getting away to the mountains or some quiet place away from people can provide us with opportunities for solitude and escape from the busyness of daily life. Jesus needed this time of refreshing with His

Father for spiritual strengthening and to seek wisdom for the trials He would face.

VERSE 24

Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them.

Under normal conditions, the disciples could have easily crossed the Sea of Galilee. **Some distance from land** (“in the midst of the sea,” KJV) translates the Greek words meaning “many stadia away from land.” One *stadion* equals about 600 feet. John indicated they rowed about three or four miles (lit. twenty-five to thirty stadia; John 6:19) at that point. The Sea of Galilee is about thirteen miles long (north to south) and eight miles wide at its widest east to west point.

The seasoned fishermen within the group of disciples had plenty of nighttime experience on the water. However, the boat rocked violently, being battered by the waves because **the wind was against them**. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills and mountains which funnel the winds down onto the surface of the lake, resulting in sudden and violent storms that even the most seasoned of fishermen would find challenging.

VERSE 25

Jesus came toward them walking on the sea very early in the morning.

Jesus had spent a considerable amount of time in prayer, since He walked on the water toward the disciples’ boat **very early in the morning**, literally, “in the fourth watch of the night,” which was between three and six in the morning. Jesus may have come to His disciples near dawn after they had fought the storm for most of the night.

VERSE 26

When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost!” they said, and they cried out in fear.

Matthew noted that with the approach of Jesus walking on the sea, the disciples were **terrified**. The Greek term for *terrified* means to disturb, unsettle, or throw into confusion. Underscoring the disciples’ sense of terror, Matthew noted that they said, **“It’s a ghost!”** and **cried out in fear**. The Greek term for *fear* means terror. “The only thing they can deduce is that they are seeing a disembodied spirit of some

kind. ‘Ghost’ . . . refers to a specter or apparition from the realm of the dead.”¹

VERSE 27

Immediately Jesus spoke to them. “Have courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Jesus gave them the assurance of His presence, **“Have courage, It is I. Don’t be afraid.”** Scared and needing reassurance, the disciples needed to know right away that they had not seen a ghost. Jesus’s words also echo God’s revelation of Himself to Moses, **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Ex. 3:14). In addition to identifying Himself and assuring His disciples He was not a ghost, Jesus may also have been revealing Himself as deity.



Explore Further

Read the article “Galilee, Sea of” on pages 610–611 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What facts about the lake provided you with a fuller understanding of the conditions that the disciples would have encountered during the storm?

Jesus’s Invitation (Matt. 14:28-30)

At this point, Peter asked Jesus if he could leave the boat and walk on the water toward Him. Jesus agreed, but as Peter started walking on the water, the winds and waves caused him to fear. As he began to sink, Peter called out to Jesus for help.

VERSE 28

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter answered him, “command me to come to you on the water.”

While three of the Gospels include accounts of Jesus walking on water (Matt. 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21), only Matthew included Peter walking on the water. Upon hearing the Lord speak, Peter replied, **“Lord, if it’s you,”** a statement filled with deep meaning. Matthew probably intended his readers to understand *Lord* in the strongest sense,

equivalent to “*Yahweh*,” whether or not Peter understood the connection at this point.² “*If it’s you*,” a first-class condition, has the presumption of truth so that “since it’s you” captures the intent of Peter’s request. The Greek for *it’s you* (lit. “you are”) echoes Jesus’s “It is I” (Matt. 14:27).

Jesus’s presence walking on the turbulent waters stirred Peter to exercise enough faith to ask, “**command me to come to you on the water.**” He asked Jesus to *command* him, a verb in agreement with his address of Jesus as *Lord*. Peter responded to Jesus’s revelation of Himself up to this point. He believed that Jesus could enable him to walk on the water and come out to the Lord.

VERSE 29

He said, “Come.” And climbing out of the boat, Peter started walking on the water and came toward Jesus.

Jesus did as Peter had requested, giving him a one-word command, “**Come.**” He did not merely give Peter permission to come, rather Jesus ordered him to start coming toward Him. Peter climbed over the side of the boat and started **walking on the water** and **came toward Jesus**. Not until he lifted his second leg over the side of the boat did he exercise faith in Jesus necessary to walk on the water toward Jesus. Nothing in the text indicates how far Peter walked on the water, but Matthew did suggest that Peter managed to get close as he came toward Jesus. As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus, he experienced the miracle of walking on the water. Whenever we face trials and difficult times in our lives, we can draw upon the strength and power of our Lord so that we can walk through these challenges. However, when we take our focus away from God, we will sink like a rock into the depths.

VERSE 30

But when he saw the strength of the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Peter sank into the waves because he became distracted by **the strength of the wind**. Peter saw the strength of the wind and—although not stated—the effect the wind had on the waves. When he looked away from Jesus and focused on the storm, his faith weakened. He became **afraid** and began **to sink** into the sea. Then he cried out like he and the other disciples had done (v. 26), but this time he did not cry out simply as an expression of fear. This time Peter cried out, “**Lord, save me!**” because he wanted Jesus to rescue him from drowning.



Explore Further

Read Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:36-41; and Luke 8:22-25. These passages show Jesus calming an earlier storm on the Sea of Galilee, teaching His disciples about His divine power and that their faith should replace fear. The lesson in Matthew 14:28-30 focused more on personal faith. What personal faith lesson does Matthew 14:28-30 teach you?

Jesus's Response (Matt. 14:31-33)

In the moment of Peter's crisis, Jesus reached out and caught hold of him. Jesus saved Peter but rebuked his faltering faith. As soon as Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, the storm stopped. On the previous occasion when Jesus calmed a furious storm merely through His words (8:26), the disciples wondered in amazement (v. 27). But this time, they worshiped Jesus and recognized Him as the Son of God.

VERSE 31

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Jesus responded to Peter's desperate cry **immediately**. Like Mark, Matthew used *immediately* many times in his Gospel, using it eleven of the thirty-three times the word appears of the New Testament. This indicates that Jesus did not delay but acted promptly to rescue Peter. The Lord had not challenged Peter to come to Him only to let His disciple drown when he failed.

Jesus's immediate rescue showed Peter, as well as the other disciples, that in a time of testing He would not leave them to flounder helplessly on their own. Rather, **Jesus reached out his hand** which showed how close Peter had come to Jesus. Jesus could have saved Peter by simply speaking the word, but He **caught hold of him**. Likely Jesus caught hold of one of Peter's hands and thereby kept him from completely sinking under the water.

One can imagine the sight of Jesus and Peter walking hand in hand on the turbulent waters back to the boat. Now that Jesus had secured Peter against the immediate threat of sinking beneath the waves, He posed the challenging question, **"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"**

Only here did Matthew use the phrase *you of little faith* of an individual, and surprisingly he used it in reference to Peter who had just taken gigantic steps of faith by walking out on the water toward Jesus. He had placed his full confidence in Jesus to work in him and make it possible for him to walk on water.

However, **doubt** had caused Peter to fail. The Greek verb translated *doubt* suggests the idea of attempting to go in two different directions or serving two masters at the same time. Peter's problem came not so much from his conviction about Jesus but from the conflict between what he experienced outside the boat and his desire to walk toward his Lord. That Peter called out to Jesus to save him underscored the fact that he still had faith enough to call out to Jesus when he needed Him the most.

Many believers can identify with Peter's experience. Just as he wanted to join Christ in what seemed exciting and adventuresome, we might also call out to Him in order to walk closer to Him. However, during a moment of crisis or in a moment of fear, when we lose our focus, we resort to crying out to Jesus, "Lord, save us! We cannot make it without You!" Then just like Jesus did not allow Peter to sink into a watery grave, He will reach out and catch hold of us just when we need Him the most.

VERSE 32

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Although the disciples on board the boat had previously thought they had seen a ghost walking on the water, John reported, "They were willing to take him on board" (John 6:21). This showed that they no longer believed Jesus to be an apparition.

When they got into the boat suggests that the turbulent storm raged the whole time Peter and Jesus remained outside the boat. As they climbed back into the boat, **the wind ceased** without Jesus saying a word as He had done on a previous occasion where He rebuked the winds and the sea bringing about "a great calm" (Matt. 8:26). However, Jesus may have been the reason the winds ceased in this instance as well. John added another miraculous aspect of the calming of the sea. The boat that had been storm-tossed in the middle of the lake came immediately on shore where they were headed (John 6:21).

Jesus demonstrated His messiahship, adding proof upon proof to His disciples. He brought calmness and peace to the sea that had rocked their lives. They needed to learn that they could depend on His presence to help them no matter the severity of the trial.

VERSE 33

Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

The climax of the episode of Jesus walking on the water and calming the sea came as the disciples in the boat **worshiped Him**. This contrasted greatly from the ending of the similar story of when Jesus calmed the sea (8:27). In that instance, His disciples merely marveled, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him!” Now they *worshiped* Jesus. They had moved quickly from fearing the storm to revering Jesus. Considering the power Jesus showed by walking on the water and the love He demonstrated in taking care of their sinking companion, their reaction made perfect sense.

Up until this point, the proclamations of who Jesus was came from God the Father (3:17), the devil (4:3,6), and two demons (8:29). While Peter’s great confession at Caesarea Philippi—“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16)—was yet to come, the disciples’ worship and affirmation of Christ’s deity indicate they had grown in their understand of who Jesus is. While they still had much to learn about Jesus, their response of worship demonstrates a deepening of their faith, despite their earlier fear and doubt.



Explore Further

When we face life’s difficulties, we can become overwhelmed by fear and lose sight of Jesus. In these moments of doubt, we need to recognize how easily we struggle with our wavering faith. But Jesus stands ready to rescue us when we call out to Him. Our personal trials, failures, and doubts can propel us toward opportunities for spiritual growth if we allow Jesus to work through them. Reflect on your own moments when you may have sunk into despair and how Jesus pulled you through that low time. Did He use these experiences to deepen your trust in Him? How do you tend to respond to Jesus’s power when you experience it? This passage invites us to worship Jesus and to trust Him more even when our faith wavers. Let these moments deepen our relationship with Him.

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 234.
2. *Ibid.*, 235.

Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

A church was known for its annual charity fundraiser. They hosted a big event with a dinner, music, and auctions to raise money for local shelters. Many of the church's members saw this high-profile occasion as a chance to dress up, socialize, and show off their generosity.

One year, Peter, a young church leader, noticed that while the fundraiser always raised a lot of money, the focus had shifted to appearances more than on the cause for the event. Some members spent weeks planning their outfits, and others seemed to show more concern with who would see their donations than how much would actually go to help those in need.

During a meeting to plan the event, Peter brought up his concerns, that the event should be focused more on the people the church was trying to help rather than the event itself. One of the church members responded that since people loved the event and it always raised lots of money, why fix what wasn't broken?

The church's pastor, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. "I'm reminded of what Jesus told the Pharisees in Matthew 15. They focused on outward rituals, but their hearts were far from God. We can't let our good deeds become a way to look good to others. Our charity needs to come from a genuine place of love and compassion, not just a desire to keep up appearances." The church fundraiser had become more about appearances and less about helping others. Both church leaders encouraged a shift in focus from superficial actions to genuine compassion, mirroring Jesus's call to prioritize the heart over empty rituals.

The room was silent for a moment. A church member looked thoughtful. "I hadn't seen it that way before. Maybe we could include a segment during the event to hear directly from the people we're helping, so everyone is reminded why we're doing this."

In Matthew 15, Jesus confronted the Pharisees about their focus on external rituals while neglecting the deeper, internal aspects of faith. He pointed out that their worship was superficial because they honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him.

Matthew 15:1-39

Matthew 15 underscores the themes of genuine faith, compassion, and the priority of God's commands over human traditions. Controversy over the traditional religious practices and Jesus's treatment of uncleanness and the importance of inner purity climaxes in this chapter. Jesus was approached by the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. They questioned Him as to why His disciples broke the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before eating (vv. 1-2). Jesus accused them of using their traditions to avoid fulfilling God's commands (vv. 3-9).

As Jesus addressed the crowd, He shifted the focus from external rituals like dietary laws and handwashing to the moral and ethical dimensions of a person's thoughts, words, and deeds. He taught them and His disciples that true defilement does not come from external actions but rather from the heart (vv. 10-20). This teaching challenges believers to focus on developing a genuine, heartfelt relationship with Jesus, marked by love, compassion, and truthfulness, rather than relying solely on outward religious observances and traditions.

Later, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman persistently begged for Jesus's help to heal her daughter who was severely tormented by a demon. Although not a Jew, she displayed a genuine faith in Jesus. After initially resisting her, Jesus rewarded her humility and unwavering faith by healing her daughter (vv. 21-28).

Jesus continued to demonstrate compassion by healing many people on a mountainside. The astonished crowd gave glory to the God of Israel for the miracles. Subsequently, Jesus miraculously fed the crowd of four thousand with just seven loaves and a few fish (v. 29-39).

Broken Rules (Matt. 15:1-6)

A group of Pharisees and scribes came up from Jerusalem, likely sent as an official contingency to check up on the ministry of Jesus and how they could stop Him. They asked why Jesus's disciples broke the traditional rules of hand washing before they ate. Instead of directly answering

their question, Jesus challenged their priorities. He asked them why they violated God’s commandments for the sake of their traditions.

VERSES 1-2

Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat.”

A special delegation of **Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem** traveled to Galilee to see Jesus. This journey—which would have taken about week—signaled a confrontational visit as they continued building their case against Jesus (12:14). This marked the only time that Matthew reversed the order in referencing the scribes and Pharisees (5:20; 12:38; 23:2,13,15,23,25,27,29). He may have changed the order to indicate that the Pharisees instigated this clash and had brought along the scribes, the legal experts in Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish traditions, for support.

The Pharisees advocated for strict obedience to the Jewish law and traditions, and questioned Jesus, **“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”** *The tradition of the elders* refers to hundreds of laws and practices the Pharisees and their scribes had added over the centuries since the Jews had returned from Babylonian captivity. The religious officials considered them to be as equally authoritative as the original law of Moses. In essence, they used those traditions to build a hedge to protect the law of Moses from being broken and regarded these traditions as being of equal authority with the Scriptures.

In questioning Jesus as to why His disciples didn’t **wash their hands when they eat**, they were seeking to disqualify Jesus as a true rabbi. This was not a question of personal hygiene, but rather by not washing their hands before eating, the disciples had not removed their ceremonial defilement and thus anything they touched would have become unclean. Furthermore, eating unclean food was viewed as making the whole person unclean.

VERSE 3

He answered them, “Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition?”

Since the Pharisees had spoken from deep hypocrisy, Jesus brushed off their accusation. He refused to fall for their rhetorical trap of having to explain why His disciples had broken their tradition. Jesus flipped the

question on them, **“Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition?”** In doing so, He charged them with breaking an explicit commandment of God for the sake of the tradition of the elders. By pitting *God’s commandment* against their *tradition*, Jesus made clear which was the ultimate authority. The Pharisees had become so focused on protecting their tradition that they demanded observance on ceremonial washings which had no scriptural basis.

VERSES 4-6

“For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,” he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.”

Jesus made the contrast even clearer by continuing, **“For God said: Honor your father and your mother”** (see Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). By pitting what *God said* against their tradition, Jesus challenged the Pharisees at the foundation of their argument. They probably thought they had fully observed this command. The Hebrew verb translated *honor* in Exodus 20:12 sometimes referred to giving monetary gifts or support. Jesus inferred that honoring one’s parents demanded providing the resources they needed when they could no longer support themselves due to sickness or old age. Refusing to care for one’s parents devalued them.

Jesus called out the Pharisees for devising a way to skirt around God’s commandment to honor one’s parents. The words **but you say** established a contrast between what the Pharisees taught and what God said. The phrase demonstrated that they usurped God’s command with a procedural regulation designed to obscure the true intent of the commandment. Matthew’s readers would have recognized the specific language of the vow, **“Whatever benefit you might have received from me,”** and understood it as committing financial support to **the temple** rather than helping their parents. Mark identified this practice as “corban” (Mark 7:11), a gift particularly designated for the Lord and thus forbidden for any other use.

Jesus went on to connect the command to honor one’s parents to a further prescription that **“whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death”** (see Ex. 21:17). The Hebrew word translated “curses” in Exodus 21:17 meant to declare someone insignificant or to

treat with contempt. If children refused to provide for their parents in their old age, then they would not have honored them. The prescription of the death penalty while seeming harsh demonstrates how seriously God takes honoring and caring for one's parents.

This loophole apparently allowed the individual to hold onto valuable items and make use of them. While the exact means of skirting this command is not certain, the intent is clear. In this way, the child avoided the responsibility to care for his parents.

Jesus emphatically stated that this practice did not **honor** one's parents as the commandment intended and did not even come close to showing them proper respect. He said that it nullified God's revealed law through Moses and elevated the tradition of the elders as superior to God's original intent for the His law.



Explore Further

Read the article "Jewish Parties in the New Testament" and the accompanying chart on pages 896–899 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What were the beliefs specific to the Pharisees? Why did they oppose Jesus?

Lip Service (Matt. 15:7-11)

Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes for honoring God with their lip service while their hearts were far from Him. Their worship was in vain. They elevated their tradition to the same or even higher level than God's commands. Then Jesus turned to the crowd to make the connection that the religious leaders had missed. What made a person unclean did not come from what went into the mouth but what came out, because it actually reflected the condition of one's heart.

VERSE 7

“Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said:”

Jesus stung the religious delegation from Jerusalem with a single blistering word: **“Hypocrites!”** Although originally a term related to the

theater, Jesus's usage expressed fake piety in relation to religious expression. This meant that not only had the religious leaders deceived others with their words and actions, but they had actually disastrously deceived themselves as well into thinking that their religious practices had given them right standing with God. Jesus connected their hypocrisy to what **Isaiah prophesied** concerning their scribal approach to law-keeping. The indictment Isaiah pronounced against his own contemporaries applied to the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus's day as well.

VERSES 8-9

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.”

Jesus applied the words of Isaiah to the scribes and Pharisees, accusing them of honoring God with **their lips** without honoring Him with **their heart**. Using the singular *heart* while referring to the plural **people** indicates these religious leaders shared the same attitude of hypocrisy and unbelief. All they could offer to God was lip service because **their heart is far from** God. The Pharisees and scribes worshiped Him **in vain**, meaning in a manner not acceptable to God, because they taught their **human commands** had the same authority as God's Word.

VERSES 10-11

Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth — this defiles a person.”

Jesus finally addressed the Pharisees and scribes' original question (v. 2) and corrected their perverted view of the Word of God. Jesus intended that everyone in the crowd **listen and understand** what the Pharisees had missed concerning the nature of uncleanness. He wanted the people to hear what He had to say and to give it careful consideration so that they could grasp it. Jesus insisted that **what goes into the mouth** will not defile a person, even if the food had been touched by hands that had not been ritually purified. This would have offended pious Jews of the time because they practiced careful ritual washing as a part of everyday life. Jesus's teaching was radically different. His use of the Greek strong adversative translated as **but** suggests a call for a major modification to Jewish practices. He made it clear that **what comes out of the mouth** really **defiles a person**. In this context, Jesus implied

that the hypocritical teaching of the Pharisees and scribes had made them unclean.



Explore Further

Read the article “Hypocrisy” on pages 783–784 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the various ways the term “hypocrisy” is used in the Bible? According to Jesus’s teachings, what does it mean to be a hypocrite? How can we guard from being hypocrites in our relationships with God and others?

Real Problem (Matt. 15:16-20)

The religious leaders were concerned primarily with outward behavior, such as eating the right kinds of foods. Jesus emphasized that any food that is consumed passes through our bodies over time. In contrast, the attitudes individuals nurture in their hearts will come out in their actions and reveal the state of their hearts.

VERSE 16

“Do you still lack understanding?” he asked.

The Pharisees were highly regarded in Jewish culture for their seeming religious dedication to God and His law. Jesus’s disciples feared that He did not realize that He had offended them (v. 12). Jesus replied by saying God had not “planted” the Pharisees and that He would “uproot” them (v. 13). In other words, their authority did not come from God. Concerning offending them, Jesus told His disciples to just leave them alone. They were blind guides, meaning they lacked the understanding necessary to know the truth about God or to lead others to God (vv. 13-14). Peter often spoke for the disciples, and he asked Jesus to explain the parable to them (v. 15).

Jesus rebuked His disciples by asking, **“Do you still lack understanding?”** Clearly Jesus expected His disciples to have gained more understanding than what Peter’s request implied.

VERSE 17

“Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated?”

Jesus began His explanation with a follow-up question that He expected His disciples to answer positively. He obviously assumed that they knew how digestion worked in their bodies but explained that **whatever**, literally meaning “everything,” went into the **mouth** traveled **into the stomach**. The body uses what it needs and the remaining waste **is eliminated**. Jesus flatly stated that nothing entering a person’s mouth defiles the individual. *Whatever* went into the mouth, the body expelled it into the “latrine” (literal translation), meaning that nothing remained that would have rendered the individual unclean. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that if people did not ceremonially wash their hands, it had no effect on their moral condition (v. 11).

VERSE 18

“But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person.”

Jesus said that **what comes out of the mouth** reveals the content of a person’s heart. By the **heart**, Jesus referred to one’s innermost being—“the seat of [one’s] thought and will”—from which all words and actions flow.¹ The Bible frequently affirms that all people fall short of God’s standard (Isa. 64:6; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:10-12,23; 5:12).

Matthew used two different Greek words translated as *comes*. *Comes out of the mouth* means to go out, while *comes from the heart* means to come out. By using two different verbs with similar meanings, Matthew showed that the words that go out of the mouth originated from the heart. In a previous encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus made a similar correlation (Matt. 12:34-35).

Jesus raised the stakes by transferring the source of the defilement from the outward to the inward state of the heart. “At one stroke he removes the necessity for a multiplicity of regulations to cover a variety of situations and concentrates on an attitude that will take care of them all”²—the condition of the heart.

VERSE 19

“For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander.”

Jesus provided a list of specific examples of the defilement which demonstrates a person's internal moral corruption. He began with the broad category of **evil thoughts**, which can lead to all kinds of sinful actions, including anger (5:21-26), greed (6:19-21), worry (vv. 25-34), lust (5:27-30), hate (vv. 43-47), and hypocritical judgment (7:1-5).

Murder is the unlawful taking of another's life, while **theft** is the unlawful taking of another's property. **Adulteries** and **sexual immoralities** covered the entire range of sexual sins committed by both married and single people. **False testimonies** involve lying in order to mislead or deceive, while **slander** destroys another's testimony and/or reputation through half-truths and lies.

VERSE 20

“These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

Jesus brought the discussion back full circle to the Pharisees' original charge that His disciples needed to observe ritual hand washing (v. 2). As He concluded, Jesus strongly stated that the sins coming out of the heart **defile a person**. No unclean thing, knowingly or unknowingly eaten because a person ate with **unwashed hands**, could ever *defile* a person.

Jesus's teaching aligns with other biblical references regarding the depravity of the heart (Ps. 14:3; 51:5; 58:3; Rom. 3:9-18,23; Eph. 2:3; 1 John 1:8-10). But Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers assure us that the human heart can be transformed through the atoning work of Christ and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit within the believer (Rom. 13:13-14; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 5:16-26).

Explore Further

Read the article “Heart” on pages 719–720 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the different aspects to the biblical understanding of the human heart? Why is it important that we examine our hearts for sinful attitudes?

1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 586.

2. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 398.

Following Jesus

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD SENT BY GOD.

We live in a culture that no longer believes in truth and absolutes. People seem quite happy to mix and match their religious and worldview beliefs in any way they please, no matter how contradictory or mismatched they might be. Spiritual and religious pursuits for many have become more like a visit to a smorgasbord where people can pick and choose what they want to consume and simply ignore what does not appeal to them. They do not really focus on truth or intellectual consistency but rather go with whatever feels good or seems right for them.

None of the choices in today's hodgepodge of religions, including a spaghetti-like atheism called "Pastafarianism," offers anything that can match what God has provided in His Son. Jesus alone promises the righteousness we need to stand before God.

The study of passages about Peter's confession of the Messiah stands against the backdrop of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). The significance of this location becomes more meaningful when viewed in the context of syncretism. The city's association with pagan worship practices and affiliations provided an interesting setting. Some ancient cultures considered Caesarea Philippi as the "gates of Hades" because of its proximity to a cave with links to the underworld in mythological beliefs. By choosing this location for His question and proclamation, Jesus symbolically positioned His mission against the syncretic backdrop, signifying the establishment of a monotheistic faith centered on His unique identity as the Messiah.



Matthew 16:1-28

Matthew 16 is a pivotal chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, rich in theological significance and central to understanding Jesus's identity

and mission. This chapter can be divided into several key sections, each illustrating crucial moments in Jesus’s ministry and His interactions with both His disciples and religious leaders.

The chapter opens with the Pharisees and Sadducees approaching Jesus, demanding a sign from heaven to prove His authority. Jesus responded by telling them the only sign they would be given would be “the sign of Jonah” (vv. 1-4). Jesus and His disciples then sailed across the Sea of Galilee, and after the voyage Jesus warned them to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv. 5-12).

The chapter’s most significant moment came at Caesarea Philippi when Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (vv. 13-20). From this point, Jesus spoke more openly about His impending suffering, death, and resurrection (vv. 21-23). Finally, Jesus taught His disciples about the cost of discipleship, calling them to deny themselves and take up their crosses (vv. 24-28).

In summary, Matthew 16 is critical for revealing Jesus’s divine identity, the nature of true discipleship, and the foreshadowing of His redemptive work. It challenges readers to move beyond superficial understanding and embrace the deeper implications of following Christ.



Know the Messiah (Matt. 16:13-20)

Outside Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples who people thought He was. He also challenged them to consider who they believed Him to be. Peter responded by acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God. Jesus affirmed this response as an insight provided by God the Father and the foundation for the church.

VERSE 13

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Jesus traveled **to the region of Caesarea Philippi**, located on the slopes of Mount Hermon about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Philip the tetrarch had recently renamed the city of Paneas, a center of worship for the Greek god Pan, in honor of himself and Augustus Caesar.

Matthew offered no reason why Jesus and His disciples traveled to *Caesarea Philippi*. However, this location provided a more dramatic setting for Peter's confession for two reasons. First, Jesus's presence in this predominantly pagan territory emphasized His increased ministry to Gentiles. Second, a place devoted to the honor of the Roman emperor served as stunning backdrop to the declaration of Jesus's identity as Messiah, the King who would be given all authority and ultimately bring all human kingdoms to an end.

In order to prepare His disciples for the true nature of His messianic work, Jesus asked, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** His question was not a request for information concerning what the people thought, but rather it was meant to correct misconceptions the disciples themselves may have had concerning His identity and mission.

In Mark 8:27 and Luke 9:18, Jesus asked, “Who do people [or the crowds] say I am?” whereas Matthew substituted “Son of Man” for “I.” While some have concluded that this has little significance, Matthew's use of *Son of Man* demonstrated Jesus's own understanding of His identity did not depend on what other people thought.

VERSE 14

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

The range of the disciples' answers indicates that they had knowledge about the peoples' messianic expectations. Herod Antipas's (son of Herod the Great) paranoia had already led him to identify Jesus as **John the Baptist** come back to life (14:1-2), which could have fueled this rumor among the people. Another opinion offered up **Elijah** the prophet as a possibility. Malachi 4:5 speaks of Elijah's future role before the day of the Lord. The focus on the prospect of judgment and miracles of nature and healing logically reminded some people of the biblical accounts of *Elijah* (1 Kings 17-19; 21; 2 Kings 1-2). The rabbis of Jesus's day held that Elijah would appear as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Due to His strong opposition to the temple leaders, some speculated that Jesus may have been a resurrected **Jeremiah**, who himself experienced great opposition from the religious and ruling authorities of his day when the prophet foretold the downfall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the people. Others speculated that Jesus was **one of the prophets** from the Old Testament returned.

The disciples' responses suggest the people believed Jesus to be a powerful prophet of God. They saw in Him the fulfillment of prophecy.

However, they had no clear understanding of the Messiah. In general, the people thought that Messiah would come as a conquering warrior or political leader. Some may have thought the Messiah would be a prophet or would come to power after the return of the prophets. Yet all these answers fell short of honoring Jesus for who He really is.

VERSE 15

“But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?”

Jesus pressed His disciples for their response to His question. **“But you”** introduces His question, marking a contrast. Jesus wanted to know what His chosen twelve disciples believed about Him. Jesus asked the entire group, **“But you . . . who do you say that I am?”** in order to give them the opportunity to move beyond the realm of opinion to an outright confession of their faith in Him.

VERSE 16

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Simon Peter answered Jesus’s question for the entire group. In a region largely devoted to a pagan god, Peter declared of Jesus, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** The term *Messiah* comes from a Greek word often translated as “Christ” (KJV, NASB) and means “anointed one.”

This is the only confession of Jesus as the Messiah in the Gospel of Matthew. Peter immediately added the title *the Son of living God*, a characteristically Jewish way of referring to God. This designation distinguished Jesus from the lifeless idols as the one true God who alone can impart life to others.

VERSE 17

Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus acknowledged Peter’s strong confession of faith. The Greek word for **blessed** means especially favored by God and was the word Matthew used at the beginning of each beatitude (5:3-10). Jesus affirmed that Peter’s confession did not come solely as a result of human understanding and reasoning (**flesh and blood** is a Jewish idiom for human agency);

rather while human reasoning played a role in the process Peter's statement was ultimately a revelation from God. Note the intimacy in the phrase, **my Father in heaven**. The Jews spoke of God as Father, but they preferred "our Father." Jesus's relationship with His Father went deeper. In declaring that His Father had revealed His true identity to Peter, Jesus was also speaking of the unique relationship Jesus had with the Father.

VERSE 18

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."

Jesus's declaration, "**You are Peter**," mirrors Peter's confession of Jesus, "You are the Messiah" (v. 16). Various interpretations have been given concerning what Jesus meant when He said, "**and on this rock I will build my church**." Some suggest Peter is the rock. The play on words in Greek between *Peter* (*Petros*) and *this rock* (*petra*) make sense only if Jesus spoke directly to Peter and explained the significance of this connection. In Aramaic, the language in which this sentence was likely spoken, both "Peter" and "rock" are *kepha*. While Christ is the foundation stone of the church (1 Cor. 3:10-11), Paul notes that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). In the book of Acts, Peter played a primary leadership role in the early church.

Another view is that Peter's confession served as the rock on which Jesus would *build* His church. Therefore Jesus declared that Peter's act of confessing Jesus as the Messiah (or "Christ") served as the foundation stone for His church and the model for all believers.

Promising the indestructibility of His church, Jesus declared that "**the gates of Hades will not overpower it**." The metaphor *gates of Hades* refers to the powers of death (Isa. 38:10) and essentially meant the same thing as "the gates of death" (Job 38:17; Pss. 9:13; 107:18). Jesus assured His followers that His church will never die despite His own death on a cross which He would soon announce (Matt. 16:21). No matter how relentless and brutal the attacks against believers become, the church will never be destroyed.

VERSE 19

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven."

Jesus described the authority He delegated specifically to Peter and generally to the church as **the keys to the kingdom of heaven**. A master of the house would only hand the keys to the doors of the estate to the most trusted servant. In handing them over, Jesus would share His authority to open and close, to lock and unlock, the entrance to His home. Therefore, His servants will declare that Jesus is the Messiah and that faith in Him is the only way to come into *the kingdom of heaven*. The phrases **will have been bound** and **will have been loosed** stressed how God's sovereign initiative will be worked out in the church. Jesus gave His disciples responsibility, authority, and supernatural power to lead the church according to His will and His teaching.

VERSE 20

Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

That Jesus **gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah** likely shocked them, especially following Peter's remarkable confession of faith (v. 16). Jesus probably wanted to lessen the excitement of the people who might have started a revolution against Rome and sought to make Him king of Israel (John 6:15). At this point, Jesus seemed interested in not directly confronting Jewish leaders' and peoples' misconceptions about who He was.

Explore Further

Read the article "Messiah" on pages 1087–1092 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why are prophecies about the Messiah important for our understanding of who Jesus is?

Embrace His Mission (Matt. 16:21-23)

Jesus revealed to His disciples the divine plan for His mission which included His suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter, struggling to accept this, rebuked Jesus, insisting such things must not occur. Jesus sharply rebuked Peter, calling him a stumbling block and accusing him of prioritizing human concerns over God's will.

VERSE 21

From then on Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.

Matthew marked a second crucial point in the narrative with the phrase **from then on** (see 4:17), and Jesus's focus began shifting towards **Jerusalem**. To this point, Jesus had stayed mainly in the region of Galilee thus avoiding spending too much time in *Jerusalem*, the religious and political heart of Israel. He gave His disciples the shocking news that **it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things** at the hands of the religious leaders there (**the elders, chief priests, and scribes**). Up to this point, Jesus had only implied that He must suffer, **be killed, and be raised the third day** (12:40; 16:4), but now He declared it plainly.

VERSE 22

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!”

Unsurprisingly, Peter initiated the disciples' reaction. He **took him aside** to get up close to Him so that he might **rebuke** Jesus privately. Peter assumed that he knew better than Jesus. Although Peter addressed Jesus as **Lord**, he did not relate to Him as his Lord in this moment. His first statement in the phrase **“Oh, no”** may be literally translated “mercy on you,” asking God to show His mercy by preventing what Jesus had predicted from coming to pass.

VERSE 23

Jesus turned and told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns.”

In a matter of only a few minutes, Peter, the rock, had become a **hindrance**, a stumbling block. By addressing Peter as **Satan**, Jesus indicated that *Satan* had inspired Peter's response. Since the beginning, the devil had attempted to circumvent God's plan (4:8-9), and now Peter had inadvertently fallen prey to Satan's deception. Jesus set Peter straight by telling him that he was **“not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns.”**



Explore Further

Because we desire comfort, security, success, and prosperity, we face the challenge of these things constantly interfering with our ultimate calling to follow Jesus. What are some ways you can put Jesus's call to spread the gospel and make disciples as your first priority every day?

- What are some ways you can do so with your local church?
-

Become His Disciple (Matt. 16:24-26)

Jesus explained the standard for His disciples. Following Jesus requires self-denial and self-sacrifice for His sake. The Christian life is a paradox where death produces life and sacrifice provides great gain.

VERSE 24

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

Jesus spelled out **to His disciples** what it meant to **follow after** Him. To follow after Jesus is to become His committed disciple. The first two imperatives, **deny himself** and **take up his cross** indicate Jesus was calling for singular decisive acts or decisions. The third imperative, **follow me**, flows out of the first two and the Greek indicates Jesus was calling for a commitment to a continual, on-going life of following Him.

Denying self means putting God and His kingdom priorities first. Even before Jesus went to the cross, He called for His disciples to behave in such a way as to put their own lives on the line—taking up their crosses—to join Him in living in such a way that the desire for self-preservation and one's own self-interests are subordinate to following Jesus.

The Roman Empire used the horror of crucifixion as one way to keep conquered populations in line, executing criminals and rebels from the lower and slave classes by the thousands. While the disciples did not yet have a full understanding of what Jesus's sacrifice would entail, they would have been familiar with the various aspects of Roman crucifixion. So Jesus's call to take up their crosses and follow Him would have been seen by them as a radical, shocking statement. Taking up the cross meant to follow Jesus wherever that may lead and no matter the consequences.

VERSE 25

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it.”

Jesus became more clear what self-denial and cross-bearing meant: **“whoever wants to save his life will lose it.”** Those who choose to focus their time and resources in gaining worldly pleasures and comforts will lose what it means to truly live. By trying to avoid self-sacrifice and suffering for the sake of Christ in this life, in the end they forfeit eternal life.

Paradoxically, **“whoever loses his life because of me will find it.”** Jesus was referring to a person who sacrificed the things of this world for the sake of following Him, serving God and others. It means putting God and His priorities first. Sacrificing one’s own life out of devotion to Christ might seem radical, but when weighing the outcomes of both paths, only the decision to pursue Christ will result in finding true, lasting life.

VERSE 26

“For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”

With two rhetorical questions, Jesus drove home His point. The first, **“what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life?”** (“soul,” ESV, KJV). The *life* Jesus was speaking of is eternal life, for that is of more value than gaining all the pleasures and things that most people desire in this life. The second question, **“what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”** points to the magnitude of the loss of one’s eternal soul because nothing in the world is sufficient to trade for it. Eternal life has far greater worth than all the wealth, fame, and power the world has to offer because in the end all such things are temporary and will pass away along with the world itself (1 John 2:15-17).



Explore Further

What are some examples of self-denial that might be necessary for Christians to follow Jesus? What might carrying one’s cross look like in daily life? What steps are necessary to truly follow Jesus?

Glory

JESUS FULFILLS GOD'S MESSAGE OF HOPE FOUND
IN THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.

Years ago when the Southern Baptist Convention scheduled its annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, a couple of my pastor friends and I decided to make the trip together. None of the three of us had ever traveled to Las Vegas, but we calculated that it would take between twenty-two to twenty-four hours to drive there from Denton, Texas. By leaving early on Monday morning, we determined that we could arrive to the convention site by the next morning. Our wives drove us to our meeting place. After we kissed them goodbye, we piled into the car and took off, taking turns driving, practically non-stop. We arrived on Tuesday morning completely road weary but ready for the convention.

I don't really remember much about what happened during the convention, but we enjoyed a memorable highlight on our drive back home. We decided that we could squeeze in a side trip to see the Grand Canyon. My wife and I had visited there several years prior so I convinced my two buddies that it would be worth stopping to see this magnificent sight.

We took out a road atlas to calculate a route that would not cost us more time than absolutely necessary. We finally reached the entrance to Grand Canyon National Park, but we still had a few miles to drive before we could view the canyon itself. When we finally reached the South Rim, we were greeted with a breathtaking view and our hearts swelled with awe. Just a glimpse of the beauty struck us so profoundly that we almost forgot about the hours of driving still ahead of us to return to Texas.

As we prepared to make our way back to the car, a busload of Asian tourists made their way to the rim. Suddenly they broke out in song. Though we could not recognize their words, we knew the melody as they burst forth their praise singing "How Great Thou Art." We stood in awe and joined them in singing our praise.

While it's not a perfect comparison, in some ways the experience mirrors the transfiguration; when Jesus was lifted high and revealed in glorious light. In our lives, we often face trials that cloud our vision, yet God invites us to those mountaintop moments where our spirits are renewed, just as the disciples' faith was strengthened on that day.



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



Matthew 17:1-27

In this chapter, Matthew recounted some key moments in Jesus’s ministry, emphasizing His divine authority, the importance of faith, and His mission to fulfill prophecy. The apostle included three significant events—the transfiguration (vv. 1-13), the healing of a demon-possessed boy (vv. 14-20), and the temple tax incident (vv. 24-27).

Matthew 17 underscored Jesus’s divine identity and mission while teaching critical lessons about faith, humility, and obedience. The Transfiguration revealed His glory and His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The healing of the boy highlighted the importance of faith and reliance on God’s power. The temple tax incident demonstrated Jesus’s humility and His commitment to living in harmony with societal expectations to a certain degree, even as He pointed to deeper spiritual truths. These events prepared the disciples for the challenges ahead as they followed Jesus to the cross and beyond.



EXPLORE THE TEXT



Transfigured (Matt. 17:1-3)

Jesus took Peter, James, and John on top of a high mountain. There, He was transfigured. They saw His glory, along with Moses and Elijah, who represented the Law and the Prophets. This event provided the disciples with a glimpse of Jesus’s divine glory and heavenly authority.

VERSE 1

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves.

Matthew used the time frame of **after six days** as a striking anticipatory fulfillment of what Jesus predicted for “some standing here” (16:28). The reference to the time frame may also allude to Moses’s receiving the law on Sinai after six days of preparation (Ex. 24:16), and **Peter, James, and his brother John** may remind readers of Moses’s companions Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu (v. 1).

Apparently Peter, James, and John comprised the inner circle of His twelve disciples. Jesus revealed more to these three men than to the other disciples. They accompanied Him when He raised Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51) and then met with them privately on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:3). In the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus endured intense spiritual affliction, He told His disciples to "sit here while I pray," but took Peter, James, and John a bit further into the garden as He prayed alone (14:32-33).

By leading His disciples **up on a high mountain by themselves**, Jesus took them as far as possible from other people and from everyday life. Matthew did not specifically identify the "high mountain" to which Jesus and His disciples withdrew. Two mountains have been linked to the transfiguration site, Mount Tabor in lower Galilee and Mount Hermon at the base of Caesarea Philippi. However, Mount Tabor is not a particularly high mountain (1,886 feet) and inaccessible in Jesus's day due to its fortifications, making the taller Mount Hermon (9,100 feet) the more likely location. Whatever the location, the event was so significant to the disciples that Peter recalled it later in his life (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

VERSE 2

He was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun; his clothes became as white as the light.

That Jesus was **transfigured** meant that His appearance was changed or transformed so that his **face** and his **clothes** shone with dazzling brilliance and whiteness suggesting glory, purity, and sovereignty. Luke wrote that as Jesus prayed, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29). Transfigured "does not imply that Jesus experienced any internal transformation . . . the term implies that the outer form now corresponded to Jesus's inner essence."¹

Two words, **sun** and **light**, characterized Jesus's transfigured appearance, indicating the unique nature of His countenance. Moses's face shone like this for a time with a reflection of the divine glory he had seen on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:29-35). However, Jesus's face and clothes did not merely reflect divine glory but radiated with His own heavenly glory. "The visual 'transformation' is not so much a physical alteration as an added dimension of glory . . . with the dullness of earthly conditions temporarily stripped away, so that the true nature of God's 'beloved Son' (v. 5) can for once be seen . . . Here on the mountain we have at least a foretaste of the coming of the Son of Man 'in his Father's glory with his angels' (16:27), though the heavenly beings who accompany

him here are not angels but glorified humans.”² Mark described Jesus’s clothes as more intensely white than anyone on earth could bleach them (Mark 9:3). Jesus literally changed into a source of light before their eyes.

VERSE 3

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

By inserting **suddenly**, often translated as “behold” (ESV, KJV), Matthew drew special attention to the next element of the narrative. The nuance of the Greek word suggests shock or surprise at the appearance of **Moses** and **Elijah** who conversed with Jesus. Moses and Elijah symbolized Jesus’s connection to the Law and Prophets, and the Jewish people had long expected the return of both at the end of the age (Deut. 18:15; Mal. 4:5-6).

Both men climbed up Mount Sinai (Horeb) to meet with God and experienced His presence (Ex. 24:15-18; 34:2-8; 1 Kings 19:8-15). They were also often believed never to have died but to have gone directly to God’s presence. Elijah went up to heaven by way of a fiery chariot in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11-12). In the case of Moses, however, while rabbinic tradition held that Moses never died but had been taken directly to heaven, Deuteronomy 34:5-6 recorded that Moses died in the land of Moab and that the Lord buried him.

Moses and *Elijah* together represented a way of saying that the whole of the Old Testament revelation found its fulfillment in Jesus. Matthew did not report what the two prophets said to Jesus; although Luke indicates their discussion concerned Jesus’s departure (sacrificial death) which was about to be accomplished in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

Explore Further

Read the article “Transfiguration” on pages 1592–1593 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How does the event of the transfiguration reflect the nature of Jesus as both fully God and fully man? What are some ways we can encounter God in our own lives? Pray that God would give you such encounters.

Overshadowed (Matt. 17:4-8)

While Peter suggested creating a memorial, the Father's presence overwhelmed them. As He had at Jesus's baptism, God affirmed Jesus as the unique Son of God and urged the disciples to heed His words. When the moment had passed, they found only Jesus was with them. This event emphasized Jesus's divine authority and the importance of listening to Him.

VERSE 4

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here. If you want, I will set up three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

With no indication that the prophets had intended to include any of the disciples in their conversation with Jesus, Peter impetuously interrupted them, awkwardly stating, **“Lord, it’s good for us to be here.”** He proposed setting up **three shelters** (probably little huts made of branches) to commemorate this remarkable event. His interruption revealed that while he had declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16), his understanding of Jesus's messiahship remained shallow. Mark noted that Peter said this “because he did not know what to say, since they were terrified” (Mark 9:6; see Luke 9:33).

VERSE 5

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him!”

The descent of a **bright cloud** and a **voice from the cloud** abruptly interrupted Peter's offer. Exodus notes concerning the Lord's glory, “The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day he called to Moses from the cloud. The appearance of the LORD's glory to the Israelites was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop” (Ex. 24:16-17). Exodus also describes the presence of God coming down upon the tabernacle as a cloud covering the tabernacle as “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34). The same cloud also led the Israelites during the days of their wilderness travel to the promised land (vv. 36-38).

A bright cloud covered them. The Greek term for *covered* is a rare verb used in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) to describe the

glory of the Lord resting over the tabernacle (v. 35). The *voice from the cloud* interrupted Peter and reiterated the words spoken at Jesus's baptism (Matt. 3:17), adding a significant addition, "**Listen to him!**" The Greek verb for *listen* carries the idea of not merely hearing, but obeying what is heard. "Just as God publicly endorsed Jesus as the royal Messiah and Suffering Servant prior to the beginning of the main stage of his ministry, now at the beginning of the road to the cross he repeats his endorsement even more dramatically, though much less publicly."³

VERSE 6

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown and were terrified.

The three disciples' enthusiasm to savor this amazing experience rapidly changed to terror when they **heard** the voice from the cloud. At the sound of the voice the disciples **fell facedown and were terrified**. The idea of falling prostrate was usually seen as an act of humility before God or sometimes powerful men. While the Greek term for *terrified* can have the sense of reverence, the disciples falling down at the sound of God's voice was not an act of worship, but because of their terror. They recognized the awesome power of the presence and voice of God. This is the only Gospel that records the disciples' terror and Jesus's response to them.

VERSE 7

Jesus came up, touched them, and said, "Get up; don't be afraid."

Peter, James, and John remained prostrate until **Jesus came up**, treating them with gentleness by touching them. Wanting to calm their fears, Jesus **touched them, and said, "Get up; don't be afraid."** He treated them with gentleness following their terrifying glimpse of the glory and power of heaven.

VERSE 8

When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

By the time Jesus told them to get up, everything had returned to normal. When the disciples **looked up**, Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and **they saw no one except Jesus**, who had returned to His fully human appearance as the Son of Man. Still, Peter, James, and John knew what they had seen. They never forgot the image of Jesus radiating the glory

of heaven, clothed in dazzling white with His face shining like the sun as He spoke with Moses and Elijah. Nor did they forget hearing the voice of God the Father declaring that Jesus is His beloved Son and commanding them to listen to Him (2 Pet. 1:16-18).



Explore Further

Christians worship Jesus as our Savior and Lord whose teachings we are to obey. What are some things that might hinder a believer from clearly hearing and obeying Jesus's commands? Are there any such things in your own life? If so, ask God to help you remove them from your life.

Instructed (Matt. 17:9-13)

Jesus ordered His three disciples not to speak of what they had seen and experienced on the mountain until after His resurrection. The disciples asked Jesus about the coming of Elijah. Jesus affirmed that Elijah had come as a forerunner for the Messiah in the person of John the Baptist.

VERSE 9

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

Beginning their descent from the mountain, Jesus **commanded** Peter, James, and John to keep quiet about what they had just witnessed. He certainly wanted to avoid any confusion with people about His mission as the Messiah or to further inflame the enmity of the Jewish leaders. This marked the final time Matthew made reference to the motif of silence concerning His identity (8:4; 9:30; 12:16-21; 16:20), but here Jesus said that the disciples must not disclose His identity as the Messiah until after **“the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”** Jesus did not want the disciples’ words concerning His transfiguration to create or fuel misunderstandings concerning Himself with the people or even among His own disciples. Only after Jesus’s resurrection, when such misunderstandings concerning His identity would no longer be possible, could the disciples openly speak about this event.

VERSE 10

So the disciples asked him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”

Peter, James, and John wrestled with what they had witnessed on the mountain and what Jesus had just said about the Son of Man rising from the dead. However, instead of saying anything about the vision or their need for silence, they asked, **“Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”** They had just seen Jesus talking with Elijah and Moses. However, they could not reconcile this with their understanding about Elijah coming before the Messiah to usher in the Messianic Age (Mal. 4:5-6). Why did Messiah have to suffer, die, and be raised (Matt. 16:21) if Elijah was to restore all things? They struggled with the idea of a suffering Messiah who would die. The disciples would express this nationalistic theme of a conquering Messiah even after Jesus’s resurrection (Acts 1:6-7).

VERSES 11-12

“Elijah is coming and will restore everything,” he replied. “But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn’t recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

In verse 11, Jesus replied by using the scribes’ paraphrase of Malachi 4:5, **“Elijah is coming and will restore everything.”** The use of the futuristic present tense emphasized the certainty of Elijah’s coming.

Then Jesus corrected the scribes’ understanding of the prophecy concerning Elijah with the phrase, **“but I tell you,”** and adding, **“Elijah has already come.”** However, the religious leaders **didn’t recognize him.** Jesus had previously spoken of John the Baptist as “the Elijah who is to come” (11:14). While John was not the Old Testament person of Elijah returned, John went before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). The prophet had come unrecognized and therefore did not receive the welcome he would have had if they had realized who he was. Israel’s political leaders, in the form of Herod Antipas, did to John **whatever they pleased.** Herod had John arrested and eventually had him executed (Matt. 14:1-11).

Jesus then explained to His disciples that just as the Jewish religious leaders had mistreated and killed John the Baptist, **“In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”** Jesus would also

be rejected and suffer at the hands of the religious and political leaders of Israel (Isa. 53:3-6). Jesus did not disguise His words to the disciples about His approaching suffering, death, and resurrection.

VERSE 13

Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

The disciples understood that Jesus referred to **John the Baptist** as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah's return. Jesus would suffer similar mistreatment, suffering and dying at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans. But Jesus would rise from the dead (v. 9).



Explore Further

Reflect on the revelation of Jesus's glory and the fulfillment of God's promises in Matthew 17:9-13. Begin by praising God for sending Jesus, the promised Messiah. Pray for the ability to see and understand how God works in your life, even in unexpected ways. Ask for the courage to turn away from sin and align your heart with God's purposes, as John the Baptist called people to do (Luke 3). Reflect on how Jesus prepared His disciples for the journey ahead and commit to trusting Him even when the future seems uncertain. Close your prayer by thanking God for His ultimate restoration of all things He promises through Jesus (Rev. 21-22).

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1. Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 429.
 2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 647.
 3. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 264.

Forgiveness

JESUS CALLS US TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER AS
HE HAS FORGIVEN US.

A few years ago, I experienced a situation in which I learned the value of forgiving someone who had hurt me deeply. The misunderstanding had escalated quickly into feelings of betrayal and resentment. At the time, hurt consumed me because I chose not to address the situation directly and allowed my emotions to fester. I felt justified in my anger and could not shake the thought that I was the one wronged.

As weeks passed, the situation became a wall between us. We both avoided speaking about it, but the tension was palpable. The more I held on to the anger, the more I realized how much it affected me. I withdrew from people and lost my overall peace of mind. Eventually, I left my position at the church, but my grudge overshadowed everything in my whole world. I couldn't move forward because I felt I was owed something.

Then one morning, I found myself reading Matthew 18:23-35 during my quiet time. In the parable, Jesus talked about a servant whose master had forgiven a massive debt, but then he refused to forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by a fellow servant. The master, upon hearing about the servant's unforgiveness, became furious and handed him over to be punished. The parable ended with the message that if we do not forgive others, we, too, will not receive forgiveness.

In that moment, I made the difficult decision to forgive. I called to make an appointment with the other person so that I could acknowledge the hurt but also offer grace. Prior to going to the meeting, I chose to let go of my expectations and, in doing so, found a sense of freedom I had not anticipated. The conversation was not easy, and the emotions did not disappear overnight. However, forgiving him allowed me over time to reclaim my joy and my peace.

Like the servant in the parable, I had been forgiven far more than I could ever repay, and that realization gave me the strength to forgive. That experience reminded me that forgiveness is not about forgetting or excusing the wrongs done to us. Rather it is about releasing the hold that anger and resentment have on our hearts.

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 18:1-35

Before moving on to Jesus’s departure from Galilee for Judea (19:1), Matthew presented teachings from Jesus that emphasized humility, accountability, forgiveness, and the values of God’s kingdom. The chapter begins with His disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:1-9). The parable of the lost sheep (vv. 10-14) illustrates God’s immense care for every individual. Jesus then addressed how to resolve conflicts and sin within the community of believers (vv. 15-20).

Peter then asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sinned against him, suggesting seven times as a possible limit (v. 21). Jesus replied that forgiveness should not be limited to seven times but “seventy times seven” (v. 22) signifying boundless forgiveness. To illustrate this, Jesus shared the parable of the unforgiving servant (vv. 23-35). This parable highlights the expectation that believers must extend the same mercy and forgiveness to others which they have received from God in Jesus Christ.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

Question of Forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22)

Jesus repeatedly stressed the importance of His followers practicing forgiveness of others (5:21-26; 6:12,14-15). Following Jesus’s teaching on resolving conflicts within the church (18:15-20), Peter wanted some clarification on the process of reconciliation. His question suggested that he sought to understand the extent of mercy that God required. He even put forth what he imagined as a generous limit. However, Jesus’s surprising response emphasized that forgiveness should reflect the boundless grace of God.

VERSE 21

Then Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

True to form, Peter spoke up for the rest of the disciples to ask Jesus a question about forgiveness. Using the respectful form of address, **Lord**, he asked, “**How many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?**” Peter seemed concerned about determining the limit for the number of times forgiveness had to be extended to an offender. He likely thought he was being generous when he offered, “**As many as seven times?**”

According to the Jewish rabbis, a person was required to forgive someone guilty of the same offense three times, after which the offender had exhausted their right to receive forgiveness. Likely believing Jesus’s standard would be higher than that of the rabbis, Peter chose *seven*, a number which both represented generosity and completeness.

VERSE 22

“I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.”

Jesus’s answer likely stunned Peter. Jesus’s choice of the number **seventy times seven** (“seventy-seven times,” ESV, NIV) speaks not of keeping count of the times one is wronged, but rather that His disciples should not be keeping track of wrongs at all. Jesus’s point was that mercy should not have limits and does not keep a record of wrongs committed. His disciples should be prepared to extend such mercy to others.

Explore Further

Read the article “Forgiveness” on pages 589–590 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Do you find it challenging to forgive repeatedly? How is forgiveness beneficial to the one who forgives?

Compassionate King (Matt. 18:23-27)

Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed a very large debt to his master but was unable to pay. In humility and desperation, he asked for mercy. His master had compassion and forgave him the debt. This parable illustrates God’s mercy and the importance of forgiveness.

VERSE 23

“For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.”

The opening phrase, **for this reason**, underscores the importance of the radical forgiveness that Jesus commanded (v. 22). He introduced this parable, found only in Matthew, with the common formula, **“The kingdom of heaven can be compared to”** (13:24,31,33,44,45,47; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1). This formula was common in rabbinic parables and meant to have the listener connect the **king** in the parable with God. Similarly, the king’s **servants** should probably be associated with God’s people.

In a large and prosperous country, a *king* would have *servants* who would have lived well. In this story, these servants could borrow or hold money owed to the king in some way for a limited time. Now the king decided **to settle accounts** with his *servants*, the ordinary word for “slaves” but in this context would have applied to those who served the king in some official capacity. Jesus only mentioned the king’s wish for a settlement without giving any specific reason or cause for concern.

VERSE 24

“When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him.”

When the king initiated the process, the special case of a servant with an absurdly high debt **was brought before him**. That he *was brought* may indicate an unwillingness to settle accounts on the part of this servant or that he had been arrested. A single talent represented a large sum of money, roughly equal to what a low-level laborer could make in twenty years. The Greek term translated **ten thousand** also has the meaning of “innumerable” and was often used as a figure of speech for a number higher than one could imagine. This debt amounted to more than what an individual could earn in four thousand lifetimes, assuming that the entirety of his wages went exclusively to repaying his debt! This man owed exponentially more than he could ever hope to pay.

VERSE 25

“Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.”

Jesus did not explain how the servant came to be in such debt. The point of the parable focused on the fact that the man **did not have the money to pay it back**. There is a shift in the parable at this point, with the “king” being referred to as the servant’s **master**, which may suggest that we should associate God with the servant’s master.

Since the servant could not repay his debt, his master **commanded** he and his family to be sold into slavery, along with the complete liquidation of **everything he had**. Selling people into slavery for payment of their debts was a common practice of the time. However, even with these extreme measures, the amount the king could have hoped to recover would not add up to a drop in the bucket for the servant’s **debt**.

VERSE 26

“At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’”

The servant **fell facedown** and begged for patience. He promised to pay back **everything** he owed to his master, a ludicrous statement given the amount of his debt. Everyone listening to Jesus tell this story would have understood that the servant’s promise was empty and hopeless.

VERSE 27

“Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.”

Instead of having him hauled away to prison, the king **had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan**. The king could have even given him more time to repay what he owed. However, foregoing his own interests, the king acted in the best interest of his servant. Contrary to what would have been expected, the king forgave his servant and released him and his family from custody.

Explore Further

Read the articles “Compassion” on pages 325–326 and “Grace” on pages 670–672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does the king’s cancellation of the debt reveal about God? About God’s mercy toward you in Christ?

Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:28-35)

The servant whose large debt was forgiven went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small debt but was unable to pay it back. Unwilling to extend compassion, he threw his fellow servant into prison. Hearing what happened, the king threw that unforgiving servant into prison until he could repay his debt. Jesus warned that those who are unwilling to forgive will face judgment.

VERSE 28

“That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’”

The servant who had just been forgiven an unpayable debt **went out and found** someone who owed him some money. Jesus did not say that he just happened to run into a **fellow servant** but sought him out. Matthew used the same word for *found* when he described the shepherd who “finds” his lost sheep (18:13). The amount owed to this fellow servant was **a hundred denarii**. A *denarius* was a Roman silver coin which constituted a day’s work for an ordinary laborer. Therefore, the amount the second servant owed was significant, equivalent to hundred days’ wages. However, compared to the debt the first servant owed the king, this was next to nothing. Anxious to get his money back, the first servant **grabbed** his fellow servant and **started choking him**, simultaneously demanding immediate repayment. The first servant’s actions demonstrate the inconsistency of having been forgiven an astronomical debt and refusing to forgive a comparatively paltry amount.

VERSE 29

“At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’”

The **fellow servant** who owed the smaller debt took the same action and used almost the same language that brought mercy to the first servant with the greater debt. The difference in the servants’ situations was that over time the fellow servant could have repaid his debt, whereas the first servant had no hope of paying his debt back to the king.

VERSE 30

“But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed.”

The first servant refused to forgive his fellow servant’s debt or give him time to repay it. Instead, **he threw him into prison** until he could pay back the full amount of the loan. Being in debtor’s prison was a hopeless situation to be in because there was no opportunity to make money to repay a debt. Instead, the prisoner was dependent upon family and/or friends to acquire the funds necessary for his release.

VERSE 31

“When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.”

The king’s **other servants** were **deeply distressed** at the first servant’s failure to exercise even a little of the generosity with which he had been afforded by the king. They **reported to their master everything** they had witnessed. They told the king that the man whom he had forgiven an enormously huge debt had turned around and thrown another servant in prison over a comparatively ridiculous smaller debt.

VERSE 32

“Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.’”

The king **summoned** the servant back into his presence. He shamed the evil man for his wickedness and for his refusal to forgive. He reminded him, **“I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.”** The king’s anger is unsurprising and did not bode well for the **wicked servant**. The Greek term for *wicked* is the same word used to describe Satan (“evil one,” 6:13; 13:19,38). The term is associated with such sins as blasphemy, sorcery, idolatry, murder, and adultery. The servant’s unforgiving attitude and actions were blatant wickedness.

VERSE 33

“Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

The king asked a question that grammatically assumed a positive response and should have pierced the guilty man's heart. **“Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”** It should also pierce the heart of every believer in Jesus who struggles to forgive others. The term for *shouldn't* can be more literally translated as “was it not necessary.” The king saw that it was necessary that the forgiven man act like a forgiven man. That the king extended such lavish grace to his servant demanded that the servant should extend such grace to others. He should have forgiven as he had been forgiven (Matt. 6:14-15; Eph. 4:32).

The king did not specifically refer to having forgiven the servant's debt. Rather, he said that his servant should **have had mercy** as the king had extended mercy to him. The king “refers to mercy as the attitude that should have guided the thinking and the actions of a man who had been the recipient of such signal mercy. The king speaks of mercy on *your fellow servant*, putting the emphasis on his relationship to the man he had condemned rather than on that to his sovereign.”¹

Jesus made His parable very personal. The king represents God who has forgiven our sin debt, and penalty for our sin is death (Rom. 6:23). We owe God a debt so outrageously high that we could never pay it back. However, God in His great mercy offers complete and total forgiveness (5:8-11) to those who repent and place their faith in Jesus. Therefore, in the same way that God has had mercy on us, we should have mercy on others.

VERSE 34

“And because he was angry, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.”

Because he was angry, the king revoked his earlier compassionate decision to cancel the servant's great debt and **handed him over to the jailers**. The king, **his master**, no longer felt compelled to honor his earlier decision due to his servant's merciless actions. Rather, he imprisoned his servant. Given the enormity of the servant's debt, this imprisonment would have been a life sentence.

VERSE 35

“So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

The context in verse 35 is relationships within the family of God. Jesus previously emphasized the need for forgiving others in the Model Prayer (6:12,14-15). In unpacking the meaning of this verse, we must first explore what Jesus was not saying. The Lord was not saying that by not forgiving others, a believer could lose their salvation. Salvation is through God's grace by faith alone in the atoning work of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. It has nothing to do with works (Rom. 3:20,28; Eph. 2:8-9). At the moment we place our faith in Christ, all of our sins are forgiven and permanently exchanged for the perfect righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 2:13-14).

God expects those whom He forgives to forgive everyone who sins against them as He has forgiven them. Nobody will ever sin against us anywhere near to the amount we have sinned against God. The ability to forgive those who hurt us demonstrates that the Spirit of God lives within us through faith in Christ who works in us.

Those absolutely refusing to forgive may show that they are not willing to receive God's forgiveness for their much larger debt of sin. This may not apply to those who deep down want to forgive yet may still be struggling with what to do because of the hurt they have experienced.

Clearly, we do not earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. How we treat other people and our willingness to forgive within the family of God demonstrates the genuineness of our relationship with Christ. Extending forgiveness and mercy to others provides opportunities for believers to demonstrate that they truly follow Christ as His disciples.



Explore Further

Reflect on Jesus's warning about our willingness to forgive others from the heart. Examine your own life and relationships, identifying any areas where you may be withholding forgiveness. Commit to extending genuine forgiveness, just as God has forgiven you.

Ask yourself, "How does my willingness (or unwillingness) to forgive others reflect my understanding of God's mercy?" "What steps can I take to ensure that I am forgiving others from the heart rather than just with mere words?"

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 477.

Our Task

BECAUSE JESUS ROSE FROM THE GRAVE, WE ARE TO TAKE
THE GOSPEL TO ALL PEOPLE.

As a pastor, I have always believed in the Great Commission, but Jesus's command took on special urgency when our church began a partnership with the International Mission Board in a west African country.

When our team of three men arrived in our host city, an IMB missionary greeted us and gave us a broad overview of our anticipated work. After a day of preparations to go to see our potential people group, we took the long and often bumpy drive over the rough terrain out into the bush where we would camp for the next few nights. The people met us with both excitement and deep spiritual hunger. Many of them had heard of Jesus, but few truly understood the power of His resurrection.

On the second day, I remained in the village in order to connect with the people while the other two men went out to canvas the area for potential areas to work. My translator and I met a man named Bulus, a village elder who had long resisted Christianity. As we shared the gospel with him, he listened carefully but remained skeptical. "If Jesus truly rose from the dead," he asked, "what does that mean for me?"

His question was profound. I told him that because Jesus conquered the grave, death no longer had the final say. This meant that the resurrection was not just a past event but a present reality that offered him eternal life and hope. I could sense the Holy Spirit working in his heart as he contemplated this truth. That evening, Bulus made a decision to follow Christ. That moment changed more than just his life—it ignited a movement in the village. Soon others came wanting to know more about Jesus. Before we returned to the States, a small group of believers began gathering regularly beneath a large tree, the beginning of a new church.

The gospel cannot stay confined within the walls of our churches. It must reach the ends of the earth. Upon returning from our first trip, I led our congregation to adopt a previously unreached, unengaged people group so that they could have access to the gospel. Every time teams returned to this people group, we carried the truth that the gospel is not just good news—it is urgent news. Because Jesus lives, we go. Because He defeated death, we share.



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



Matthew 28:1-20

Throughout His ministry, Jesus had repeatedly foretold His death and resurrection (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19), but His disciples struggled to comprehend what He meant. The resurrection of Jesus stands as the cornerstone of the Christian faith. If Jesus had remained in the tomb, His teachings and claims would have been meaningless. However, His victory over death proved that He was indeed the Son of God, with power over sin and the grave. It validated everything He had taught, and fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah's suffering, death, and resurrection (Ps. 16:10; Isa. 53:1-12).

Matthew 28 does not simply recount a miraculous event; it marks the beginning of a new era. With Jesus's resurrection, His followers took up His mission of taking the good news to the nations. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) is a call to spread the gospel worldwide, making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to follow Christ's commands.



EXPLORE THE TEXT



Believe (Matt. 28:1-7)

At dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary visited the tomb, only to witness a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone. The guards, overwhelmed with fear, collapsed like dead men. The angel reassured the women and declared that Jesus had risen, just as He had promised. He instructed them to see the empty tomb and then go quickly to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive and would meet them in Galilee.

VERSE 1

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb.

The **Sabbath** ended at sundown on Saturday evening, and Matthew indicated that the women arrived **after the Sabbath** or early

Sunday morning. **Mary Magdalene** and **the other Mary** made their way **to view the tomb** as soon as they had enough light to see. Jesus's resurrection would lead the early church to adopt Sunday as their day of worship (1 Cor. 16:2). Both women had witnessed Joseph of Arimathea and others entomb Jesus's body on Friday afternoon (Matt. 27:59-61; Mark 15:45-47; Luke 23:55), so they knew the location of Jesus's tomb. By the time they arrived, Jesus had already risen. The credibility of the resurrection account is indicated by the fact that two women became the first witnesses to the resurrection. In first-century culture the testimony of women was not usually allowed in court. If the resurrection was a ruse two women would not have been chosen as the first eyewitnesses.

VERSE 2

There was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it.

Only Matthew made reference to a **violent earthquake** as **an angel of the Lord descended from heaven** and **rolled back the stone** from the entrance to the tomb. Because Jesus had already risen, the angel did not roll away the stone to let Him out of the tomb but so that the women might get into the tomb, so they could see for themselves that the tomb was empty. That the angel sat on the stone may have indicated a note of completion or victory over the grave.

VERSE 3

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow.

The comment about the angel's **appearance** comparing it to **lightning** signified his impressive nature. **His clothing was as white as snow** which pointed to heavenly garments because they resembled the clothing of the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9). Surely the angel's appearance pointed to the even more spectacular significance of Jesus's resurrection.

VERSE 4

The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men.

The angel's glorious appearance caused the posted guards to be **shaken by fear**. They became so overwhelmed with terror that **they became**

like dead men. Their preparations for military service prepared them to face human opposition. However, when these professional soldiers witnessed this striking heavenly being who had easily pushed the large stone away from the front of the tomb, they became paralyzed with fear and passed out.

VERSE 5

The angel told the women, “Don’t be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.”

The angel ignored the guards and spoke reassuringly to **the women, “Don’t be afraid.”** The Greek text used an emphatic pronoun translated **you** which implied that he meant these words of comfort for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. They had no reason to fear, but the Roman soldiers had every reason to be afraid. This marked a dramatic reversal because these harmless and unarmed women could stand calm and assured while the battle-seasoned soldiers had been frightened into a state of shock. The angel further encouraged the women by assuring them that he knew why they had come—they were **looking for Jesus who was crucified.**

VERSE 6

“He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”

The women had come to see a corpse, but no body remained. The angel stated the heart of his message: **“He is not here. For he has risen.”** Then the angel added, **“just as he said,”** a statement which has caused readers to recall Jesus’s repeated predictions that He would suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19).

The angel encouraged the women to see for themselves that the tomb was empty, **“Come and see the place where he lay.”** No person had witnessed Jesus leaving the tomb, but it occurred with the stone still in place over the entrance. The form of the Greek verb emphasizes seeing and understanding once and for all that Jesus had risen from the dead.

John recorded that the linen cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’s body was still in place and the burial cloth which had been wrapped around His head was folded and laying in a separate place (John 20:6-7). The location and condition of the burial clothes indicate that no grave robbers had taken Jesus’s body.

VERSE 7

“Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.’ Listen, I have told you.”

The women having witnessed the empty tomb, the angel commissioned them to deliver a message to Jesus’s **disciples**. He told them to **go quickly and tell** them the news that Jesus **has risen from the dead**. The angel also told the women to tell the disciples, **“indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee,”** a meeting Jesus prophesied before His death (26:32). Jesus would surely go ahead of them, and they would **see Him there** and not merely an empty tomb. The angel concluded his message with **“Listen, I have told you.”** The angel’s words were “an authoritative pronouncement (perhaps even that the angel speaks for God) and functioned as a call to action. The message has been delivered, and now it is up to the women to act on it.”¹



Explore Further

Read “Resurrection of Jesus the Christ” on pages 1349–1350 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Note how each of the four Gospel writers reported the events surrounding the resurrection. What did they emphasize in common? How do the differences in the accounts give them greater authenticity?

Worship (Matt. 28:8-10)

The women quickly and joyously left the tomb to find the disciples and share the news. On the way, they met Jesus and immediately worshiped Him. Jesus then told the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. He would see them there. This passage highlights the joy of the resurrection, the personal encounter with Christ, and His call to spread the good news.

VERSE 8

So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news.

The two Marys wasted no time in obeying the angel's command. The angel had told them to "go quickly and tell his disciples" (v. 7), so **they ran** to announce **the news** of Jesus's resurrection. They **departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy**. The NIV captures this mix of emotions: "The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy." The women likely did not fully understand what they had just seen and heard. Nevertheless, their *fear* mixed with *great joy* in expectation of what the resurrection of Jesus meant for the future.

When they began their walk to the burial place, they had expected to continue their mourning from Friday. But they left carrying the news that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and **they ran to tell his disciples the news**. While the general term *disciples* could have included all those who had given Jesus their allegiance, these two women would share this news specifically with His eleven closest followers.

VERSE 9

Just then Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

The resurrected **Jesus met** the women and stopped them in their tracks and said, "**Greetings!**" The Greek term from which this word is translated means "rejoice" or "be joyful." Earlier it had been used disingenuously by Judas as he betrayed Jesus (26:49) and by the soldiers as they mocked Jesus ("hail," 27:29). Apparently the women recognized Jesus immediately. Their grip on **his feet** confirmed the reality that Jesus was no ghost or a figment of their imaginations. He had risen from the dead.

Grasping someone's feet expressed submission and homage to a king. Standing before the resurrected Jesus, the women recognized that He was more than a mere mortal, He was divine. As a result, they prostrated themselves, held His feet, and **worshiped him**.

VERSE 10

Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."

Just as the angel had done (v. 5), **Jesus told** the women, "**Do not be afraid.**" Joyful at the news of His resurrection and their worshiping of Him and clinging to Him might seem contradictory with fear of Him. But just as the women had left the angel with both fear and great joy, so too here their joy was apparently mixed with some fear of the supernatural.

Jesus commanded the women, **“Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”** Jesus’s reference to *brothers* meant His disciples because He had previously used the term (12:49-50; 23:8; 25:40). The family metaphor showed love and patience for them because they had, in essence, run away from home when they abandoned Jesus (26:56). But now by using the term Jesus was communicating to them that in spite of their previous failure, they were still His brothers and disciples, who would share in the work of spreading the gospel of salvation.

Explore Further

When the women encountered the risen Jesus, they fell immediately at His feet and worshiped Him. How does Jesus’s resurrection inspire and shape your worship? Let Jesus’s victory over sin and death deepen your worship, both personally and within the community of believers.

Share (Matt. 28:16-20)

Matthew concluded his Gospel account with Jesus commissioning His followers after the resurrection. He had previously instructed the eleven disciples to meet Him on a mountain in Galilee where now He declared His authority over heaven and earth. He commanded His disciples to make disciples from the peoples of all nations and to baptize them in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They were also to teach these new believers to obey everything Jesus had commanded them to do. Jesus assured them of His continual presence, promising to be with them always, even to the end of the age.

VERSE 16

The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them.

Jesus made several post-resurrection appearances to various people (Mark 16:9-13; Luke 24:13-49; John 20:10-21:23), but Matthew did not include any of these events. He skipped ahead to Jesus’s promised meeting with the disciples in Galilee, a promise He reiterated when He

instructed the women to tell His brothers to go to Galilee where He would see them (28:10). Returning to their home region of Galilee, where they had all spent so much time and had done so much together, would have made sense. They normally returned home after the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Furthermore, Galilee's association with Gentiles (4:14-16) made this the fitting location for the mission mandate to take the gospel to all the nations.²

Matthew gave no specific time frame that **the eleven disciples traveled to Galilee**, but John recorded a post-resurrection appearance a week later in Jerusalem (John 20:26), so the disciples may have left for Galilee shortly after that. John also recounts an appearance of Jesus to Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, and John and two other disciples by the Sea of Galilee (21:1-23).

Matthew noted that the disciples *traveled to Galilee*, specifically **to the mountain where Jesus had directed them**. The exact mountain is not identified. Mountains figured prominently in Matthew's Gospel in connections with Jesus's temptation (4:8), the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), the Transfiguration (17:1-13) and the Mount of Olives (24:3; 26:36, Gethsemane was on the Mount of Olives). Whichever mountain it was, the disciples would have been familiar with Galilee and therefore known of the specific location where they were to meet Jesus.

VERSE 17

When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted.

The eleven disciples reacted similarly to the women (v. 9) when Jesus appeared in His glorified body—**they worshiped**. They recognized Jesus and that He had risen from the dead. However, Matthew added a stunning admission, **but some doubted**. However, he offered frustratingly little detail about the doubters. The Greek word for *doubted* refers more to hesitation than to unbelief. Fear may have contributed to the way they responded to Jesus. Perhaps they still struggled with some confusion about how to behave in the presence of an exalted and holy being. While no evidence exists that more than the eleven disciples were present, the syntax implies a change of subject from the previous clause, *they worshiped*. Some of the eleven worshiped, while others doubted—hesitating in their reaction to being in the presence of the risen Jesus.³

The fact that some of the disciples doubted argued against the theory that their seeing Jesus was simply a hallucination born of a desperate desire to see Him. Although the disciples expected the bodily resurrection of God's people, they likely anticipated all the dead being resurrected

at the same time (Dan. 12:2-3). Despite Jesus's repeated promises that He would rise from the dead (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19), His resurrection from the dead as it had occurred was unexpected.

VERSE 18

Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.”

Taking the initiative with a comforting approach, **Jesus came near** in order to commission His disciples to take the gospel of salvation to the world. He drew near them, even those who doubted, to reestablish His relationship with them as both His brothers and His disciples. In this episode, the disciples did not speak. Rather their role was to embrace their commission and carry it out.

Jesus began His commission of His disciples as He asserted, **“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.”** As the risen Lord, God the Father had given Jesus complete sovereignty over the entirety of the created order, both *in heaven and on earth*. Jesus had previously spoken of His authority to forgive sins (9:6) and that all things had been entrusted to Him by God the Father (11:27). Prior to His ascension into heaven, Jesus commissioned His disciples with His authority and power to take His gospel into the world.

VERSES 19-20

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus grounded His command in His authority with **therefore**. “Jesus is insisting that his authority is all-encompassing and thus extends beyond the Eleven, beyond Israel, and to the people of all nations. The broad sweeping authority of Jesus is why people of all nations should become his disciples and obey everything that he commands.”⁴

The commission has one main imperative verb, **make disciples**, and three subordinate participles—“go,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” Jesus commanded the Eleven to *make disciples of all the nations*, a phrase that included both Jews and Gentiles. The command to go is connected specifically to the task of making disciples. Furthermore, making disciples encompasses the act of conversion after the proclamation of the

gospel as well as the actions of **baptizing** and **teaching** converts to obey all of Jesus’s commands, meaning discipleship.

Baptism is the initial step of new believers which both proclaims the new convert’s faith and identifies him or her with the church, the body of fellow believers. Baptizing **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** indicates both the unity and individuality in the Godhead or Trinity.

Jesus expected His disciples to follow His pattern of teaching—to teach new believers **to observe** His commands. As the disciples had committed themselves to serving Jesus and being trained by Him for this mission, new disciples of Jesus are to commit themselves to serving Him while being trained by those under His authority (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Finally, Jesus encouraged His disciples that as they sought to obey His commission He would be with them: **“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** The word *always* translates a Greek phrase which literally means “the whole of every day,” and this promise extends *to the end of the age*. The *end of the age* refers to the future return of Christ and the time of the final judgment. This promise is not for the Eleven only. It extends to all believers as they proclaim the gospel in their own times and places until Jesus returns.

Explore Further

How do you see yourself living out the Great Commission in your daily life? Since every believer has been called make disciples, consider integrating the Great Commission into your daily prayer life. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel daily. Pray for boldness like the early believers did (Acts 4:29) and seek courage to proclaim Christ without fear. Pray for discipleship growth by asking God to help you mentor and encourage other believers. Pray for the nations to come to Christ while lifting up missionaries. Thank God for empowering and guiding you in His mission.

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1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1101.
 2. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 688.
 3. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 430.
 4. Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 761-762.

Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937) was a businessman who was a driving force in establishing the Standard Oil Company. By 1882, Standard Oil had an almost complete monopoly in the oil business in the United States. At his death, Rockefeller had a net worth of 1.4 billion dollars (estimated to be 280 billion in today's money). When asked how much money was enough, Rockefeller supposedly said, "Just one dollar more."

A similar drive to reach success runs rampant in our culture. Television is replete with reality shows full of people seeking their fifteen minutes of fame. Success includes attaining great fame, money, expensive houses, expensive cars, and the list goes on and on. But the saying remains true: at the end of life you can't take any of that wealth with you. Focusing on the accumulation of wealth and the trappings of fame and fortune absent a saving relationship with Christ in the end leads to the loss of all that a person has spent a lifetime accumulating as well as their eternal soul.

In today's session we will see the disciples struggle over the Jewish belief that wealth indicated God's blessing and what Jesus said about rich people. They questioned Jesus about who could be saved. This set the stage for Jesus's lesson on the true reward of eternal life.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 19:1-30

Matthew 19 details a pivotal moment in Jesus's ministry, addressing key topics such as marriage, divorce, childlike faith, wealth, and discipleship. Throughout Matthew 19, Jesus challenged cultural assumptions about marriage, wealth, and status, calling people to radical surrender and wholehearted devotion to God. His teachings underscored that eternal

life is not earned through good deeds but through faith, humility, and willingness to forsake all for the sake of following Him.

The Pharisees sought to trap Jesus by asking if a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Jesus pointed back to God's original design for marriage (v. 4), and He affirmed marriage as a lifelong covenant (v. 6). Jesus explained that God permitted divorce due to human hardness of heart, but from the beginning, it was not God's intent. He added that anyone who divorces, except for sexual immorality, and remarries commits adultery. His disciples, shocked by the strictness of this teaching, suggested it might be better not to marry at all. Jesus acknowledged that some remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom, showing that both singleness and marriage can be divine callings (vv. 3-12).

The disciples tried to turn away those who had brought their children to Jesus so that He could lay His hands on them and pray for them. But Jesus rebuked His disciples, saying, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (v. 14). This moment underscored the humility and dependency required to enter God's kingdom. The chapter closes with Jesus's encounter with a man who inquired as to how to attain eternal life, which is the focus of this session.



Unwilling (Matt. 19:16-22)

A rich man asked Jesus what he had to do to have eternal life. When Jesus told the man to keep the commandments, the man said he had kept all of them. Jesus then told him to sell everything he owned and give to the poor, then to follow Him. The young man was not willing and went away grieving.

VERSE 16

Just then someone came up and asked him, "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?"

The story of the rich young man follows Jesus's blessing of the children (vv. 13-15). Matthew contrasted the children with **someone** who approached Jesus. Mark wrote that the man came running and knelt before Jesus, so he came eagerly and reverently (Mark 10:17). Luke called

him a ruler (Luke 18:18), so likely he had a high social status, probably as an official in a Jewish synagogue.

The man called Jesus **“teacher,”** one who taught concerning the things of God, rather than the more common “rabbi.” It was a term of respect that was also given to scribes. His question, **“What good must I do to have eternal life?”** suggests an attitude of confidence that he was certain he could earn salvation by doing good of some sort. He wanted Jesus to identify some supremely righteous act that would secure him *eternal life*. “He was sure that entrance to eternal life was in his grasp if he only knew how to go about it.”¹

VERSE 17

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” he said to him. “There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

As Jesus often did, He answered the man’s question with a question of His own, **“Why do you ask me about what is good?”** Apparently Jesus wanted to probe the man to see why he had not found satisfaction in his pursuit of eternal life. Jesus challenged him to take his focus off himself and onto God’s absolute goodness with His next statement, **“There is only one who is good.”** Only God can define what constitutes goodness because He alone is perfectly good.

Continuing the lesson, Jesus told the man, **“If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”** We must not take Jesus’s words as dismissively telling the man, “just be good and do the best you can.” Rather, He said that God required keeping the commandments—all of them—perfectly in order for him to have eternal life. No one can possibly do that! Jesus wanted the man to know that his goodness would always fall short (Rom. 3:23).

VERSES 18-19

“Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: “Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

As a dedicated Jew who believed in following the law, the man believed that he must prove himself worthy of God. However, this did not fit with what Jesus had just taught in the previous passage that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those with the faith and humility of

children (vv. 13-15). Jesus wanted to lead him to confess his need and dependency on God.

Rather than considering the implications of his self-reliance in his pursuit of eternal life, this young man wanted specifics. **“Which ones?”** This question had a practical basis. According to rabbinic calculations, the Pentateuch contained 613 commandments. So the man’s question was which commandments were a priority and should be focused on.

Jesus replied by listing five of the Ten Commandments: **“Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.”** He also included **“and love your neighbor as yourself”** (Lev. 19:18), which He would include later in His twofold summary of the law (Matt. 22:37-40). These commandments have to do with the way people should treat other people. Jesus stressed the importance of the ethical treatment of others. His answer may have disappointed the young man because he had expected some higher service to God necessary in order to gain eternal life.

Clearly, Jesus did not intend to give the man the impression that if he could obey these commandments perfectly he would receive eternal life. Rather, He was exposing the man’s self-reliance so as to make him realize he could not possibly keep even this shorter list of commandments. Jesus wanted this young man to see his own spiritual bankruptcy.

VERSE 20

“I have kept all these,” the young man told him. “What do I still lack?”

The man sincerely believed what he said, **“I have kept all these.”** For the first time, Matthew described him as a **young man**, which would have made him between twenty-four and forty years of age, that he had not reached maturity. His answer exposed his lack of spiritual maturity when he declared that he had *kept* (meaning “guarded”) *all* these commandments. In the Greek text, the emphasis is on *all*.

Still searching for more, the man offered yet another simplistic question, **“What do I still lack?”** Although he likely believed that he had done all he knew to do to earn right standing with God, he wanted to know what he had missed.

VERSE 21

“If you want to be perfect,” Jesus said to him, “go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Jesus revealed to the young man what he still lacked. His response, **“if you want to be perfect,”** pointed back to the Sermon on the Mount and its command “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). *Perfect* denoted not moral flawlessness but completeness in the sense of maturity. God intended for His children to mirror their heavenly Father’s supreme good character which should be expressed through loving others like He loves. This kind of love would not permit the wealthy man to hoard his riches while people lived in poverty

The man’s search for perfection took an expected turn as Jesus identified his most glaring impediment. Jesus had omitted the command against coveting (Ex. 20:17) in His earlier statement, which He now brought to the forefront. Jesus confronted him with this commandment, **“go, sell your belongings and give to the poor.”** If the man would do this, Jesus promised that he would **have treasure in heaven** (see Matt. 6:20), not that getting into heaven came as a reward for good works. The selling of his possession marked only the first step of Jesus’s call for radical obedience, and the second step demanded even more—**“Then come, follow me.”**

VERSE 22

When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

But this man, who had worshiped his wealth more than anything, could not forsake it when Jesus challenged him to sell everything and follow Him. This man refused to make the radical changes in his life because his **many possessions** made his life comfortable. The man did not go away because he found following Jesus unattractive; rather, it was the cost of giving away all his possessions that made him go **away grieving**.²

Explore Further

Read the article “Eternal Life” on pages 512–513 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some common views on how to receive eternal life? The rich young man refused to follow Jesus because it would have meant the loss of all his possessions. If Jesus asked you to give up something that you highly value for the sake of following Him, how would you respond? Why?

Possible (Matt. 19:23-26)

After the rich young ruler departed, Jesus explained to His disciples that riches can make it extremely difficult for a person to enter God's kingdom because wealth often leads to self-reliance rather than dependence on God. When the disciples expressed concern about who can be saved, Jesus reassured them that while human effort alone cannot achieve salvation, God has the power to make the impossible possible.

VERSE 23

Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus seized the opportunity to use this young man's rejection to issue a warning to His disciples about the dangers of wealth. He showed the seriousness of His warning by beginning with **“Truly I tell you”** and proceeded to tell them that a wealthy person could **enter the kingdom of heaven** with difficulty. With all the advantages of wealth and influence, rich people may find it much more difficult to have the attitude of humility, submission, and service required to follow Jesus.

VERSE 24

“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

Intensifying His lesson, Jesus illustrated the difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom with the use of hyperbole—an exaggeration for effect—by saying, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”** Jesus used the image of the largest animal any of them would have ever seen passing through such a small opening as a metaphor for the impossible. Clearly Jesus deliberately did not use the analogy to insist on the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God, but to underscore the exceptional difficulty of this occurring. Unless someone turned and humbled himself in childlike trust (vv. 13-15), that person could not enter the kingdom of heaven.

VERSE 25

When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, “Then who can be saved?”

Jesus's statement about the rich man shook **the disciples** to the core. They found His words hard to accept. Matthew used a very strong expression, **utterly astonished**, to bring out the extent of their bewilderment. What Jesus said went far beyond mild surprise to that of calling into question ideas that they had accepted all their lives. Judaism held that material wealth indicated God's approval and blessing, so the disciples responded, **"Then who can be saved?"** From their point of view, God would only bless someone with great wealth who deserved it because of their goodness. If God excluded what they deemed as likely candidates for salvation, what hope existed for anyone else? They reasoned that if the rich cannot be saved, then they did not stand a chance.

VERSE 26

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Christ responded with another shocking remark, one that was likely confusing at first. He **looked** at His disciples, meaning that Jesus fixed His gaze on them, because they were having difficulty comprehending what Jesus had told them. The disciples may have expected Jesus to say something like only the truly humble or poor in spirit can be saved (5:3) or that only those with childlike faith and dependence on God can be saved (19:13-15). Instead, Jesus agreed with the disciples, **"With man this is impossible."** No one can be saved by wealth, achievements, abilities, or good works. But God has an entirely different plan. Jesus went on to say, **"but with God all things are possible."** While Jesus slammed the door on human efforts to attain salvation, He declared that God can bring about salvation to anyone. They still had much to learn, especially since Jesus did not explain to them how God would bring this about: through Jesus's death on the cross.

Explore Further

Reread Matthew 19:25-26. Just as in the first century, people today have misunderstandings about how a person can "enter the kingdom of God." Think about some of the ways you have heard people answer this question, "Why would God allow you to enter into heaven?" How could you help them come to know that human efforts will always fall short?

Reward (Matt. 19:27-30)

Peter responded by saying they had left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus promised the disciples that those who have left everything to follow Him will receive a hundred times more. True followers of Jesus, in contrast to the rich young ruler, will also inherit eternal life. He then told them that the first will be last and the last first: many who seem important now will be humbled, while those who seem insignificant will be exalted.

VERSE 27

Then Peter responded to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”

Speaking for the rest of the disciples, Peter responded, **“See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”** This emphasized the disciples’ interest in knowing what rewards they might expect for their obedience, having given up everything to follow Jesus. This question, coupled with the previous question (v. 25), suggests not a sense of entitlement but rather a great concern over what would or would not await them in eternity.

VERSE 28

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, in the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Instead of rebuking Peter, Jesus answered graciously. Jesus looked toward **the renewal of all things**, referring to the new heavens and new earth which will be created at the return of Christ. Jesus described the moment when He will take His seat on the glorious throne of heaven in eternity (Rev. 21:1-5). **The Son of Man** recalls imagery from Daniel 7:13-14.

Jesus revealed that since His disciples **have followed** Him that they would have more than treasure in heaven. They would **sit on twelve thrones** and have positions of great responsibility and power alongside Him **judging the twelve tribes of Israel**. In other words, the disciples will reign with Christ at a time still in the future. The apostle Paul taught that all believers would judge the whole world and angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

VERSE 29

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life.”

Jesus expanded His focus to include **everyone who has left houses** or family or property for the sake of His **name**. The phrase **because of my name** represents loyalty to Jesus. Everyone who has sacrificed people and possessions in order to follow Christ **will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life**. The phrase *a hundred times more* refers to an astonishing and miraculous increase (see 13:8,23). The reward will vastly exceed any sacrifice because every believer will inherit eternal life in the kingdom of heaven and be with Jesus forever.

VERSE 30

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

With this statement, Jesus combined warning and promise about a great reversal of the values of this world coming in the final judgment. Previously, the disciples had believed that a person’s wealth indicated God’s favor on earth and therefore the expectation of being blessed in the next life (vv. 23-25). The rich man became an example of one who was **first** in this life who would be **last** in eternity. Those who have forsaken everything to follow Jesus will enjoy great rewards in eternity. Jesus illustrated this with a parable in the next chapter (20:1-16).

Explore Further

Revisit the article “Eternal Life” on pages 512–513 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In terms of quality, how would you describe eternal life? How would you explain the present and future aspects of eternal life? Spend some time in prayer, asking God if there is anything in your life that you need to let go of to better follow and serve Him.

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 489.

2. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 793.

Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

In the last couple of years, some friends and I have started getting together every few weeks for talk and encouragement. Sometimes, we meet at a restaurant, but not always. The first time we went to a restaurant, one of the guys in the group, Ryan, made what seemed to be an unusual request. He said, “When the server returns with your bill if you don’t mind, can everybody please give me your ticket? Y’all can give me cash if you’ve got it. If you don’t, that’s okay. You can pay me later, or if you can’t, it’s okay, too. I’ve got this covered. And I’d like to do this every time we go out.” Fortunately, I had cash with me—enough for my meal and a tip—so I gave it to Ryan. Everybody else did the same thing. Ryan put all the money in his pocket and pulled out a credit card.

When our server returned, Ryan gave her the stack of tickets, about nine in all, and a credit card. She returned; he signed the ticket and handed it to her. She walked off. In a few minutes, she came to the table again and said to the group, “It’s been a pleasure to serve you.” And she gave Ryan a huge hug. “Do you know her?” someone asked. No, he had never seen her before tonight. This happened every time we went out to eat.

One night, there were only five of us at dinner. As usual, each meal, with a tip, was less than twenty dollars. We passed our cash to Ryan, and he paid the server. This time, the manager and the server came to the table. The manager showed Ryan his signed receipt and asked, “Did you mean to leave this tip, sir?” “Yes ma’am, I did.” The manager hugged him. Ryan looked slightly embarrassed, and we all sort of shrugged and laughed. After the server and manager left, we all stared at Ryan. Knowing we were curious, he said, “Times are tough, and servers work hard. So, I always over-tip.” We kept staring. He continued, “Tonight, the tip was one hundred dollars. God has been good to me, and I get great satisfaction from being generous. The servers think I do it for them, but I do it for me.”

Ryan’s attitude and actions have caused me to want to be a more generous tipper. I thought a lot about Ryan as I read the verses for today’s

text, which involves people getting paid more than expected. This study has made me think about the connection between grace and generosity. I have come to believe they are related.



Matthew 20:1-34

In today's study, we read a parable. Jesus spoke of a situation that would have been familiar to His hearers—a wealthy man was hiring day laborers to work on his property. Jesus used this common imagery to teach an unexpected characteristic of kingdom living—God extends grace to all, even those we might consider the least likely and least deserving.

The backdrop for the story was the Jewish understanding that positive occurrences in one's life were an indicator of God's approval. Jews believed that God gave greater blessings to the one He was more pleased with. Receiving a smaller blessing meant He was less pleased with that person. This explains the disciples' confusion when Jesus taught how hard it is for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God. Essentially, they asked, "If the wealthy can't make it into the kingdom, who possibly can?" (19:25). The other layer to this type of thinking was that receiving an equal blessing meant equal approval.



Workers Hired (Matt. 20:1-7)

Jesus was continuing His response to Simon Peter's question, "See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?" (19:27). Jesus explained that their reward would be greater than they could fathom and that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (v. 30). Although Mark 10:28-31 and Luke 13:30 included this teaching, only Matthew told this parable.

VERSE 1

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.”

The kingdom of heaven does not refer to a region defined by political or national boundaries. It has nothing to do with palaces, fortifications, armies, land holdings, or wealth accumulation. *The kingdom of heaven* refers to God’s absolute rule in a person’s life. For a Christ follower, being part of this kingdom means a person is living under and according to God’s lordship and leadership. The phrase has a wider application that includes both the seen and unseen realms; it is not limited by time or place.

Jewish parables often depicted God as either a king or a **landowner**. The *landowner* symbolized wealth, power, and influence in the first century. Hiring workers **early in the morning** meant these men were day laborers. These workers were at the lowest rung of the socio-economic strata in the first century—even lower than slaves. Slaves had the protection of their owners, who would not have wanted any harm to come to them. Verse 15 below betrays the fact that the one hiring could treat a day laborer any way he chose, even if that led to abuse. Typically, those hired *early in the morning* were the most promising and capable workers.

VERSE 2

“After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day.”

Hearing that the laborers were paid a **denarius** for a day’s work raised no eyebrows in Jesus’s audience. A *denarius*, a Roman coin, was a fair and thus common day wage for an unskilled or day laborer in Jesus’s day. With this salary, a worker could support his family at a peasant level.

A **vineyard** was an essential part of the biblical world. A vineyard provided food and income for its owner. People used grapes both to eat and, when processed, to drink. If the vineyard were large enough, the owner would hire laborers; the vineyard provided income for the workers and their families. Thus, **the workers** agreed to the man’s offer. They had a job, at least for that day.

VERSE 3

“When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.”

The common workday in the first century was divided into four equal parts. Work typically started in the cool of the day, about 6:00 a.m., and continued until 6:00 p.m. The majority of grape harvesting in Israel was done in August or September. This landowner had a bountiful harvest; thus, he needed additional workers.

The marketplace could have been a town square, forum, or public meeting place. The marketplace was always the hub of a city. It was a place to do business, to see and be seen, and at times to bring one's grievances (Mark 12:38).

The single Greek word translated **doing nothing** means “without work.” These were not men who didn't want to work—they did. Each needed a job. Their situation was not due to apathy or lack of willpower or desire; they lacked opportunity. That, though, was about to change.

Seeing how demanding the workload was, the landowner returned to the marketplace at about 9:00 a.m. He knew men would still be there, hoping for an opportunity to work.

VERSES 4-5

“He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing.”

The vineyard owner made no promise about the men's salary for the day. He only promised to do **“whatever is right.”** Hearing this, the men expected to receive a pro-rated percentage of what those hired earlier would be paid. Hearing and trusting the man's promise, **off they went**, ready to work for the rest of the day.

The vineyard owner returned to the marketplace a third and fourth time. The details are abbreviated. There is no mention of the marketplace, of men *doing nothing*, of what the vineyard owner said to the men, or of promised pay. Jesus's hearers would have filled in the details based on the owner's interactions with those he hired earlier.

VERSES 6-7

“Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”

For the fourth time in this story, Jesus said of the vineyard owner **he went**, meaning he went out to the marketplace (see vv. 1,3,5). The Greek

phrase underscores the landowner’s intentionality; he was determined to hire additional workers.

Jesus’s audience would have understood that in this parable, the vineyard owner represented God. The repetition highlighted the Father’s single mindedness. The verb **found** is a reminder of His determination.

The vineyard owner returned to the marketplace because he needed additional workers, even at this late hour. The men were still standing there because they needed work. They were desperate for some income for the day. No work and no income meant no food.

Responding to the landowner’s question, the men were neither accusatory nor defensive. They would have worked if someone had hired them. Going to the vineyard at this late hour, the men would have hoped for or expected one-twelfth of the pay those hired first would receive. For these men, any income would have been better than none.



Explore Further

Read “Wealth, Trade, Money, and Coinage in the Biblical World” on pages 871–873 in the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible*. How did the development of coinage change the way people paid for goods and services? How did coins make life easier and/or more complicated?

Equally Paid (Matt. 20:8-12)

Old Testament law dictated that employers were to pay their day laborers at the end of each day (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15). For those without other support or income, receiving their daily pay was their only means of survival. James rebuked the wealthy for withholding the workers’ pay after they had finished the job (Jas. 5:1-4).

VERSE 8

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.’”

The **evening** marked the transition from daylight to dark. It was the end of the workday, which, for these men, meant the time to be paid for

their labor. It was time for accounts to be settled—a concept that had both economic and spiritual connotations. Jesus’s hearers would have recognized the implied dual application.

The Greek word translated **foreman** can refer to a manager of lands or a household. He was not the property owner; he was the overseer or steward. Having a foreman further highlighted the landowner’s wealth and, in that culture, his influence. Socially, the distance between the owner and the day laborers was striking—the powerful and the pauper, the wealthy and the wanting, the influential and the overlooked.

To pay the most recently hired first would not have raised eyebrows. The owner was free to pay his workers in whatever order he chose. Giving the men **their pay** underscored two thoughts. First, they had worked for and earned the day’s wage. Second, it was *their* pay, meaning that at this point, they each thought they would receive an amount based on how long they had worked that day.

VERSE 9

“When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius.”

Presuming the laborers heard this conversation, the owner’s instructions had to raise the eyebrows of each worker. Those hired last would have been both shocked and delighted. Having worked just one hour but being paid for twelve hours of work meant these men were being paid twelve times more than they expected. One can almost see them turning to one another and asking, “Did I hear that right?”

VERSE 10

“So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each.”

Hearing that those who had worked just one hour had received a denarius, the earlier hires expected to be paid far more than usual. **They assumed they would get more.** Their expectations were through the roof. Were they also about to receive twelve times their normal pay?

Why did Jesus speak of only those hired first and last? He had been contrasting the first and the last—meaning the presumed most and least deserving—in His teaching (see Matt. 19:30; 20:16). Jumping from the one-hour workers to the twelve-hour workers emphasized the contrast between the two groups.

VERSES 11-12

“When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: ‘These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.’”

The Greek word translated **complain** carries the idea of grumbling or murmuring. The verb tense conveys repeated or ongoing murmuring. These first-hired day laborers showed no hint of civility, gratitude, or respect. They did not address their employer by a title of respect. They questioned his behavior and spoke to him rudely.

Each group hired after 6:00 AM received a bonus, meaning more per hour than the first group. The first ones hired, though, received no bonus whatsoever. The workers did not say, “What you have paid them is equal to what you have paid us.” No, instead, **“you made them equal to us.”** Implied in the statement is the complaint: “Don’t you see we are not equal? You should value us more. We have worked and suffered all day. They worked one hour right at dusk when it was getting cooler. This is not fair!”



Explore Further

Think of a time that someone intentionally gave you more than you expected or deserved. How about giving you less than you expected? How did each of those make you feel? Pray that God will give you opportunities to show someone unexpected generosity this week.

Grace Exemplified (Matt. 20:13-16)

In this parable, Jesus never mentioned grace; yet that is clearly the theme. Jesus did not tell the parable because He wanted to teach His followers about viticulture or hiring practices in His day. He wanted them to understand God’s extravagant grace.

VERSE 13

“He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?’”

Scripture does not say why the landowner **replied to one** of the workers rather than to all. Regardless, this action reminds us that God relates to us individually. The verb *replied* refers to a deliberate and well-thought-out response.

In this case, the word **friend** is not a term of fondness. It actually indicates a distance between the speaker and the listener (see 22:12; 26:50). The phrase **“I’m doing you no wrong”** echoes the Greek terms translated in verse 4, “I’ll give you whatever is right.” The wording would have reminded the worker of the earlier agreement.

Further reminding the protesting worker of their agreement, the landowner posed a rhetorical question: **“Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?”** The principle here was that no one was getting less than they deserved or had been promised. Some, though, were getting more than they expected.

VERSE 14

“Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.”

The time for argument and protest was over. The employer gave his employee a two-fold directive: **“take”** and **“go.”** Both words imply a fulfillment of obligation. To *take* meant the worker was not stealing something; the employer said it’s **“yours.”** The worker had earned it. Having received what was his, the employee was free to go; his obligation had been fulfilled, and he was dismissed. If the vineyard owner had paid first those whom he hired first, they would have taken their denarius and left; they would have never known what those hired later were paid. In telling the story in this way, Jesus set up the situation for this very moment. His whole point was to tell what the vineyard owner wanted to do; he wanted to give the last the same as he gave the first.

VERSE 15

“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?”

The landowner made three “I” statements: **“I have the right”**; **“what I want”**; and **“I’m generous.”** Taken in order, these statements say something about God’s authority, His intention, and, finally, His character.

The word translated *right* conveys the idea of power and authority. First-century landowners had the authority to do as they wished with

their property or, as this owner stated, “**with what is mine.**” The landowner’s statement served as a reminder of God’s authority and sovereignty over what is His.

This verse echoes what the landowner said in the previous verse: “*I want.*” This underscores that God’s intentions—His actions—are beyond human understanding. God’s ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). He sees and knows what we cannot.

Any true child of God would have to say He is generous—it is part of His very character. He supplies our every need (Phil. 4:19). Every good and perfect gift comes from Him (Jas. 1:17). And He saves us, not partially or barely, but to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25).

The question, “**Are you jealous?**” reads in Greek as “Is your eye evil?” This was a first-century metaphor for being envious (see Matt. 6:23). The complaining employee had been blinded by jealousy. What a contrast! The employee was jealous; the employer, **generous.**

VERSE 16

“**So the last will be first, and the first last.**”

So that begins this verse is a signal that the story has reached its end. Therefore, Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 function as bookends for the story that comes between.

What was the theological difference between the first and second statements? When Jesus earlier talked about **the first** and **the last**, He was differentiating between those who were His disciples and those who were not. This parable, though, applied only to His true disciples—those who had been invited to work in His vineyard. These verses teach several principles. First, genuine grace costs the recipient nothing. It does cost the grace giver something and often costs dearly. The grace giver always operates out of a generous heart. Second, God’s application of grace is an affront to a world that cries out for justice. As believers, how grateful are we that God has not responded to us with justice but grace?

Explore Further

Read the article “Grace” on pages 670–672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How do you see the descriptions of grace in this dictionary entry played out in this parable that Jesus told?

- What does this teach us about being grace-filled believers?

Authority

JESUS HOLDS ALL AUTHORITY, AND THOSE WHO
REJECT HIM WILL BE CONDEMNED.

“Look at this driver coming up behind us. Can you believe that?” I was a passenger in the car with my good friend, Richard, a detective in the local police department. He was driving one of the city’s unmarked police cars. Richard and I had been friends for several years. He and his family were members of the church where I served as pastor. He sang in the choir and taught the youth Sunday School class.

Because of our friendship, I spent a lot of time with him and eventually with other officers as well. We would regularly meet for coffee, or a group of us would go to lunch together. As relationships deepened, I ended up serving as a volunteer chaplain for the local police department.

This particular day, Richard and I were traveling northbound on the interstate, headed toward Atlanta after lunch. Richard had been watching a driver in his rearview mirror. After hearing what he said, I pulled down my visor to see in the mirror what was happening behind us. A driver was flying our way, darting between lanes, and driving recklessly.

Richard was trained to handle this. The driver came up behind us and started to change lanes. Richard changed lanes, too. Every time the driver wanted to change, Richard changed right in front of the driver. And Richard started to slow down.

Furious—that would be the word. The driver started flashing his headlights. He honked the horn. He made obscene gestures. And we could see he was hollering. He got right up behind our car, honking and gesturing. Richard reached down, flipped a switch, and turned on his flashing blue lights.

Suddenly, this HUGE space came between us and the car behind us. The man slowed dramatically. No more aggressive driving. No honking. No gestures. The man had become a law-abiding citizen. Evidently, he wasn’t in as big a hurry as he thought he was.

I asked, “Richard, why didn’t you just wait until he got in front of you and pull him over?” He explained that we were outside our local city limits and therefore out of his jurisdiction. “I had no authority to pull him over here,” he said.

Matthew 21:1-46

Matthew 21 records three distinctive actions; with each, Jesus conveyed a message about His being the Messiah. The first was Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vv. 1-11). Rather than enter the city on the back of a massive white horse, as political victors of the day often did, Jesus rode on the back of a lowly donkey. Although the people lauded Him and gave Him a royal procession, Jesus was not going to be a Messiah like the people hoped and expected He would be. He had not come to overthrow the yoke of Roman rule and oppression. No, He had come to conquer an even greater enemy, the one who had opposed humanity since the garden of Eden.

Jesus conveyed His second messianic message as He overturned the sellers' tables in the temple (vv. 12-13). He did not put an end to the practice; He merely disrupted it for the day. These buyers and sellers set up their tables in the court of the Gentiles, the outermost court of the Jerusalem temple complex. Doing so meant the Gentiles had no place to worship in the temple. As He turned over the tables, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:3-8. The prophet had foretold a day when both eunuchs and Gentiles would be welcome to worship in the house of God. The sellers had turned the temple into a place of commerce rather than a place for consecration, a place for profit rather than a place of prayer. Jesus had come to be the Messiah for all peoples, even the Gentiles.

Jesus's third action occurred as He and the disciples approached Jerusalem early one morning; He cursed a barren fig tree (Matt. 21:18-22). As my college religion professor said, "Jesus and His disciples pulled up to this fig tree for breakfast, and they found out it was not open for business." Having leaves meant the tree should have been producing fruit—but it was not. The scene pointed to the barrenness of Judaism, which may have looked like it would be producing great fruit, but it was not. The people's hearts were barren and not producing the fruit of righteousness (Phil. 1:9-11). Cursing the fig tree showed that God would soon be bringing judgment on the Jews. Fruit would be produced in Christ's followers rather than in the rituals of first-century Judaism.

To put this in a timeline, the triumphal entry occurred on the Sunday before Jesus's crucifixion on Friday. He cursed the fig tree and overturned the tables in the temple on Monday. His encounter with the religious leaders in today's study occurred the next day, on Tuesday.

Authority Challenged (Matt. 21:23-27)

Entering Jerusalem, Jesus had caused quite a stir; “the whole city was in an uproar” (v. 10). The locals did not know who He was. The crowds visiting Jerusalem, though, did (v. 11). By the time He arrived at the temple on Tuesday, His identity was well known.

VERSE 23

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?”

When Jesus first told His disciples at Caesarea Philippi that He was going to Jerusalem where He would die, He explained that He would suffer at the hands of “the elders, chief priests, and scribes” (16:21). These were the temple authorities. Men from two of the three groups confronted Jesus as He entered the temple: the **chief priests** and **elders**. The *chief priests* were members of the Sanhedrin, which functioned essentially as the religious ruling body or Jewish supreme court of the day; they heard cases and rendered decisions. The chief priests also assisted the high priest in leading temple worship and overseeing the temple activities and treasury. Like the chief priests, the *elders* were also members of the Sanhedrin. Elders were either Pharisees or Sadducees but not chief priests. The Pharisees and Sadducees differed in their theology and practice; they were often adversaries.

The chief priests and elders approached Jesus while He was **teaching** in the temple. Jesus’s action would have been expected. Rabbis regularly taught their disciples within the temple complex. The temple authorities asked Jesus about the source of His **authority** for doing **these things**. Scripture does not say what *these things* were. Were they referring to His overturning the sellers’ tables (21:12-13) or accepting the people’s words of praise about His being the Son of David (vv. 8-9)? Maybe they were concerned about this itinerant preacher teaching within the temple complex. Were they referring to His healing the blind and lame? Had they caught wind of His healing the blind men in Jericho or raising Lazarus from the dead? The Bible does not say.

However, a careful reading reveals that the religious leaders were not curious about Jesus’s acts but about His *authority* to perform them.

Those who were threatened by Jesus’s display of authority wanted to catch Him in an error so they could threaten Him. They were not looking for an answer as much as they were looking for a way to trap Jesus.

VERSE 24

Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Traditions of Jewish rhetoric often called for answering a question with a question rather than a statement. Jesus would have been very familiar with this communication style and technique. He regularly replied to a question with a question. For instance, we read in Mark’s Gospel, “Some Pharisees came to test him, asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He replied to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’” (Mark 10:2-3). This interaction led to a teaching moment.

From His youth, Jesus was comfortable with a question-and-answer situation. When He was twelve, Mary and Joseph took Him to Jerusalem for the Passover. As they headed home, they could not find Him among their fellow travelers. They returned to Jerusalem and found Him “in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and *asking them questions*” (Luke 2:46, emphasis added).

Historically, rabbinic debates have followed a four-fold pattern. The first step is a question that is typically hostile. Even if presented politely, the intent is often to antagonize. The second is a counter-question, which may come directly or at the end of a story or illustration. The third is an admission, a logical response to the second question. The final step is a sharp reply, which may come at the end of a story or illustration. Jesus was setting forth this pattern of debate with this request. He promised to answer their question if they would answer His.¹

VERSES 25-26

“Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.”

Jesus countered the chief priests’ and elders’ questions with a question of His own. It, too, addressed authority. In essence, He asked, “By what authority did John baptize—human or divine?”

John the Baptist had earlier challenged the religious leaders of his day. While baptizing in the Jordan River, he declared the Pharisees and Sadducees to be a “brood of vipers” and said they would face God’s wrath (3:7-12). One can imagine the smug satisfaction these religious leaders felt when Herod the tetrarch had John arrested, thrown in prison, and later beheaded (Matt. 14:1-12; Luke 3:19-20).

Instantly, these religious leaders recognized the dilemma this question posed. Jesus presented a comparison by analogy. The question implied a parallel answer—that Jesus derived His authority from the same source that John had. They, who could be adversarial to one another, found themselves unified in the same trap. Either answer, from heaven or humans, would get them in trouble.

If they said John’s authority came **from heaven**, meaning from God, that would validate John’s ministry and message. John would have been speaking a message from God when He proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (John 1:15-36). If that were true, why did they not believe?

If they claimed that John’s baptism was of human origin and authority, the people—who saw John as **a prophet**—would rise in protest because they believed John had been sent from God. Antagonizing the crowds could be a threat to these religious leaders’ safety. Adding insult to injury, if John had been a prophet this would indicate that the masses recognized the message and messenger from God, and they, the so-called religious experts, did not. Thus, whether John’s baptism was from a divine or human source, either way, they had responded wrongly to his message and ministry.

The crowd referred to the many who had come to listen to Jesus “as he was teaching” (Matt. 21:23). A very large crowd hailed Him at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vv. 8-9). The crowd identified Him as being from Galilee (v. 11). Likely, some people in those earlier crowds now listened to Him teach in the temple.

VERSE 27

So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

The religious leaders could not admit publicly that John’s ministry and message were from God, even if they believed it. Jesus’s highly visible entrance into the city had raised the Jews’ messianic zeal. To give any credibility to John, and thus, by extension, to Jesus, would have only intensified Jewish fervor. Having painted themselves into a

corner, these chief priests and elders gave the only answer they could, **“We don’t know.”**

Their reply gave Jesus a socially acceptable way to not answer their question. And although He did not answer their question, His implication was clear: John’s authority and His had both come from God. But Jesus was not finished with them yet. He did not give them a reply, but He was about to tell them a parable.

Explore Further

Consider the connection between Jesus’s authority and this week’s memory verse (Phil. 2:9). Look at how Matthew talked about Jesus’s authority in his Gospel: His authority in His teaching (Matt. 7:28-29), His authority to forgive sin (9:1-8), how He gave His disciples authority over unclean spirits (10:1), and ultimately, all authority in heaven and earth (28:18-20). How do you think this authority is related to God’s exalting

- Jesus and giving Him a name above every name?

Authority Recognized (Matt. 21:28-32)

Jesus told a parable about a man who asked his two sons to go work in his vineyard. The first son refused but later changed his mind and went. The second son agreed to go but then didn’t. The religious leaders recognized that it was the first son who did his father’s will. Jesus then explained to them that tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God before them.

VERSE 28

“What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘My son, go work in the vineyard today.’”

This is the first of three related parables Jesus told in this context (vv. 28-32). Collectively, they spotlight the Jewish leaders and their unfaithfulness to God. In legal terms, this first parable, which is unique to Matthew’s Gospel, presents the charges against these religious leaders. The second (vv. 33-44) describes the fate they deserved. The third (22:1-14) describes how God intends to carry out their sentence.

Because the Jews had rejected Christ, the cornerstone (21:42), God would deal with His family not based on their genealogical link to Abraham but because of their faith in His Son, Jesus. Let's focus first, though, on the offense of these so-called religious experts.

After telling the chief priests and elders that He would not reveal His source of authority, Jesus seamlessly transitioned into this parable. Jesus began with a signal that this was going to be a teaching moment: **“What do you think?”** The phrase was not uncommon in rabbinic instruction.

The parable would follow a familiar structure: one authority figure and two less powerful persons or groups. The two persons or groups were typically presented in contrast, with the first doing the right thing and the second making a wrong choice. The father represented God. The first son represented the irreligious of Jesus's day; the second represented the religious leaders and their followers.

The father (God) had called his two sons to work in his vineyard. As a son (or daughter) was expected to obey their father, so the Jews were expected to obey God. **My son** was a term of affection rather than ownership. The father gave his son two imperatives, **go** and **work**. He was to work in **the vineyard**, which would have been part of the small family farm. These were common throughout the land. Vineyards produced one of the most common and important crops in the biblical world. Some prophets used vineyards as an analogy for Israel (Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1). The word **today** conveyed a sense of urgency for the task.

VERSES 29-30

“He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go.”

Here, Jesus contrasted the two sons and, by implication, the irreligious and the observant Jews. Initially, the first son gave no pretense of intending to obey his father. He simply didn't **want to** do what his father had told him to do. This type of response would be unheard of in first-century Judaism. The phrase indicates the son's rebellion and lack of respect for his father and his father's authority.

The Greek word translated **changed his mind** is associated with the words “regretted” and “repented.” Some translations, such as KJV, say the son repented. This fits since repentance involves a change in both one's attitude and action. So-called “repentance” without a change in behavior is not repentance; it's a conviction—which may be accompanied

by guilt and remorse. The fact that the first son **went** into the vineyard gave evidence of the transformation in his thinking. This parable is a reminder that God values repentance, a turn from self-serving and sinful behaviors to God-honoring lives.

In His parable, Jesus described the father's interaction with his second son. The father **said the same thing**, echoing his imperatives to the first son: *go* and *work*. This son agreed to go do the work but never went to the vineyard.

In the parable, Jesus described two things about the sons: what they said and what they did. In both instances, the sons did the exact opposite of what they had told their father they would do. The first said "No" but eventually obeyed; the second said "Yes" but didn't. The first son's response was disrespectful. The second son, however, responded respectfully, calling his father "**sir.**" The response may have given the father the impression that this son intended to obey; this son wanted his father to believe he would work in the vineyard. So succinctly, Jesus described the second son's behavior—"**but he didn't go.**"

VERSE 31

"Which of the two did his father's will?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you."

This short parable began with Jesus asking the religious leaders, "What do you think?" (v. 28). Jesus concluded it with this second question, "**Which of the two did his father's will?**" The terminology is similar to what He had used in His Sermon on the Mount regarding those who would enter the kingdom: "only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21; see also 12:50).

The religious leaders conceded that the first son had obeyed his father, the one who had the wrong words but the right behavior. This forced these chief priests and elders to admit that actions rather than words—practices rather than promises—determined acceptable behavior.

When they gave this answer, "**The first,**" the religious leaders may not have yet realized that Jesus's parable was about them. They had given a self-condemning answer, possibly without yet recognizing it.

The phrase "**Truly I tell you**" was Jesus's normal way of alerting His listeners that He was about to make His point (see Matt. 18:3; Mark 12:43). In Scripture, these words are exclusively on the lips of Jesus.

These chief priests and elders had to be shocked when Jesus compared them to **tax collectors** and **prostitutes**—and even more shocked

that in that comparison, they, the religious elite, were the unrighteous ones! Both prostitutes and tax collectors were generally despised in Jesus’s day. Jesus was not saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes were good, only that the religious leaders were so much worse!

VERSE 32

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn’t believe him. Tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; but you, when you saw it, didn’t even change your minds then and believe him.”

Jesus continued with His sharp reply, making three statements. First, **“John came to you.”** Although John’s message was a call to repentance (3:1-12), these religiously elite men probably thought it did not apply to them. He challenged them to “Produce fruit consistent with repentance” (v. 8). The phrase **“the way of righteousness”** was a Hebrew way of referring to God’s will or His directed path (see Prov. 12:28). The chief priests and elders **didn’t believe** John’s message. Second, **tax collectors and prostitutes did believe** John’s message. They recognized that John was the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah.

Third, **“you,”** the religious leaders, failed to see how John’s message was drawing even the socially outcast to believe and repent. In their pride and self-righteousness, the religious elite didn’t **change** their minds and **believe** in John. They failed to follow the example of the first son, who recognized his father’s authority and allowed his mind to be changed. Instead, like the second son, they knew what was expected and said all the right things; but they failed to do what the father had asked.

By what authority had Jesus been doing these things? What was the authority behind John’s ministry and message? It came from God the Father. Such a truth called for nothing short of radical obedience.

Explore Further

- Read the article “Authority, Divine Authority” on pages 148–149 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to your understanding of Jesus’s authority?

1. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 506.

Honor

BELIEVERS' HIGHEST CALLING IS TO HONOR GOD
IN EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR LIVES.

Before the advent of coinage and banking institutions, people bartered; they exchanged goods or services for goods or services of comparable value. In Scripture, Job was a man of great wealth. His fortune was determined by the livestock he owned (Job 1:3; 42:12). “Abram [later known as Abraham] was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold” (Gen. 13:2). Abraham’s son, Isaac, was “rich and kept getting richer.” His wealth was not measured, though, in coins but in livestock and servants (26:13-14). Coins had not yet been invented.

Precious metals were measured for trade by weight rather than by their stamped size. A shekel was originally an indicator of size and weight rather than the name of an official government-issued coin. When the time came to bury his wife, “Abraham weighed out [rather than counted out] . . . four hundred standard shekels of silver” (Gen. 23:16; see also Jer. 32:8-9).

When were coins developed? Kings established coins to guarantee a standard weight for trade and commerce. The first known coins came from Lydia, which was a kingdom in Asia Minor—the western region of modern-day Turkey. About 610–560 BC, the Lydians stamped electrum, an alloy of gold and silver, with the head of a lion. The earliest silver coin was Persian and known as the *daric*. As the Persian Empire grew, the *daric*, also called the *drachma*, was increasingly used as the standard for commerce and trade.

Coinage had become standardized by the time the Greeks and then the Romans came to power. The Greeks had a common coin, also called a *drachma*, that was about the size of an American dime. This was similar in size and weight to the Roman *denarius*, which was valued at about a day’s wage for an unskilled laborer. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for thirty silver coins, likely *denarii*. The widow at the temple gave two of the smallest Jewish coin, the *lepton* or “mite” (KJV). These bronze or copper coins were the least valuable coin in circulation in the time of Jesus. *Leptons* were just a bit wider in diameter than a pencil eraser; the Greek word *lepton* means fine, thin, or small.

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 22:1–23:39

Events in today’s study occurred during the last week of Jesus’s public ministry; specifically, they happened on the Tuesday before His crucifixion on Friday. Just a few days earlier, Jesus and His disciples had gone to the home of his good friends, Mary and Martha, who lived in Bethany. He had heard that their brother, Lazarus, had died. After Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, Jesus raised him from the dead. Incensed, the religious leaders in Jerusalem convened and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Word about their plans had gotten out; many of the Jews who were in Jerusalem preparing for Passover wondered whether Jesus would show up for the festival and risk being arrested by the chief priests and Pharisees (John 11:17-57).

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

Government Authority (Matt. 22:15-22)

The Pharisees and Herodians wanted to catch Jesus in a verbal trap so they might arrest and condemn Him. They sent several people to Jesus to ask the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 17). If Jesus approved of paying taxes, it could be viewed as support for the Roman occupation. If Jesus disapproved of paying taxes, it could be viewed as treasonous against Rome. Jesus stunned them with His answer: give to human government what is due and give to God what is due Him.

VERSE 15

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to trap him by what he said.

The question had been about authority (21:23-27). The chief priests and elders demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing “these things.” He said He would explain His source of authority if they would identify John the Baptist’s authority for his ministry. When these religious leaders refused to answer, Jesus responded with three parables.

The first two addressed the error of the Jewish leaders and the fate they deserved (21:28-44). The chief priests and elders realized Jesus was talking about them in His parables! Jesus continued. In His third parable, He told how the Father intended to carry out the sentence (22:1-14).

After hearing Jesus's parables and realizing He had been talking about them, **then the Pharisees** decided to act. But who were the *Pharisees*, and why did they oppose Jesus? They were the largest Jewish religious group of Jesus's day. They opposed Jesus because they did not believe He was obeying the law. He performed miracles on the Sabbath. He touched a corpse. He did not observe the ritualistic purification traditions. He allowed a woman to touch Him. Over and over, Jesus violated their interpretation of Old Testament law and their oral traditions.

The Greek word translated as **went** conveys a sense of intentionality. Any action the Pharisees took would be premeditated. The KJV translates **plotted** as they "took counsel." They who lived separated lives (*Pharisee* means "separate one") were willing to conspire with others if that meant they could trap Jesus in some theological error so they could discredit Him and thus destroy His ministry and influence.

VERSE 16

So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are truthful and teach truthfully the way of God. You don't care what anyone thinks nor do you show partiality."

This is the only time the **Herodians** are mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. The Herodians were a Jewish political group that supported the work of Herod the Great, his family, Rome, and its emperors. This meant the Herodians promoted Jewish oppression in their day. Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, was the territorial ruler (or "tetrarch") of Galilee 4 BC–AD 39, which meant he was in power during Jesus's lifetime. Herod Antipas was the ruler and thus involved in the deaths of John the Baptist, Jesus, and James, the son of Zebedee.

The Herodians may have joined the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus due to Jesus's close relationship with John the Baptist. The Herodians would have opposed John because he condemned Herod's divorce and subsequent marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias, Philip's wife (Mark 6:14-29). The Pharisees may have thought their disciples would have seemed to be less of a threat to Jesus than their mentors. Furthermore, the Pharisees may have believed their disciples' false flattery would have caused Jesus to lower His guard.

Everything these men said to and about Jesus in this verse was accurate and true. However, their words were not sincere; the Pharisees and, by extension, their disciples believed Jesus was a heretic by claiming to be God (John 10:22-33).

VERSE 17

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” was a loaded question. The Herodians supported Herod and thus favored paying taxes. The Pharisees resented paying taxes to Rome; they believed it violated Hebrew law. Both believed regardless of how Jesus answered, He would offend one of the two groups. However Jesus answered, they expected His words would ensnare Him.

One answer meant Jesus would be rejected by the masses who were looking for a Messiah to free them from Roman occupation. The other answer would imply He opposed Roman rule; this could result in His being condemned to death as a revolutionary.

By asking *lawful . . . or not?* these men thought they were cornering Jesus into having to choose one of their options. They would soon find out, though, that Jesus would not be trapped by their clever verbal posturing.

VERSE 18

Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, hypocrites?”

As before, Jesus did not answer their question. That Jesus knew their **malicious intent** was evidence of His omnipotent and divine nature. He demonstrated having a supernatural knowledge more than once in His public ministry (for instance, Matt. 12:25; 16:7-8; Luke 5:20-25; 6:6-11). As mentioned above, they intended to trap Jesus in His words—a malicious act (“malice,” ESV, NASB; “evil intent,” NIV).

Jesus challenged His opponents in two ways. First, He asked why they were **testing** Him. Matthew elsewhere used this same Greek word, translated as “tempted” (Matt. 4:1). Second, Jesus called them **hypocrites**. This was a theater term that referred to a play actor; it could also refer to an impersonator or pretender. Again, Jesus’s supernatural knowledge allowed Him to see behind these pretenders’ masks.

VERSE 19

“Show me the coin used for the tax.” They brought him a denarius.

In teaching, Jesus often referred to something regularly seen in first-century life—sheep, vineyard workers, sowing seed, a wedding banquet. For this teaching moment, He used a coin as an object lesson. This was not just any coin but specifically the one used for **the tax**.

Jesus was not referring to the temple tax, which the Old Testament law required (Ex. 30:11-16; Matt. 17:24-27). The Romans collected three types of taxes in the first century. They collected a land or property tax that they levied against farms and dwellings. The second was a head tax that was tied to the Roman census. This tax compelled Joseph to go to Bethlehem before Jesus’s birth (Luke 2:1-5). The third was a customs or poll tax. People paid this as they transported goods along major highways or through city gates. Matthew had been this type of tax collector when Jesus called Him to be a disciple (Matt. 9:9). Jesus was likely referring to this third option, the poll tax.

The **denarius** was considered a standard wage for a day laborer, such as an agriculture worker, in the first century (20:1-16). This was the required coin for paying the poll tax. These silver coins were widely circulated and thus readily available for this teaching moment.

VERSES 20-21

“Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked them. “Caesar’s,” they said to him. Then he said to them, “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The coin would have borne the **image** of Tiberius, who ruled the Roman Empire AD 14–37. The reverse side would have had an image of a female seated, facing right; this was likely Livia, who was the wife of Caesar Augustus, or Pax, Rome’s goddess of peace.

Tiberius’s **inscription** read “TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS,” which translates as, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The other side referred to the high priest of Roman religion: “PONTIF MAXIM.” Thus, both sides promoted the pagan Roman belief that the emperors were divine and worthy of worship. Jews considered this to be a violation of both the first and second commandments, which forbid having other gods before Yahweh and worshiping a graven image (Deut. 5:7-10).

“Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Jesus’s statement most likely affirmed the legitimacy of the secular, civil government. His balanced reply meant a person could be both a loyal citizen and a committed person of faith. The coin had the image of the emperor; we bear the image of our Creator (Gen. 1:26-27). Giving **“to God the things that are God’s”** referred not only to the temple tax but also to the worship He and He alone deserves.

Paul affirmed governmental legitimacy in his letter to the Romans: “Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God . . . Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor” (Rom. 13:1,7). Jews paid their temple tax; citizens were (and are) equally expected to pay their taxes to the Roman government.

VERSE 22

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

The Pharisees and Herodians had joined forces to trap Jesus with their clever question. However, His response showed support for both Rome and God. Jesus had taught truthfully the way of God (v. 16). Thus, they were **amazed** by His answer.

Matthew recorded other times people marveled at what Jesus had said or done. They were astonished at His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (7:28-29), at His power over the raging sea (8:26-27), at His power to heal a man physically and spiritually (9:8), and His ability to deliver a man demon-possessed (12:22-23). Whereas earlier the Pharisees “went” to plot against Jesus (22:15), here they simply **went away**.

Explore Further

Read “Jewish Parties in the New Testament” on pages 896–897 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to your understanding of the opposition Jesus faced from these groups in His ministry?

God’s Authority (Matt. 22:34-40)

Another Pharisee, an expert in the law, approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” (v. 36). Jesus replied that the greatest command was to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (v. 37). He followed this with a second command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39). All of the Old Testament commands and teachings fulfilled these directives.

VERSE 34

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.

After the Pharisees and Herodians failed to entrap Jesus, the **Sadducees** asked Jesus a question. The Pharisees and Sadducees were two distinct groups. The Sadducees were typically wealthy and aristocratic; they held the majority on the Sanhedrin. They were politically liberal but theologically conservative. The Sadducees held that only the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah, were sacred Scripture. Thus, they rejected the possibility of a resurrection—since it is not mentioned in these books. Jesus had silenced the Sadducees after they asked Him a question involving the afterlife (vv. 23-33). In Matthew’s Gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees sometimes united in their opposition to Jesus (3:7-12; 16:1-4,5-12).

VERSE 35

And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him:

An expert in the law (“scribe,” Mark 12:28) asked a question of Jesus. By profession, scribes copied the law of Moses; additionally, they interpreted the law during legal proceedings. This **one of them** was a Pharisee. The New Testament indicates that many scribes were Pharisees (see Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9). This man’s copying and interpreting the law would have qualified him to be an *expert*.

The purpose of his question was to **test** Jesus. The same verb occurs in Matthew 4:1, which states that Jesus went “into the wilderness to be tempted [or tested] by the devil.” Jesus also used this verb earlier in His encounter with His opponents: “Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, ‘Why are you testing me, hypocrites?’” (22:18).

VERSE 36

“Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?”

This expert in the law referred to Jesus as a **teacher** or a rabbi. Whereas Jesus’s opponents had earlier used this title as a form of false flattery (vv. 16,24), its usage here may have been sincere. Asking what was the greatest commandment was a loaded question. The Old Testament law, the Torah, contained more than 600 laws. Jews in this day debated how to rank or prioritize them. Choosing just one would certainly have annoyed other rabbis who might choose another as their favorite.

VERSES 37-38

He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command.”

Jesus chose a law that began in a person’s heart; He spoke of loving God. Jesus quoted what is known as the Jewish *Shema*. Jews recited this as a prayer twice daily, in the morning and evening. The word *Shema* is the first word of the Hebrew prayer; it means “listen” or “hear.” Deuteronomy 6:4-5 says, “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Mark’s Gospel includes both of these verses in his account of this conversation as well (Mark 12:29-31).

The **heart, soul, and mind** (or “strength,” Deut. 6:5) are not separate categories; when spoken together, they refer to the fullness of a person’s being. So, this type of love was not a fleeting emotion, subject to a person’s whims or daily circumstances. This was (and is) a call to wholehearted devotion to God with every aspect of one’s being.

Two factors made this the greatest and most important command. First, this type of love would ultimately produce visible proof of obedience. This fullness-of-being type of love ultimately would affect and be evident to those around us. Second, this type of love affirms that God alone is worthy of this level of devotion. It says something about the God we worship and follow.

VERSE 39

“The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Whereas the first command was to love the Creator, this one focuses on loving humans, whom He created: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

In giving this command, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18. The chapter gives pragmatic instructions about how to put this love for others into practice (Lev. 19:9-18). It teaches that God's people are to share gleanings from their harvest. Do not lie, act deceptively, steal, spread slander, threaten another person's life, or take revenge. Do not mistreat the blind or deaf. Judge cases fairly, regardless of the person's social status. These are ways to put that love into action.

Loving God, others, and ourselves are inextricably linked. John, the beloved disciple, taught that our love for others is the byproduct of God's love for us. (1 John 4:11).

VERSE 40

“All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:1-21). The first four address our relationship with God. Numbers five through ten instruct us about how we are to treat others. Expanding outward, God gave Moses over 600 laws found in Genesis–Deuteronomy that were part of the Mosaic law. Rather than taking the panoramic view, Jesus zeroed in on the two commands that were the foundation for all Old Testament law. On these two **depend** all of **the Law** and **the Prophets**, meaning all the teaching of the Old Testament. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared He did not come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets.” He came to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17).

So, moving from the most expansive to the tightest view, God gave over 600 commands to His people. These 600 can be summarized in the Ten Commandments Moses received on Mount Sinai. The Ten are focused down to two—we are to love God with our whole being and to love others as we love ourselves.

Explore Further

How do we determine if we are living a life fully devoted to God? What can keep us from achieving this type of commitment? Why is living a fully devoted life such a challenge? As you pray this week, ask God to reveal to you areas in which you struggle in your devotion and commitment to Him.

- Also ask for His strength as you address this area or these areas.

Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

Dates and time matter, don't they? Some matter more than others—and some for different reasons. A child's birthday; a wedding anniversary; Valentine's Day; September 11, 2001; December 7, 1941; or April 15—each has its own significance. Knowing the time is also essential—and for some occasions more than others. Consider what happens if someone is late for a job interview or their wedding. That matters a lot more than setting an exact time for mowing the lawn.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII adopted and introduced the calendar we use, known as the Gregorian Calendar. It contains twelve months of varying lengths; the total number of days is 365, except in a leap year, which has an extra day in February. A leap year last occurred in 2024. The next is in 2028.

Clocks, with their system of gears, wheels, and weights, came into use in the late 1200s. The church financed and built clock towers with bells to remind people of their daily prayer time. These clocks also helped establish the widespread acceptance of having hours of equal length. The word “clock” is derived from the French word for “bell,” *cloche*.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 24:1-51

The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was the epicenter of Hebrew worship. Jesus and His disciples were in the temple complex; this would be His final visit (Matt. 21:23). There, Jesus spoke “woe” pronouncements against the scribes and Pharisees and grieved over Jerusalem (23:23-39). He lamented that the temple, the symbol of Jewish authority, would face God's judgment and be left desolate (v. 38). Gone would be God's presence, power, and provision.

Leaving the temple, Jesus’s disciples pointed out the architecture of the temple complex. He declared God’s judgment on the temple: “not one stone will be left here on another that will not be thrown down” (24:1-2). This led to a discussion about end times. The disciples asked, “when will these things happen? And what is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v. 3). The rest of chapter 24 and chapter 25 record Jesus’s reply.

A careful reading shows the disciples asked about two separate events, not just one—even if they didn’t realize it at the time. They asked, “when will these things happen?” right after Jesus talked about the temple’s being destroyed. They also asked about “the sign of [Jesus’s] coming and of the end of the age” (v. 3). The temple’s destruction occurred in AD 70; we still await Christ’s return and the end of the age.



An Unknown Hour (Matt. 24:36-41)

Earlier in Matthew 24, Jesus’s disciples approached Him with questions about signs of His return and the end of the age. He responded with some general signs in verses 4-35. However, Jesus explained that no one knows the specific day and hour, not even the Son. Only the Father knows. Jesus further illustrated this truth by describing two men in a field, where one man will be taken and one left. He also described two women grinding grain; one would be taken and one left.

VERSE 36

“Now concerning that day and hour no one knows — neither the angels of heaven nor the Son — except the Father alone.”

In replying to the disciples’ question about the signs of the end of the age (v. 3), Jesus described events with what has become familiar terminology—“wars and rumors of wars” (v. 6), nation rising against nation (v. 7), and “false prophets” who would “deceive many” (v. 11). He said it would be a time of “great distress” (v. 21) and that afterwards, “the Son of Man [would come] on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v. 30). These signs would indicate that Jesus “is near—at the door” (vv. 32-33).

Jesus next issued a warning concerning **that day and hour**. He knew His disciples wanted to know the exact details. The disciples remained curious. Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus and His disciples were on the Mount of Olives. Again, they asked about future events: “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” There, He echoed a similar statement: “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:6,7).

Knowing His disciples’ curiosity, Jesus was careful to say “**no one knows . . . except the Father alone.**” That *the Father* knows but **the Son** does not underscores Jesus’s submissiveness to God’s will—an attitude He demonstrated during His earthly ministry (Luke 22:42; John 5:30). Showing submission in no way contradicts His divine nature. Jesus chose this position and stance (Phil. 2:5-8). How He could do that is part of the mystery of the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14).

VERSES 37-38

“As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark.”

Whereas Jesus had earlier referred to Himself as “the Son” (v. 36), here He chose the title **the Son of Man**. The Old Testament prophet Daniel used this title to describe the Messiah coming with the clouds of heaven. He would receive glory and an everlasting dominion (Dan. 7:13-14). This prophetic text points to Jesus. He often used the *Son of Man* title when accentuating His role as the Messiah (Matt. 9:6; 10:23; 12:8,32,40; 16:13; 19:28).

Jesus likened the time of His return to **the days of Noah**. What do we know about the days of Noah? 1) They were evil. Wickedness ran rampant. People’s minds focused only on evil (Gen. 6:5,11-13). They lived self-indulgent and self-focused lives. 2) The people were forewarned. Noah was “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5). Hearing Noah, the people had ample opportunities to heed the warnings and repent. 3) People continued life as usual, focusing on everyday activities, some mundane and others life-altering. They ate, drank, and got married, seemingly oblivious to God’s coming judgment (Matt. 24:38).

One phrase stands like a massive roadblock to the people’s self-focused lives—**until the day Noah boarded the ark**. The time of God’s judgment had arrived. Suddenly, God had the attention of everyone who had failed to listen before. The self-focused will ignore the warnings.

Life will seemingly be going on as usual, despite obvious warning signs. People will be oblivious, just as they were in the days of Noah.

VERSE 39

“They didn’t know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be.”

Amazingly, the people of Noah’s day **didn’t know**. Despite the years it would have taken to construct the ark, and Noah’s preaching (2 Pet. 2:5), the people chose to ignore what they saw and heard. What they could not ignore, though, was the rising flood waters—**the flood came**. Being swept away meant they had no opportunity to escape.

The coming of Christ will parallel the days of Noah (v. 37). In his Gospel, Luke recorded Jesus also saying the day of the Son of Man will be like the days of Lot (see Luke 17:28-29). Again, the picture is of life as usual until God’s judgment comes.

VERSES 40-41

“Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

Jesus gave two illustrations of “life as usual,” using everyday tasks. These two scenes depict separation. The first depicts **two men . . . in the field**. Farming was an integral part of daily life in the biblical world. In the first century, most people lived in small towns and villages. Many had a small plot of land they farmed. Families passed these properties from one generation to the next. Others, living in large cities, had land beyond the city walls that they would farm. The wealthiest owned massive farms and hired seasonal help. Likely everyone in Jesus’s audience had done farm work in their lives.

The second illustration is of **two women . . . grinding grain**. Two types of hand mills were common in households in Jesus’s day. The first was made of two slightly curved stones laid out like an X. The grain was put in the intersection of the two stones; workers moved it back and forth on the lower stone.

The other type of hand mill used two flat disk stones, which were stacked; each had a hole in the center. The upper disk had a second hole near the edge. Grain was placed between the two stones. A single stick was inserted in the center holes; a second stick was used as a handle to turn the upper stone.

Grinding grain was a daily task, typically performed by women, slaves, or children. This, considered the most menial of tasks, took six or more hours.

Looking at these illustrations, scholars differ about who is **taken** and who is **left**. Some interpret this to mean nonbelievers are taken away, just as the unrighteous were in Noah's day. Others, though, interpret this to mean the righteous are taken away to safety, just as Noah and his family were during the flood. The ones who remain are the unrighteous who will face God's judgment. Regardless, those who ignore the signs and do not heed the warnings will face judgment.

Explore Further

Read "Time, Meaning of" on pages 1571–1572 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How might a Christian's perspective of time differ from a non-believer's? How does knowing that time is headed toward a climactic end affect how you live your life?

Be Alert (Matt. 24:42-44)

Jesus instructed His disciples to remain alert since the day and hour of His return are unknown. Then, He gave a parable about a homeowner who was about to be robbed. Had he known, the homeowner would have remained alert and prevented the robbery. Since His disciples know that Jesus's return is assured, they are to be ready.

VERSE 42

“Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming.”

Therefore signals a transition in thought. Jesus had been speaking about what to expect related to the destruction of the temple and what would occur at the end of the age when He returns. Now He shifted His focus. No longer was He speaking about prophecy; He began discussing being prepared for those events. *Therefore* also indicates an expected change in people's behavior. Because Jesus is coming back unexpectedly, *therefore*, His followers' behavior is to change. Rather than going about

their daily activities oblivious to His return, they are to **be alert**. *Be alert* does not refer to expecting something to occur immediately but rather to being ready in case something does happen. It is the picture of a night watchman who is awake, alert, and at his post.

Speaking of His return, Jesus said that no one knows—“except the Father alone” (v. 36). Here, Jesus told His disciples, “**you don’t know.**” Jesus does not withhold information about His return to taunt or provoke us. Instead, He challenges us to remain faithful, ready for His return, regardless of when it occurs. Notice how Jesus closed this sentence. Although none of His followers know when it will be, “**your Lord is coming.**” This event is “the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

VERSE 43

“But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into.”

Jesus again emphasized the necessity of being ready for His return. A **thief** breaking into a home at night wasn’t uncommon in Jesus’s day. In this illustration, the thief is likened to Jesus at His return, not because Jesus would be involved in any nefarious activity, but because His arrival would be so unexpected (see 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15).

No police force existed in the first century. Thus, the **homeowner** was responsible for his home and family’s safety. The verse indicates the homeowner knew a thief would be coming, but he didn’t know when—**what time**. Jesus again used the term that reflects the task of a night watchman. The homeowner must **stay alert** to protect what matters.

VERSE 44

“This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Just as the homeowner was to be prepared, Jesus’s disciples “**are also to be ready.**” The phrase is an imperative. The adjective *ready* means to be prepared to receive someone who is expected. The good news from this verse is that just as being ready is not optional, neither is it impossible. Jesus wouldn’t have given that imperative if it were impossible. “**The Son of Man is coming.**” An unnamed angel used this same phrase at Jesus’s ascension: “This same Jesus . . . *will come* in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven (Acts 1:11, emphasis added).”

The ten virgins knew the bridegroom was coming; they did not know when (Matt. 25:1-13). Jesus’s disciples knew He would be returning; they did not know when. That is our situation still today. We, therefore, are to live ready.



Explore Further

Read “Second Coming” on pages 1423–1424 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does it look like for

- believers today to live expectantly of Christ’s return?
-

Be Faithful (Matt. 24:45-51)

Jesus shared a second parable that further illustrates the importance of remaining faithful while we await Christ’s return. Two servants are entrusted with a master’s household. One is faithful to continue his tasks, honoring God with his life. The other refuses to repent, thinking he has time to do so later. He pursues selfish pleasure. This man may suddenly realize there is no time left to repent when Christ returns.

VERSE 45

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give them food at the proper time?”

Jesus gave a series of parables related to being ready for His return and the coming judgment. Verses 45-51 record the first of those parables; chapter 25 contains the rest. In Jesus’s parables, He commonly contrasted someone who was good and did the right thing with someone evil who did not. This parable involves one man, a servant, who did the right thing and contrasts what happened when he did not.

The **servant** was an overseer; he was not the owner; he simply had been entrusted to care for something in the owner’s absence. Having proven himself to be **faithful** and **wise**, he was **put in charge** of his master’s **household**. The word *household* means household servants. Along with other unnamed responsibilities, this man was to make sure the other servants were fed.

VERSES 46-47

“Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.”

This wise and faithful servant had done what was expected. He would be **blessed**. Jesus was teaching a lesson about the importance of staying alert and watching for His return. His followers who had been alert and watching would be blessed. The Greek word for *blessed* refers to an inward contentment that is founded in one’s relationship with God. Circumstances can neither produce nor destroy this state of blessedness.

This servant would be rewarded when the master returned. He had been a good steward of a few of the master’s possessions; he was thus put in charge of looking after **all of his possessions**.

VERSE 48

“But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’”

The phrase **“But if”** alerted Jesus’s hearers that He was still telling this hypothetical story. He described this **servant** as being **wicked** rather than wise and faithful. *Wicked* typically describes immoral and unethical behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes (“evil,” Mark 7:21; Rom. 2:9; 7:19; Col. 3:5). It can also refer to harm (Acts 28:5). In every biblical usage, the term is always negative—never good or positive.

Whether the servant was wise and faithful or wicked was determined by what he said **in his heart** and how he behaved as a result. Jesus viewed the *heart* as the seat and center of a person’s thinking. When explaining to His disciples why He spoke in parables, He mentioned those who “understand with their hearts” (Matt. 13:15). This wicked servant kept his thoughts to himself. However, his actions would soon reveal his thoughts about his master’s prolonged delay.

VERSE 49

“and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards,”

How a servant treated his fellow servants was an indicator of character. To **beat his fellow servants** and eat and drink **with drunkards** violated the master’s trust and defied the standards of proper conduct. Jesus’s hearers would have shaken their heads in utter disbelief.

VERSE 50

“that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.”

Here, Jesus returned to the theme of the master’s return, or as He had said earlier, “the coming of the Son of Man” (see v. 37). Jesus was teaching His disciples about the certainty of His return and their doing His work and will as they awaited that day. Here, Jesus repeated the words He had used earlier, **day** and **hour** (v. 36). Jesus was reemphasizing that the time of His return cannot be predicted or known. The lesson for believers is to live prepared because no one knows when.

VERSE 51

“He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

To be **cut . . . to pieces** means to cut a person in two; this punishment was applied in the ancient world (see Heb. 11:37). Matthew’s Gospel often speaks of Jesus condemning **hypocrites** (Matt. 6:2,5,16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13-29). Jesus used this term to refer to the religious such as the scribes and Pharisees who appeared pure and pious but who were instead corrupt in their judgmental self-righteousness. The **weeping** signified sorrow and regret; the **gnashing of teeth** represented frustration and furor. Jesus used this phrase to describe the condition of those separated from God and eternally doomed (8:12; 13:42).

Jesus did not explain this parable. He was confident that its message was clear. He gave His followers the task, as the Fanny Crosby hymn says, to “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.”¹ As we await His return, may we be about the Father’s business.

Explore Further

Think about Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem. Then, consider what the Bible teaches about His return. How are the two events similar? How will they differ? Why do you think the two events differ so dramatically?

1. Fanny J. Crosby, “Rescue the Perishing” (1869).

Active Faith

THE WAY WE TREAT JESUS'S FOLLOWERS REVEALS THE
NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

Noah Lyles was born in Gainesville, Florida, in 1997. Running was in his blood. His father, Kevin, had been a competitive sprinter in college. He later raced with Team USA in the 1995 World Championships; they won the gold. His mother, Keisha, also competed in track and field while in college. Additionally, Noah's brother, Josephus, ran competitively in high school and beyond. Racing for the United States, Josephus won the bronze in the 200 meters at the North American, Central American, and Caribbean Championships in 2022.

Young Noah had health issues, including asthma. His breathing improved after he had his tonsils removed at age six. Growing up, he enjoyed gymnastics. When he was about twelve, he started running track and field. His strength was as a sprinter.

He and his family moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where he attended middle and high school—and continued running. As a teen, he set records not only for his high school but also for the state. Rather than go to college, Noah decided to run track and field professionally.

Running in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Noah brought home the bronze in the 200-meter race; he did the same in the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

The race that everyone still talks about is the 100-meter men's competition in Paris. In the race, Kishane Thomas of Jamaica had maintained a strong lead. Fred Kerley of the United States and Akani Simbine of South Africa closed the gap during the run. Close on their heels came Noah Lyles in the final few meters. When the runners crossed the finish line, the announcer declared that Thomas had won. But had he? The truth was that no one—including the runners—knew for sure.

Olympic Committee members huddled in the booth, scrutinizing the video. Split-second imagery showed that Lyles crossed the finish line first in 9.784 seconds, just five one-thousandths (.005) of a second faster than Thompson. Kerley came in third .02 seconds later. Lyles later said that waiting for the judges' rendering was the longest three minutes of his life!

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 25:1-46

In the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25), Jesus responded to a question the disciples asked about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the end of the age (24:3). In response, Jesus put forth a series of parables that warned the disciples about being prepared for His return because they could not know when that would be. In each parable, He contrasted those who would be prepared for His coming with those who would not. One parable examined the difference in being a faithful servant versus an unfaithful one (vv. 45–51). The next contrasted five wise virgins who were ready when the bridegroom came with five who were not prepared and were shut out of the wedding feast (25:1–13). The third contrasted how servants took care of the talents the master had entrusted to them in his absence (vv. 14–30). The final scene (vv. 31–46), which is not a parable, we know as the judgment of the sheep and the goats. This is Jesus’s last major teaching that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

The Judge (Matt. 25:31–33)

When Jesus returns, angels will be with Him. His glory and authority will be evident as He judges all people from all nations. Jesus will separate the righteous from the faithless.

VERSE 31

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.”

Jesus talked to His disciples about taking up their crosses and following Him. He asked, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (16:26, KJV). Then He said, “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done” (v. 27). Jesus often mentioned angels in connection with His second coming, the final judgment, and the end of the age (13:41–42, 49–50; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31).

Verse 31 introduces the judgment at the end of the age. The previous three parables—the faithful (and then unfaithful) servant, the ten virgins, and the servants who received talents—each alluded to a judgment. Verses 31-46, though, focus solely on judgment. As noted above, this teaching is not a parable. Jesus was describing an actual future event.

Every detail in this verse emphasizes Christ’s glory, authority, and grandeur. **The Son of Man comes**, a phrase that likely means He will return to earth for this judgment. Rather than come in humility and wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7, KJV), this time He will come with honor and be clothed with majesty. The humiliation He experienced on the cross is past. Now He will return in power and **glory** (Matt. 24:30).

Angels were involved in the events of Jesus’s birth (Luke 2:8-15). They will again be involved at His return. Angels are divine servants of God; they never seek the spotlight. Instead, they offer a divine message that gives the Lord glory (see Ps. 148:1-2; Rev. 5:11-12). Matthew previously mentioned that angels would be involved in God’s judgment at the end of the age (Matt. 13:36-43,49-50). Jesus did not explain at this point what their role will be; instead, He simply said they will be **with him** (see Zech. 14:5; Jude 14). Hebrews 12:22 talks about “myriads of angels,” which is an innumerable number according to some Bible translations (ESV, KJV). Jesus will bring **all** the angels with Him.

The word **throne** is a transliteration of the Greek term *thronos*. In Scripture, it often refers to a seat in the divine realm which is reserved for the Lord (Matt. 5:34; 23:22; Acts 7:49; Heb. 1:8; 12:2; Rev. 1:4; 3:21; 4:2-11; 5:1,6,13; 22:1-3).

Jesus did not explain how His *glory* would be manifest. He did not describe the *angels* or His *glorious throne*. Our curious minds likely wonder about what all of this will look like. But these details were not the focus of this verse. The fact that the Son of Man is returning is the sole focus; this alone is what ultimately matters.

VERSE 32

“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

All humanity, Jews and Gentiles, people of all creeds and ages, will **be gathered before him**, meaning Christ, on this judgment day. Although we may come as part of a throng, we will be judged individually, separated **one from another**. This will be “so that *each* [singular] may be repaid for what *he* [singular] has done” (2 Cor. 5:10, emphasis added).

The Old Testament referred to God’s people as **sheep** or collectively as a “flock” (1 Kings 22:17; Ezek. 36:37-38). Old Testament texts also depict God as a **shepherd** (Ps. 23:1; Jer. 31:10). The task of separating the sheep from the goats echoes the principle in Jesus’s parable about separating the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:24-30,36-43) and the good fish from the bad (vv. 47-50). These teach that the Lord will separate the good from the bad; the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished. This separation of sheep and goats also alludes to Ezekiel 34:17-24.

VERSE 33

“He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

Throughout the Middle East, sheep and goats were commonly kept together for grazing, but workers would separate them at night or for inventorying, milking, or breeding. Thus, Jesus’s hearers could easily have visualized what He was saying.

The text does not say “right hand” or “left hand,” but rather simply refers to Christ’s **right** or **left**. Throughout history, most people have been right-handed. For most people, the right hand is the stronger of the two. The Bible describes God’s power as being in His right hand (Ex. 15:6). Ancient statues and wall-carvings show that people in Middle Eastern cultures received rewards or favors with the right hand. Those depicted on a leader’s right hand were the favored ones. Further emphasizing the importance of the right hand, after Jesus ascended, He took His place at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 8:1; also Acts 7:55). The right hand, then, is the place of honor and power.

This verse also shows that Jesus has no problem separating sheep from goats. He is not ambivalent or indecisive. He knows automatically which is which. Our culture does not typically make that distinction concerning someone who passes away. Even if this person never lived a Christ-centered, godly life, loved ones will still say, “I know they are in heaven.” Jesus’s teaching stands in opposition to that thinking.

Explore Further

Post your memory verse (Matt. 25:40) in a conspicuous place so you can read it several times this week. Ask the Lord to help you see “the least of these” and pray for His guidance in how you can minister to them.

The Righteous (Matt. 25:34-40)

Addressing the righteous people, Jesus described them as blessed by the Father. They will inherit the kingdom God has prepared for them. He went on to describe the ways they had acted with compassion to meet His physical needs—hunger, thirst, alienation, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment. The righteous questioned Him wondering when these events happened. Jesus explained that anyone who met the need of any Christian was ministering to Him.

VERSE 34

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

Having gathered the nations and separated the sheep from the goats, the Son of Man would now render His judgment. The title **King** should not be surprising, as Jesus had already mentioned sitting on His throne (v. 31). Jewish texts often refer to God as “King” (Ps. 24:10; Isa. 33:22; Zech. 14:9). Here, the title refers to Christ.

Announcing the coming Messiah, the angel Gabriel told Mary, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32-33). After Jesus’s birth, wise men came to Jerusalem, looking for the “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). Although He was revealed to be the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS,” Jesus typically did not use this title for Himself (Rev. 19:16). The Jews were expecting One to come, a Messiah who would rule as David had done. However, at His first coming Jesus did not come to be that kind of king, Messiah, or ruler.

The King will give two imperatives: “**Come**” and “**inherit.**” These are words of invitation, grace, and abundance. Writing to his “brothers and sisters” in Christ, Simon Peter said, “entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you” (2 Pet. 1:10,11). What words of welcome and abundance!

Inheriting **the kingdom** involves inheriting eternal life (Matt. 19:29). This was God’s plan from the beginning. Here, Jesus looked both backward and forward. Those on His right were to inherit a blessing that had been prepared for them **from the foundation of the world**—meaning since creation. From eternity past, this was God’s plan. Looking forward, Jesus promised that the inherited blessing of the righteous would last for all eternity. The righteous are promised “a building

from God, an *eternal* dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands” (2 Cor. 5:1, emphasis added).

VERSES 35-36

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.”

The conjunction **For** connects what came before with what follows. It signaled that Jesus was about to explain why those on the King’s right would be blessed and welcomed into the kingdom.

These two verses introduce six acts of kindness that alleviate suffering. It is the first of four times this list will be given in verses 35-44. The four uses include the six acts that were done or not done and the question of when. What were the areas of suffering?

Hunger was a common plight of the poorest in Jesus’s day. Thirst was as well. People living in the biblical world struggled to find water in the arid climate and desert terrain. This was not a temporary inconvenience; it was life-threatening. The Greek term translated *stranger* typically refers to a foreigner (Eph. 2:12,19) and at times travelers.

Among the ancient Greeks, nakedness was common. Men in ancient Greece exercised and competed athletically in the nude. The Jews, however, strongly condemned public nudity. Most people in the first century were unclear about what caused sickness. Some sought relief from medicine and doctors; others depended on magic, superstition, or the so-called gods of healing.

Ancient prisons were often underground, which explains why Daniel was “brought up from the [lions’] den” (Dan. 6:23). The prison where Paul was held in Rome, the Tullianum, was accessed through a hole in the ceiling. It was dark, unsanitary, humid, and foul-smelling. Prisoners of higher rank were often lowered into open-air quarries, where they were forced to work.

Those on the King’s right gave according to each need. They gave food, water, housing, clothing, care, and time. They performed acts of self-denial, compassion, and pity. For this, they heard “come . . . inherit” (Matt. 25:34). Why were the sheep lavished with such a great reward for what seems to be relatively minor acts of compassion? They were acts of love that had taken root in and grown from a heart and life that mirrored the Lord’s grace and care.

VERSES 37-39

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’”

Jesus called those who had responded with compassion and self-denial **righteous**. The Greek term conveys a sense of being upright and virtuous; this describes someone who lives an ethical life by keeping God’s commands. Earlier in His teaching, Jesus stated the righteous would be rewarded (Matt. 10:41-42; 13:36-43). Here, He echoed that thought.

The question of **when?** indicated surprise. Although surprised, those on the King’s right did not argue or say He was wrong. Instead, they asked *when?* Also, showing respect, they referred to the King as **“Lord.”** In the context of the Lord being on His glorious throne, the righteous were affirming His divine authority.

These righteous ones said they didn’t remember seeing the King hungry or thirsty, without clothes or lodging, sick, or imprisoned. **“When did we see you”** with a need and respond? The verb translated *see* conveys perceiving and understanding a situation.

VERSE 40

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

“Truly I tell you” emphasizes the truth and importance of what is about to be said. This verse radically transforms the focus of acts of kindness, grace, and charity. Those who gave help believed they were relieving **the least of these**—meaning the hurting, vulnerable, and abandoned; they in no way realized they were dealing with Christ.

Who exactly were *the least of these*? Throughout church history, interpretations have differed. First, some have believed that the phrase refers to the nation of Israel, which is small geographically. According to this view, nations would be judged for how they treated and supported Israel. Second, some believe *the least of these* refers to all needy individuals. Third, some have interpreted this to refer to all Christians who are in need. Those holding this view cite Paul’s words about doing good work, “especially for those who belong to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Fourth, some believe the phrase refers to Christian missionaries; those

holding this view stress giving even a cup of water in Jesus’s name (Matt. 10:40-42). Other scholars have offered different interpretations. Of the options, the third is the most likely since Jesus referred to them as **“brothers and sisters of mine.”**

The righteous do not earn entrance into the kingdom because of their good works (Eph. 2:8-9). Their acts of kindness are external evidence of an internal faith, devotion, and commitment. Further, they are unaware that they were doing these charitable deeds to Jesus.

Explore Further

Read “King, Christ as” on pages 962–963 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to the concept of Jesus as King—beyond what is included in Matthew 25?

The Faithless (Matt. 25:41-46)

Jesus then addressed the faithless people. They will endure eternal punishment and separation from God. He then noted the same physical needs and stated that they had neglected to meet the needs of those around them. By neglecting these needy persons, they had neglected Him. The unrighteous will experience eternal punishment and the righteous will experience eternal life.

VERSE 41

“Then he will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!’”

Having pronounced His blessing for those on His right, the King was ready to render judgment to those on His left. **“Depart from me, you who are cursed.”** In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said those who disobeyed the Father’s will would hear this same mandate, “Depart from me, you lawbreakers!” (7:23). Heaven is a place of welcome and of long-awaited and joy-filled reunions. Hell is the exact opposite. It’s a place of remorse and abandonment. How those words *“Depart from me”* will ring in the ears of the unrighteous for all of eternity!

The word *cursed* carries the idea of pronouncing doom. Jesus explained what the state of doom would be for those on His left; they would be in an **eternal fire**. The New Testament commonly speaks of the eternal fire of hell (Matt. 3:12; Rev. 14:10-11; 21:8). This was the fate of the rich man who refused to share with Lazarus the crumbs from his table. From Hades, the rich man begged Abraham, “Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!” (Luke 16:24).

Jesus said this fire was **“for the devil and his angels.”** Among the Gospel writers, Matthew alone mentioned the devil’s *angels*. These fallen angels, like Satan, rebelled against God and were cast from the Lord’s presence (Rev. 12:3-9; see Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:11-19). The fall of Satan and his angels made this place of torment a necessity.

VERSES 42-43

“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you didn’t take me in; I was naked and you didn’t clothe me, sick and in prison and you didn’t take care of me.”

The list of opportunities in these verses are almost identical to the list in verses 35-36. Those on the King’s left had the same opportunities as those on His right. Rather than respond to people in need with charity and compassion, those on the King’s left did nothing.

VERSE 44

“Then they too will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help you?’”

This is the fourth and final time the list of deeds appears in this story. This time, we have the fewest details. Scholars have offered a couple of explanations for the shortened list. First, Jesus was using a common teaching method among first-century rabbis. Jesus’s listeners had firmly established the elements in their minds; thus, He used an abbreviated list of details. Second, those on the King’s left did not want to call attention to what they had not done. Thus, their question was, **“Lord, when did we see you . . . and not help you?”** Their response completely omitted what actions they could have taken. Maybe they were ashamed, or possibly, they did not care about those in need.

VERSE 45

“Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”

This verse reminds us that we cannot separate our care and compassion for others from our relationship with Christ (Jas. 2:15-17). This verse also teaches us that if we are not doing anything for others, we are not doing anything for Christ: **“you did not do it for me.”** We serve Christ by serving others—by showing compassion and tending to people’s needs.

VERSE 46

“And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Early in his Gospel, Matthew wrote of punishment and judgment. John the Baptist had declared that God’s wrath was coming. Those who face that wrath “will burn with fire that never goes out” (3:7-12). This theme continues throughout his Gospel. At the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated that those who did not obey His words would face destruction (7:13-27). In His parables on the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said that those who cause evil will be thrown “into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:42,50). After telling Peter that he should forgive seventy times seven (18:22), Jesus said that God the Father would be angry and show no mercy to those who refuse to forgive a brother or sister from the heart (vv. 32-35).

Jesus could have concluded His public teaching with any subject. His topic of choice was a warning and a promise. He left His followers and all people with clear options. His words echo Moses’s from centuries earlier, near the end of his life. He said, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19). May we do the same. Eternity is at stake.

Explore Further

Look up Matthew 5:3-12; 6:19-21,25-34; 10:40-42; 11:28-30; 19:27-30; 25:14-30. As you think of Jesus’s teachings, do you tend to

- focus more on rewards or punishments? Why do you think that is?

Our Atonement

JESUS CAME TO DIE ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SINS.

We tend to associate certain foods with specific occasions—don't we? Some of those food-occasion connections are obvious. For instance, we associate brightly colored marshmallow chicks and dyed eggs with Easter. Candy canes and gingerbread houses go with Christmas; we always see candy corn at Halloween. We associate turkey with Thanksgiving. The connections are solidly linked.

We think of picnics with grilled hot dogs and hamburgers on the Fourth of July. Sides may include baked beans, coleslaw, apple pie, and homemade ice cream. As families gather, the atmosphere is festive and relaxing.

If you don't believe these connections are ingrained in our society, try suggesting something radically different. Tell your family you want corn dogs, tacos, fish sticks, brussels sprouts, candy corn, and pastel-colored mints for Christmas lunch. That'll stir up some conversations!



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



Matthew 26:1-75

Matthew 26 opens with Jesus predicting He would be handed over to be crucified during the Passover (vv. 1-2). Matthew then related how the chief priests and elders were plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed (vv. 3-5).

Events continue with Jesus's anointing at Bethany (vv. 6-13), Judas's deal with the chief priests to betray Jesus (vv. 14-16), and the Passover meal Jesus shared with His disciples (vv. 17-30). At this meal, Jesus predicted one of His disciples would betray Him (vv. 20-25), and He instituted the Lord's Supper (vv. 26-29). Then, on their way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus stated that all His disciples would desert Him (vv. 31-35).

After this, Matthew related Jesus’s praying in the garden of Gethsemane (vv. 36-46), followed by His arrest (vv. 47-56) and trial before the Sanhedrin (vv. 57-68). The chapter closes with Peter’s denial of Jesus (vv. 69-75).

In this session, we look at Jesus as He shared the Passover with His disciples. As He did so, Jesus gave this ancient ritual a new meaning and interpretation. He used it to teach that He was establishing the new covenant through His atoning and sacrificial death.



Coming Betrayal (Matt. 26:17-25)

On the day of Passover, the disciples approached Jesus to inquire about preparations for the Passover meal. Jesus instructed them to go to a certain man’s home where they would celebrate the meal that night. During the Passover meal, Jesus revealed that one of the disciples present would betray him. Each disciple denied that he could be the one.

VERSE 17

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

The Jews were required to make three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem—Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost or the Festival of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:22-23). The one in early spring was Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Passover recalled that night when God spared the Hebrews as death struck the firstborn in every home and herd in Egypt—except where blood had been painted on the doorposts and lintels (11:1-12:30). Death passed over those homes. Passover began on the fourteenth day of Nisan (about April 1) and was a seven-day celebration. Nisan was the first month of the Hebrew year. It comes during the last half of March and the first half of April.

The Passover feast was called **Unleavened Bread** as a reminder of the haste with which Moses led the Hebrews out of Egyptian captivity. In preparation for leaving, God had instructed His people to remove all the

leaven from their houses. This would have forced them to eat unleavened bread. He told them: “Here is how you must eat it: You must be dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You are to eat it in a hurry; it is the Lord’s Passover” (12:11).

The **preparations** involved three facets. First, the disciples had to prepare the place for the Passover meal. Part of the preparation was to sweep the house and remove all leaven. This was to be completed on the morning before the Passover Supper.

Second, the disciples would have had to prepare the food. They would select an unblemished lamb that would be sacrificed and later roasted for the meal (Mark 14:12). From about 3:00 in the afternoon until dusk, men would take their family’s lamb to the temple; there, the priest would slay the animal and put some of its blood on the altar. As the thousands gathered at the temple to slay their animals, they would sing the *Hallel*, which came from Psalms 113–118. The disciples would gather other food for the meal, including bitter herbs, which would remind them of the Israelites’ years of Egyptian slavery (Ex. 12:8).

Third, for a Jewish family’s Passover meal, the youngest son would be prompted to ask questions about the unique meal. The answers would highlight details related to the Hebrews’ experience in Egypt. This was a way to pass details of the Hebrew faith on to the next generation. Because Jesus and His disciples were adults, this final facet was not necessary.

VERSES 18-19

“Go into the city to a certain man,” he said, “and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My time is near; I am celebrating the Passover at your place with my disciples.’ ” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

Every year, Jews made the multi-day pilgrimage from their homes to **the city** of Jerusalem. Its population would swell from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands—and maybe even a couple of million.

The disciples would recognize this **certain man** because he would be carrying a jar or jug of water (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10). Men typically did not transport water; women did (John 4:1-28; see Gen. 24:11).

This certain man worked for someone who owned a large home (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:10-11). That the disciples were to refer to Jesus as **The Teacher** may indicate he had met Jesus and/or heard Jesus teach. Whatever the case, Jesus’s divine knowledge enabled Him to tell His disciples confidently, first, that they would see the right man on Jerusalem’s streets and, second, that their paths would cross at the exact moment

the man was transporting water (Mark 14:13-16). This verse does not explain where **your place** was. It was a large guest room in this certain man's home (Mark 14:15; Luke 22:11-12).

This was not the only instance when Jesus referred to His **time**. He used this term when talking about His impending crucifixion and death—when His atoning work of salvation would be completed (John 7:6-8). The New Testament also uses the word “hour” to refer to these events (7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1; see Rom. 5:6).

People typically shared Passover in Jerusalem with their biological families. Having Passover with His **disciples** emphasized how close Jesus was to these men.

VERSE 20

When evening came, he was reclining at the table with the Twelve.

Adopting Roman tradition, the Jews began eating special meals while **reclining**. Rather than sit, diners reclined on three raised couches arranged like a capital U. The people would recline on their left side, bend their left elbow, and prop their head with their left hand. Their feet were away from the table, likely hanging off the couches.

In the opening of the U was a low-rise **table** that held plates and bowls of food that the people would share. As they ate, people held a piece of bread in their right hand and scooped food from the bowls on the center table. This reclining position helps clarify why the beloved disciple “had leaned back against Jesus at the supper” (John 21:20; see 13:23). While both reclined on their left side, John would have had his back to Jesus.

VERSES 21-22

While they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” Deeply distressed, each one began to say to him, “Surely not I, Lord?”

For a second time, Jesus demonstrated His divine knowledge of a future event: **“one of you will betray me.”** The Greek word translated as **distressed** carries the idea of grieving or being sorrowful. This was beyond normal or passing sadness. The disciples were shocked at the thought that one of the Twelve would betray Him. Grammatically, the construction of their question, **“Surely not I, Lord?”** indicates they each expected a “No” response. Each disciple asked Jesus about himself.

Interestingly, none of the disciples suspected that Judas Iscariot would be the one to betray Jesus. They all trusted him. He was the treasurer and managed the group's money. What the men did not know, though, was that "he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it" (John 12:6).

VERSE 23

He replied, "The one who dipped his hand with me in the bowl — he will betray me."

For Judas to be able to dip his hand in the bowl with Jesus indicated that they were reclining side by side. Thus, John was on one side of Jesus; Judas was on the other. This would have been a place for a cherished friend and never an enemy (see Matt. 26:50). This further emphasized that the other disciples never imagined Judas would betray Jesus.

In saying Judas "**dipped his hand with me in the bowl,**" Jesus was emphasizing that they were eating together. Like the kiss later in the garden, a normal indication of closeness and friendship had been corrupted to indicate disloyalty. Instead of stating generally, "one of you will betray me" (v. 21), here, Jesus was more specific: "**he will betray me.**"

VERSE 24

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born."

Jesus referred to Himself as **the Son of Man**. This messianic term has its roots in the words of the Old Testament prophet, Daniel. He spoke of the Son of Man coming with "the clouds of heaven" and being given "an everlasting dominion" and "his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13,14). The phrase was the promise of a coming Messiah. Saying the Son of Man "**will go**" highlighted Jesus was committed to remaining "obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

What happened that night and in the following hours were **just as it** [had been] **written**. The Old Testament foretold these events. Some have suggested Jesus was alluding to Isaiah 53, which foretold His being despised and rejected, pierced and crushed, oppressed and afflicted, and submitting willingly to death, carrying the sin of many. Others postulate Jesus had Psalm 22 in mind. There, David penned the words that Jesus cried out while on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Ps. 22:1).

Reclining with His disciples, Jesus was also thinking of other words David penned. The psalmist wrote, “Even my friend in whom I trusted, one who ate my bread, has raised his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9; see John 13:18). Concerning him, Jesus declared, **“woe to that man.”** Jesus used the word *woe* as a condemnation for flagrant sin, most often to condemn the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:13,15,16,23,25,27,29).

For Jesus to say of Judas, **“It would have been better for him if he had not been born,”** is as strong a condemnation as we find in Scripture. Jesus elsewhere referred to Judas as a devil, the son of destruction (John 6:70; 17:12), and John wrote that Satan had entered him (13:27).

VERSE 25

**Judas, his betrayer, replied, “Surely not I, Rabbi?”
“You have said it,” he told him.**

What might have motivated **Judas** to betray Jesus? One theory suggests Judas was angry and disappointed; he wanted Jesus to be a political Messiah who would break the yoke of Roman domination. Others believe Judas thought Jesus was losing in the ongoing conflict with the religious leaders of their day. He decided to give his loyalty to the supposed winners. Some think Judas became angry because he came to believe that Jesus was a false teacher and not the Messiah. Others state Judas loved Jesus and was trying to apply pressure. Maybe if Jesus was backed into a corner, He would lash out against His foes and take His rightful place as a religious and political leader.

Judas’s earlier question to the chief priests reveals part of his motivation—greed. He asked, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” (Matt. 26:15). He settled for thirty pieces of silver, equal to about 120 denarii or four months of a laborer’s pay.

Here, Judas asked the same question as the other disciples—with one slight but significant variation. They each asked, “Surely not I, Lord?” (v. 22). Judas did not refer to Jesus as “Lord” but as **Rabbi**. In Matthew’s Gospel, the title indicated distance and formality rather than intimacy and familiarity (see 23:7-8). By using a similar question, Judas may have been trying to camouflage his intention. If so, it did not work.

Jesus’s statement, **“You have said it,”** could mean, “Those are your words, not mine.” Or it could indicate agreement, similar to, “Dude, you said it!” Regardless, Jesus knew what Judas was about to do, and in all probability, Judas knew that Jesus knew.

Matthew's Gospel does not say what Judas did next. The next time it mentions Judas was when he showed up in the garden with armed men, ready to arrest Jesus (26:47).

Explore Further

Read the article "Festivals" on pages 564–569 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why do you think God initiated so many festivals with His people? Which do you think were the most important to the Jewish people in the Old Testament? In the New? What can we learn from these events? Why do believers today not observe these festivals?

Coming Atonement (Matt. 26:26-30)

During the Passover meal, Jesus gave new symbolic meaning to the bread and the wine. Jesus described the breaking of bread as His "body." This symbolized his coming crucifixion and death. The cup of wine symbolized His "blood" that would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins, sealing the new covenant. When Jesus and the disciples finished the meal, they departed Jerusalem for the Mount of Olives.

VERSE 26

As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is my body."

Besides the resurrection, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels is Jesus's feeding the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). Here, with just His disciples, Jesus repeated what He had done with the lad's loaves of bread in front of thousands: He **took, blessed, broke, and gave**. Jews usually spoke a blessing, thanking God for His provision. Breaking the bread symbolized that Jesus's body would soon be broken (Isa. 53:4-5). As parents would give bread to their family, Jesus's giving to His disciples demonstrated that He was the Provider.

Here, the verbs are imperatives: **Take** and **eat**. Doing so invited the disciples to partake of the benefits of His perfect sacrifice. Jesus was

speaking symbolically when He said, **“This is my body,”** just as when He said, “I am the gate of the sheep” and “I am the vine” (John 10:7; 15:5).

VERSES 27-28

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

A **covenant** is an agreement that lays out the boundaries and expectations in the relationship of two parties. God established His covenant with His people in the Old Testament through Moses. The terms of their ongoing relationship were specified in the Ten Commandments and the other laws He gave Moses at Mount Sinai. Centuries later, God established the new covenant through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on Mount Calvary. Both the first and the second covenants involved a Passover meal, a spotless lamb being slain—and its blood being shed. These verses lay out the symbolic transition from the old to the new covenant.

Knowing what He was facing in the next hours, how remarkable was it that Jesus was able to give thanks? The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus: “For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). The Greek word for **giving thanks** is *eucharisteo*, from which comes the word “Eucharist”—a term many believers use for the Lord’s Supper.

Each man would have taken a sip from the shared cup and then passed it to the next disciple. The cup they drank symbolized Jesus’s **blood**. Just as the blood of the sacrificial lamb was the means of forgiveness in the old covenant, drinking from the cup symbolized that they each were participating in the new covenant and being forgiven for their sins (1 Cor. 11:25-26).

Jesus said His blood was **“poured out for many”** because He knew not all people would respond to God’s offer of forgiveness. The Greek word translated **forgiveness** means to be pardoned and the act of freeing or liberating from an obligation, guilt, or punishment.

Jesus’s sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins is the core, the essential component of the Christian faith. His whole purpose for coming was to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). The old covenant with its daily sacrifices would no longer be necessary. Jesus’s atoning death was the final offering for the sins of those who will repent and place their faith in Him (Heb. 10:11-14). And, apart from His once-for-all sacrifice, there is no forgiveness (John 14:6).

VERSE 29

“But I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Passover in Jesus’s day typically involved four cups. The cups represented the four promises God gave to Moses concerning His people (Ex. 6:6-8). First, the cup of blessing recalled and gave thanks that the Lord had called the Israelites to be His people. Second, the cup of memory recalled that God delivered His people from Egyptian slavery. Third, the cup of redemption recalled that God set His people free with an outstretched arm. This was likely the cup over which Jesus gave thanks, in verse 27. Fourth, the cup of hope and freedom recalled God’s promise to bring His people into the land of promise.¹

VERSE 30

After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Passover meal normally ended with **a hymn**. This may have been a continuation of the Hallel Psalms that the men had begun singing at the time of the animal sacrifice (Pss. 113–118). Some speculate that they sang from the Great Hallel Psalm (Ps. 136). Twenty-six times it repeats the extraordinary promise for God’s people: “His faithful love endures forever.” Whether that was the hymn or not, it is the great truth of Jesus’s life and death; He came to show that God’s faithful love endures forever!

Explore Further

The Jews in Jesus’s day longed for God to repeat the miracle of the exodus—to open the doors of heaven and to rain manna once again (Ps. 78:23-29). On the day after feeding the 5,000, Jesus explained that He was the bread that had come down from heaven (John 6:32-58). Read John 6:32-58. How does what Jesus taught in the upper room complement what He said in this passage? What do these passages say to us today about His being a gift from God?

1. G.B. Howell, “Passover: How Many Cups?” *Biblical Illustrator* 37 No. 3 (Spring 2011).

Our Savior

JESUS ENDURED THE CROSS SO THAT WE MIGHT HAVE
ACCESS TO GOD.

Three of the most dreaded words in the English language are: Some assembly required. The instructions can be maddening, whether for a bicycle, BBQ grill, or bookshelf. The worst outcome is to have parts left over.

I've been amazed when the plans and instructions actually work. Some years ago, my wife decided we needed a new white cabinet for the bathroom. She found one online. The description included those three dreaded words: Some assembly required.

A box arrived a few days later. My wife separated all the hardware and put parts in a muffin tin. Guess what? The pieces of wood were numbered. She read the instructions. I started assembling. In less than an hour, our cabinet was standing tall. Amazingly, the cabinet ended up being sturdier than I ever imagined. It fits perfectly in the spot and looks great.

The people who designed the cabinet knew how to make all the pieces fit. They could see the end from the beginning. Apart from their vision and instructions, the cabinet would have never come together.

Today, we look at a story that is sad and tragic on the surface. Behind it, though, we remember that the Creator has seen the end from the beginning. He knew all along what He was doing. He had a plan. Trusting Him? Well, that's where faith comes in.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Matthew 27:1-66

John's Gospel alone records Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Afterward, the religious leaders increased their determination to kill Him. "Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews but departed from there to the countryside near the wilderness, to a town

called Ephraim, and he stayed there with the disciples” (11:54). Jesus likely remained there for about a month while He awaited the events of His final week.

On Sunday, Jesus made His triumphal entry (Matt. 21:1-11). Once in Jerusalem, Jesus looked over the temple courtyards; as evening approached He returned to Bethany with His disciples (Mark 11:11). On Monday, Jesus overturned the money changers’ tables in the Court of the Gentiles at the temple (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18). Afterwards, Jesus healed people in the temple precincts. He and the disciples returned to Bethany (Matt. 21:14,17). On Tuesday, Jesus spent the day teaching in the temple precincts and, later, on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 21:23-25:46). The Gospels do not record any activities on Wednesday. This was likely a day of rest for Jesus and the disciples.

On Thursday, after Peter and John prepared the upper room (Luke 22:7-13), Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples. Afterward, He and the Eleven left the upper room and went to Gethsemane—where He prayed. Here, Judas betrayed Him with a kiss, and the authorities arrested Jesus, likely about two in the morning. The disciples deserted Him and fled (Matt. 26:17-56).

Friday was the day of Jesus’s trial before the Jews and then the Romans—and of His crucifixion and burial (26:57–27:61). Hours before sunup, Jesus appeared before Annas, the former high priest. From there, He was led to Caiaphas’s house, where the Sanhedrin had gathered (Matt. 26:57-67; John 18:12-14,19-24). Under oath, Jesus was required to answer the questions of Caiaphas, the high priest. He confirmed He was the Son of God. Caiaphas declared Jesus was a blasphemer; the Sanhedrin said He was worthy of death. Peter listened from the courtyard, and when asked three times, he denied knowing Jesus. The Sanhedrin convened again after daybreak. Enough members were present to make their ruling official. Jesus was deserving of death. Yet, this Jewish body had no authority to impose the death penalty (John 18:31), so they decided to bring Jesus to Pilate and demand that he execute Jesus (Matt. 27:1-2).



Mocked (Matt. 27:27-31)

At daybreak, the chief priests and elders delivered Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (vv. 1-2). Two questions reveal

Pilate's quondary. First, he asked Jesus if He was the king of the Jews (v. 11). This claim had enraged the Jews. Second, after the crowd demanded Pilate to crucify Jesus, he asked, "Why? What has he done wrong?" (Matt. 27:23; Luke 23:22). This question showed Pilate didn't care about Jesus's claims of divinity. He didn't care if the Jewish leaders thought Jesus was guilty of blasphemy. He was a Roman governor and unconcerned about someone's religious claims. He cared only about the Empire—and his position in it. Ultimately, finding no justifiable cause to execute Jesus and faced with a brewing riot, Pilate literally washed his hands of the matter. He declared himself innocent of Jesus's blood and handed Him over to be crucified (Matt. 27:24-26).

VERSE 27

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's residence and gathered the whole company around him.

The Romans commonly beat or flogged a criminal before crucifying him; the process hastened the person's death. Criminals were typically stripped for the flogging and then beaten within an inch of their lives. After beating Jesus, the soldiers put His clothes back on Him (vv. 26-31).

Jesus's mock trial and scourging occurred in the outer courtyard in full view of the mob. The soldiers then led Him **into the governor's residence**—meaning into an inner courtyard. The massive residence was known as the Antonia Tower, the Antonia Fortress, or the Praetorium. It towered over the northern corner of the Jerusalem temple. From here, Roman soldiers could scan the temple platform and keep an eye on the Jews. A Roman legion consisted of 6,000 soldiers. **The whole company**, a cohort (NASB) or battalion (ESV), was about a tenth of that, thus 600 men. These soldiers served as Pilate's bodyguards and likely accompanied him from his permanent dwelling in Caesarea Maritima. *The whole company* would have been those assigned to the Praetorium for that day.

VERSE 28

They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe.

Criminals condemned to crucifixion were commonly stripped before being placed on the cross, a way to add humiliation to their agony. Jesus, though, did not have to wait for this element of humiliation; the soldiers **stripped Him** again during this mocking phase. Jesus had foretold these events (20:19).

The **scarlet robe** would have been a cloak that one of the soldiers typically wore or maybe one that Pilate no longer wore. Because the dye was expensive to produce, only royalty, rulers, and members of the military wore a *scarlet robe*. Mark and John wrote the robe was purple (Mark 15:17; John 19:2). The color was likely a dark red—like crimson. It was a precursor to the fact that Jesus would have placed on Him the sins of the world, which are red like crimson (Isa. 1:18).

This would be the first of three elements that signified a king's status in Jesus's day. None given to Jesus that day though were of royal quality. Each was a substitute for the real thing.

VERSES 29-30

They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: “Hail, king of the Jews!” Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head.

Here, Jesus received the second and third accessories that indicated royal status—a **crown** and **staff**. Instead of the golden crown made to resemble laurel leaves and berries, Jesus's was made of a thorny bush or vine. Instead of a golden scepter, Jesus received a reed to hold in His right hand. Beaten and bloodied, Jesus wore the costume of a king in caricature.

The soldiers **mocked** Jesus. They **knelt down before Him** in derision and proclaimed, **“Hail, king of the Jews!”** Little did they know, they were mocking and bowing down to the King of kings and Lord of lords to whom one day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is indeed Lord (Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

As the soldiers **spat** on Jesus, He experienced what Isaiah had written of centuries earlier: “I gave my back to those who beat me . . . I did not hide my face from scorn and spitting” (Isa. 50:6). The soldiers' hitting Jesus with His mock scepter indicates it was not a flimsy reed that grew along the riverbanks. His **staff** was likely a wooden stick or cane.

VERSE 31

After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.

Criminals who received a death sentence were typically paraded naked through the city to their crucifixion. Jesus, though, was clothed before

the Romans led Him into the streets. Some believe the Romans were concerned about the crowds' reaction. They knew the city was filled with people celebrating Passover and that the Jews had an aversion to public nudity. Thus, the Romans, not wanting to incite an uprising (v. 24), broke with tradition. Others believe the soldiers put Jesus's clothes back on Him because they knew He would not be scourged again. Once arriving at the place of crucifixion, criminals typically would receive a beating or scourging similar to the one Jesus endured. Knowing Jesus would have never survived a second beating, the Romans put His clothes back on Him before leading Him through the Jerusalem streets.

Having endured the scourge with a leather whip, the beating with the scepter and soldiers' hands, and the loss of blood due to the crown of thorns, Jesus had to be **led away**. Weakened, He was unable to walk through the streets and carry His cross's horizontal beam (see v. 32).



Explore Further

Read the article "Cross, Crucifixion" on pages 368–371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does this article shed light on what Jesus was about to face? Having read this article, why

- are we prone to sanitize the cross and what Jesus endured?

Forsaken (Matt. 27:45-49)

At noon, darkness came across the land and lasted for three hours. Jesus cried out in Aramaic asking God why He had abandoned Him. Some of the onlookers mistakenly thought Jesus was calling out for the help of Elijah and offered Jesus a drink.

VERSE 45

From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land.

Jesus was crucified about nine in the morning (Mark 15:25). Jesus was in full daylight and thus full view for His first three hours on the cross. Yet, all of that changed at noon. **Darkness**, which signified the absence of light and the presence of evil and judgment, covered the land (Joel 2:1-2).

This darkness lasted three hours—far longer than an eclipse or other natural phenomenon.

VERSE 46

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “*Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?*” that is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

The Jews started counting the hours of the day at sunrise, thus, about six in the morning. The ninth hour was about **three in the afternoon**. Jews prayed at the temple three times a day: in the morning, three in the afternoon, and at sunset. Priests offered sacrifices at the first and second of these times. Thus, *three in the afternoon* was the time of the final sacrifice of the day. At this point, Jesus had been on the cross for about six hours.

Why did Jesus cry out from the cross, **“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”** As He bore the sins of the world, He sensed that the closeness and divine fellowship He had enjoyed with the Father was temporarily broken. Psalm 22:1 can help clarify what Jesus was experiencing. Speaking to the Father, the psalmist cried out, “Why are you so far from my deliverance and from my words of groaning?” Certainly, Jesus felt that way as He hung on that Roman cross in the heat of the day.

VERSE 47

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling for Elijah.”

Who were among **those standing there?** The governor’s soldiers had beaten and humiliated Jesus and then brought Him to the place of crucifixion and guarded Him there (vv. 27-37). Unidentified pedestrians walked by; the chief priests, scribes, and elders were there, mocking. Two criminals crucified alongside Jesus were present, taunting Him (vv. 38-44). Many unnamed women from Galilee were there, along with Zebedee’s wife—whose sons were James and John. John, likely the beloved disciple, was there (John 19:26-27). Mary, the wife of Clopas, was present (v. 25). Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was present; this may be the Mary whom Mark identified as the mother of James the younger and of Joses (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40). Jesus’s mother and her unnamed sister were there (John 19:25). A woman named Salome, who may have been known to Mark’s initial readers, was there (Mark 15:40). All four Gospels report that Mary Magdalene was at the cross.

The Old Testament taught that before the coming of the great day of the Lord, God would send the prophet **Elijah** (Mal. 4:5). Some thought Jesus was calling for him. Maybe people did not understand clearly what Jesus said because His mouth and throat were parched, and His lips were swollen and bloodied from being beaten and slapped.

VERSES 48-49

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink. But the rest said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

This action was intended to torment and humiliate Jesus further. When Jesus arrived at Golgotha, the soldiers “gave him wine mixed with gall to drink. But when he tasted it, he refused to drink it” (v. 34). Gall was a bitter herb that could be poisonous if enough were ingested. The bitterness would have only added to Jesus’s agony. Now, hours later, Jesus was offered **sour wine**, likely the same as before. Drinking it would be torment, not refreshing. The mocking continued. Matthew did not identify who **the rest** were. He was likely referring to unidentified bystanders. Matthew earlier said that people passing by the site and those standing nearby hurled insults at Jesus: “‘You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!’ . . . In the same way the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him and said, ‘He saved others, but he cannot save himself! . . . He trusts in God; let God rescue him now’” (vv. 40-43). None of the revilers believed Jesus could or would save Himself—nor that God would intervene. While one person present offered Jesus a drink, the rest were waiting to see what would happen.

Neither the Romans nor the Jewish officials would rescue Jesus. His followers were powerless and unable to save Him. The Father had forsaken Him. The Son of God hung on the cross surrounded by people, yet abandoned and alone, seemingly without hope.

Explore Further

Read through Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Consider how these texts point to Jesus’s crucifixion. What elements do you see in these passages that foreshadow what Jesus experienced at His so-called trial and crucifixion that followed?

Son of God (Matt. 27:50-54)

Did Jesus die, as did most crucified criminals, of asphyxiation—unable to pull Himself up to catch His next breath? Did He die because of a loss of blood after all He had endured? Did the pleural cavity around His lungs or the pericardial sack around His heart hemorrhage and cause His death? These final possibilities would have explained the water and blood coming out when the soldier speared His side (John 19:34). Regardless, crucifixion was a horrific way to die—maybe the most excruciating means of execution ever devised. Knowing the agony caused Jesus to pray, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). Yet face the cross He must.

VERSE 50

But Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.

Jesus had earlier **cried out** to the Father, “*Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?*” (v. 46). Here, He cried out again. Usually, at this point in a crucifixion, the dying person had no voice or strength; many were unconscious in their final moments. John stated that at the end, Jesus “said, ‘It is finished.’ Then bowing his head, he gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). That Jesus still had **a loud voice** and could cry out showed He was still in control.

One of the themes woven throughout Matthew’s Gospel focuses on the divine majesty of Christ. That Jesus **gave up His spirit** underscores His authority over His own life. Isaiah, foreshadowing Jesus as the Suffering Servant, said, “he willingly submitted to death . . . yet he bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). This was yet another reminder that Jesus was giving His life willingly—no man was taking it from Him (John 10:18). He, not His accusers or executioners, determined when He would draw His last breath. A favorite Christmas carol, “Silent Night,” calls Him, “Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.” This verse in Matthew’s Gospel is a reminder that Jesus was also Lord at His death.

VERSE 51

Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split.

Some translations render **Suddenly** as “And behold” (ESV, KJV). This highlighted the unexpected nature of these events. That this occurred *suddenly*, just as Jesus “gave up his spirit,” underscores that these

events were happening according to God’s divine orchestration and leading. None of what occurred in this verse (or the next two) was a natural phenomenon.

The curtain of the sanctuary separated the holy area from the most holy area in the Jerusalem temple. It was sixty feet tall, and the fabric was about as thick as a human hand is wide. The high priest was allowed inside the most holy area only once a year—on the Day of Atonement—when he obtained forgiveness for God’s people. Being torn **from top to bottom** meant the curtain was **torn in two** and thus beyond repair. Only God could have accomplished such a feat. The ripping signified that the old sacrificial system was obsolete; the promised new covenant was now in place (Jer. 31:31-34). No longer does a representative or intermediary have to enter God’s presence on our behalf; God’s children have full and direct access to Him.

Darkness covered the land. The earth **quaked**. The **rocks were split** apart. Seemingly, creation was convulsing at the evil that God’s Son was enduring. The “punishment for our peace was upon him . . . and the LORD has punished him [or, ‘laid on him’ (KJV)] for the iniquity of us all.” The only One who never sinned became sin for us (Isa. 53:5,6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Again, each aspect was according to God’s divine plan. He knew the ending from the beginning.

VERSE 52-53

The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And they came out of the tombs after his resurrection, entered the holy city, and appeared to many.

The supernatural occurrences continued. **The tombs were also opened**. Matthew did not identify who the **saints** were. Matthew reported their **bodies . . . were raised**. The scene recalls Ezekiel’s valley of the dry bones vision. Ezekiel had seen flesh and skin cover dried bones; “breath entered them, and they came to life and stood on their feet.” God’s message to His people was, “I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them, my people, and lead you into the land of Israel . . . I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live” (Ezek. 37:10, 12,14).

The saints did not come out of their tombs until after Jesus walked out of His tomb on that resurrection morning. In this way, Jesus is indeed “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). The miraculous event of Matthew 27:52-53 is a foreshadowing of what will occur “at his coming, [to all] those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:23).

VERSE 54

When the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

A **centurion** was a Roman soldier who was commander of 100 soldiers. This *centurion* would have been in charge at the cross; **those with him** would have been under his command. To be **keeping watch** meant this squad of four soldiers was assigned to carry out Jesus’s death sentence (John 19:23-24).

The Greek word used in this verse translated as **terrified** refers to something alarming that seizes someone with fear. These men, part of the mightiest military force on earth in the first century AD, were *terrified* because of what they had seen.

The Jews had hurled insults at Jesus. They had mocked Him and accused Him of blasphemy. They, who claimed to be eagerly awaiting the coming of the Messiah, had responded to Jesus with violence and vitriol. This centurion, who was a Gentile, astonishingly was the one who made a great pronouncement about Jesus’s identity. Both God the Father and Christ the Son had earlier made this same declaration (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; John 10:36).

The Romans regularly referred to a hero or their emperor as a son of god. This centurion’s assertion, though, was different. He based his statement on what God had done; He had darkened the earth for three hours and later caused it to quake. Thus, this Gentile soldier echoed the disciples’ earlier faith statement about Jesus’s identity (Matt. 14:33; 16:16). He did not declare that Jesus was “a son of god” but “**was the Son of God!**” The centurion’s confession would foreshadow the good news of Christ being received by both Jews and Gentiles in the days and years to come.



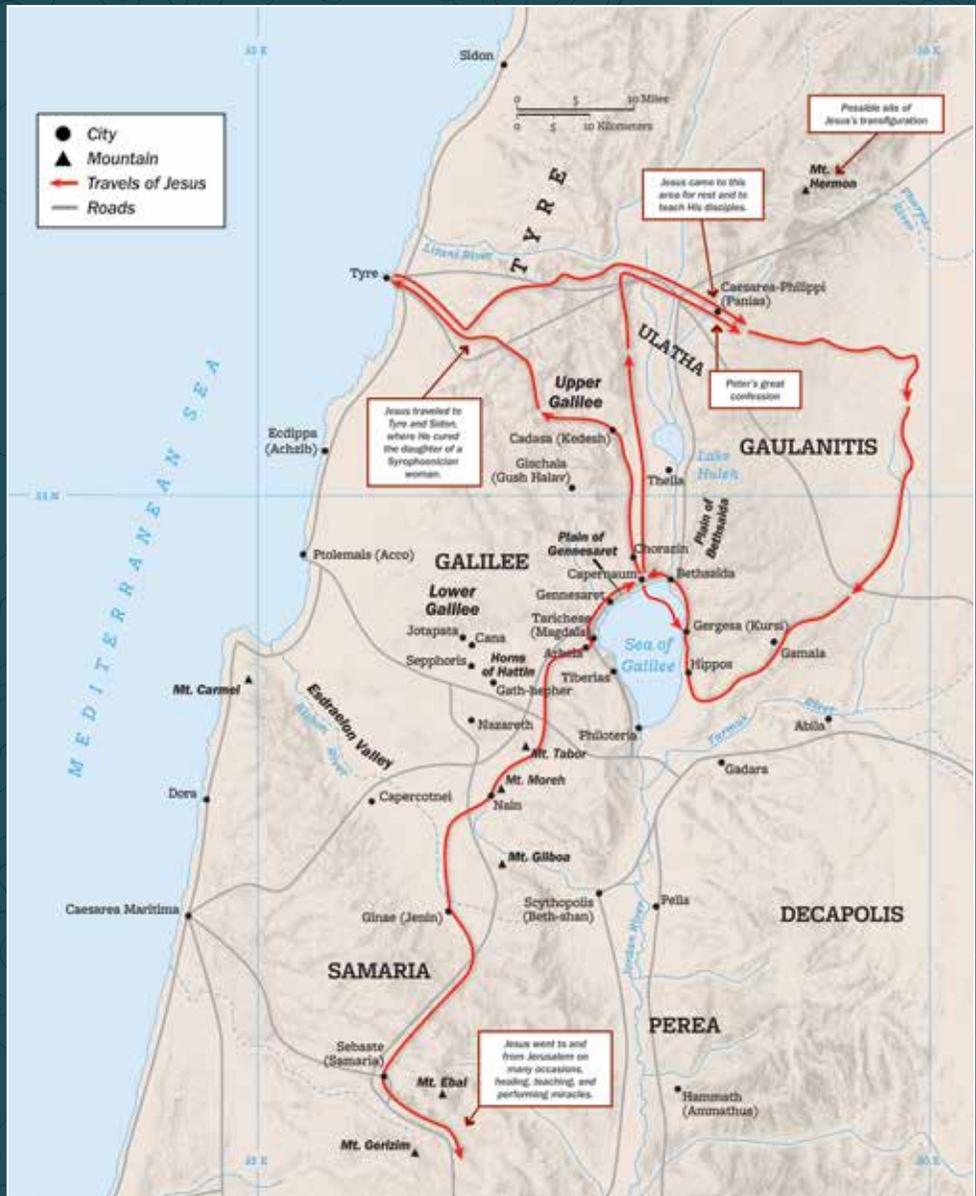
Explore Further

Many of the events surrounding Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection were unexpected: the three hours of darkness, the raising of the saints, the tearing of the temple curtain, and the profession of the centurion.

- In our lives, how does God use unexpected events to draw us to Him?
-

Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee

"Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee" is based on "The Ministry of Jesus Beyond Galilee," Holman Bible Atlas (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1998), p. 224. Used with permission.



MATTHEW 14–28

Turning points are key to any story. A character moving in one direction suddenly transitions to a new path. Overcoming obstacles, the hero wins in the end. Matthew 14–28 represents a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. After preaching and healing in Galilee, Christ turned His face toward Jerusalem. His steps ultimately took Him to a cross—and an empty tomb. As believers, we benefit from this turning point. Through His example, we learn how to face our fears, overcome opposition, sacrifice for others, and embrace the hope that only He provides. By studying Matthew 14–28, we gain a better understanding of what it means to live out our faith each day—and how we can move forward to make disciples of all nations.

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