



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE.**
Adults

Matthew 14–28

Leader Guide (CSB)

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



Ross McLaren wrote the Leader Guide commentary for these sessions on Matthew 14–28. Dr. McLaren retired from Lifeway after 25 years in various adult ministry leadership positions. He is the co-author of “Jeremiah, Lamentations” in the *Holman Old Testament Commentary* series, the author of the notes on Mark’s Gospel in various CSB Study Bibles, and the former editor of *The Herschel Hobbs Commentary*. He also has served as a college professor and lectured in universities in numerous countries. He has led multiple international mission trips and is the founder and lead teacher of the Multicultural LifeGroup at Brentwood (TN) Baptist Church.

Leslie Hudson wrote the group plans for this study of Matthew 14–28. Leslie lives with her family in White Bluff, Tennessee. She loves cold mornings, hot coffee, and a good deep dive in the Bible, all at the same time. She’s involved in the women’s ministry and music ministry at her church, but her passion is for her high school girls Sunday school class at First Baptist Church in Dickson, Tennessee.

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FROM THE TEAM LEADER



Recently, 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 the items slowly, I took time to inspect each piece one at a time. While some of the jewelry was 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 inside and outside 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 found while organizing my closet, 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



What Bible Study Leaders Can Learn from Flight Attendants

G. Dwayne McCrary

“May I have your attention please . . .”

I would guess the job of a flight attendant feels thankless at times. People board the plane expecting to be greeted and acknowledged. We aren’t concerned about the flight attendants because we’re focused on our travel plans and schedules. We expect them to hear our requests for coffee and deliver it exactly as we asked. We complain about things beyond their control, like flight delays and full planes.

Flight attendants serve a vital role in our travel experience. I would even contend that if we take time to observe them as they work, there is much we can learn. Let’s consider some of the actions of flight attendants that parallel what we do as Bible study leaders. At least four similarities can be drawn to help us lead our groups.

PASSENGERS BOARD WITH OTHER THINGS ON THEIR MINDS.

When people board a plane, the last thing on their minds is how they will interact with the flight attendants. Passengers may be consumed with how their baggage will fit in the overhead compartment, how long the flight will be, or the notes they need to review in preparation for a meeting. Flight attendants must get the attention of their passengers to give directions about seat belts, inflating flotation vests, and locating the exits.

When people arrive for our Bible study groups, Bible study might be the last thing on their minds. Issues at work or in their families, events in the news, or the person who got their usual parking

spot may be occupying their thoughts. Just like flight attendants, we need to direct their attention to the lesson. As individuals arrive, we can pose a question or invite them to participate in an activity to help them focus on the study.

NOT EVERY PASSENGER HAS FLOWN BEFORE.

Some passengers might be making their first flight. They don’t know where the seat numbers are located, that they need to face the wheels out when placing their bags in the overhead bins, or how to adjust the air vent. They can figure out

“EVERY PERSON DESERVES TO BE HEARD, MOVED FORWARD IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD’S TRUTH, AND CHALLENGED TO GROW IN THEIR FAITH.”



some of those things by watching others, but not everything. Many times, the flight attendant needs to point out the button that reclines the seat or explain the purpose of the bag in the seat pouch.

In much the same way, some folks who attend our groups have never been in a Bible study before. Even if they have been in a group at another church, the dynamics of this church and small group might feel vastly different to them. We can help these individuals by providing them with a *Personal Study Guide* or *Daily Discipleship Guide* and directing them to the first page of that week's session. We can also introduce them to others in the group who can walk with them for the day.

PASSENGERS EXPECT TO BE TREATED FAIRLY.

If one passenger on our row gets extra snacks, we expect extra snacks too! Regular flyers don't wear badges or tags that reveal the airfare they paid or how often they fly, so the flight attendant must treat everyone like a frequent flyer or as if they paid a premium price to be there.

The people in our Bible study groups should be treated fairly as well. We value each person in the room regardless of their attendance pattern, position in the church or community, or stage of spiritual maturity. Every person deserves to be heard, moved forward in their understanding of God's truth, and challenged to grow in their faith.

SOME PASSENGERS WILL TRAVEL WITH YOU AGAIN BASED IN PART ON HOW YOU INTERACT WITH THEM.

Travelers will likely not have an opportunity to visit with the pilot, the person guiding the plane to the gate, or the baggage handlers. Their only guaranteed interactions are with the person checking tickets and the flight attendants. Therefore, travelers will equate the flight attendants with the rest of the company and decide whether to use that carrier again based on that interaction alone.

Individuals who attend our small groups may not visit with the pastor or other church leaders every week. As a result, our interactions with them in Bible study could have a tremendous impact on their decision to come back or not. We have the privilege of representing the vision and values of our churches and our Savior to the people who attend our groups. Our actions and attitudes need to give them a reason to return.

The next time you fly, thank the flight attendants for giving you an example of how to lead a Bible study group. We can use these lessons to be better Bible study leaders.

G. Dwayne McCrary is the manager of the Adult Ongoing Bible Study team at Lifeway and a frequent flyer. His newest book, *Marked by Prayer*, can be found at Lifeway.com.



Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Caesarea Philippi [sess uh REE uh FIH lih pigh]—a city located in the upper Jordan Valley along the slopes of Mount Hermon; the place where Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was (Matt. 16:13-20); the transfiguration (17:1-13), which occurred about a week after Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, was probably also in this area

Centurion [sen TYOOR ee uhn]—an officer in the Roman army in command of one hundred soldiers; generally presented in a favorable light in the New Testament (Matt. 8:5; 27:54; Acts 27:3)

Herodians [hih ROH dih uhns]—an aristocratic Jewish group who favored the policies of Herod Antipas and supported the Roman government; they allied with the Pharisees in trying to trap Jesus with their question about paying taxes to the Romans (Matt. 22:15-22)

Galilee [GAL ih lee]—small region in the northern part of Israel where Jesus did most of His ministry (Matt. 3:13; 4:18,23; 17:22; 26:32); following the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Galilee became the major center of Judaism

Mount of Olives—a two-and-a-half mile-long mountain ridge running in a north-south direction due east of Jerusalem; the name came from its extensive olive groves, well-known since ancient times (Zech. 14:4); at its peak it rises over 200 feet above the Temple Mount across the Kidron Valley

Passover—one of the three annual festivals, it commemorated the final plague on Egypt when the firstborn of the Egyptians died and the Israelites were spared because of the blood on their doorposts (Ex. 12)

Pharisees [FEHR uh sees]—religious group in Israel that controlled the synagogues and exercised great control over much of the population; the term means “separated ones”

Sadducees [SAD joo sees]—religious group in Israel that controlled the temple and its services; they rejected the oral law of the Pharisees and accepted the Pentateuch as the ultimate authority; materialistic in their outlook, they did not believe in life after death or rewards or punishment beyond this life and denied the existence of angels and demons

Scribes—during the exile in Babylon, scribes became the experts in God’s written word, they copied, preserved, and taught it; Ezra was a scribe (Ezra 7:6); in the New Testament, most were Pharisees (Mark 2:16). They were considered the experts in cases where people were accused of breaking the law of Moses.

BIBLE READING PLAN



MARCH

- 1. Matthew 14:1-5
- 2. Matthew 14:6-12
- 3. Matthew 14:13-21
- 4. Matthew 14:22-27
- 5. Matthew 14:28-33
- 6. Matthew 14:34-36
- 7. Matthew 15:1-9
- 8. Matthew 15:10-20
- 9. Matthew 15:21-28
- 10. Matthew 15:29-31
- 11. Matthew 15:32-39
- 12. Matthew 16:1-4
- 13. Matthew 16:5-12
- 14. Matthew 16:13-20
- 15. Matthew 16:21-23
- 16. Matthew 16:24-28
- 17. Matthew 17:1-8
- 18. Matthew 17:9-13
- 19. Matthew 17:14-21
- 20. Matthew 17:22-23
- 21. Matthew 17:24-27
- 22. Matthew 18:1-5
- 23. Matthew 18:6-9
- 24. Matthew 18:10-14
- 25. Matthew 18:15-20
- 26. Matthew 18:21-22
- 27. Matthew 18:23-35
- 28. Matthew 19:1-6
- 29. Matthew 19:7-12
- 30. Matthew 19:13-15
- 31. Matthew 19:16-22

APRIL

- 1. Matthew 19:23-26
- 2. Matthew 19:27-30
- 3. Matthew 20:1-16
- 4. Matthew 20:17-19
- 5. Matthew 20:20-23
- 6. Matthew 20:24-28
- 7. Matthew 20:29-34
- 8. Matthew 21:1-5
- 9. Matthew 21:6-11
- 10. Matthew 21:12-13
- 11. Matthew 21:14-17
- 12. Matthew 21:18-22
- 13. Matthew 21:23-27
- 14. Matthew 21:28-32
- 15. Matthew 21:33-46
- 16. Matthew 22:1-14
- 17. Matthew 22:15-22
- 18. Matthew 22:23-33
- 19. Matthew 22:34-40
- 20. Matthew 22:41-46
- 21. Matthew 23:1-7
- 22. Matthew 23:8-13
- 23. Matthew 23:14-26
- 24. Matthew 23:27-36
- 25. Matthew 23:37-39
- 26. Matthew 24:1-8
- 27. Matthew 24:9-14
- 28. Matthew 24:15-28
- 29. Matthew 24:29-31
- 30. Matthew 24:32-35

MAY

- 1. Matthew 24:36-44
- 2. Matthew 24:45-51
- 3. Matthew 25:1-13
- 4. Matthew 25:14-30
- 5. Matthew 25:31-40
- 6. Matthew 25:41-46
- 7. Matthew 26:1-5
- 8. Matthew 26:6-13
- 9. Matthew 26:14-16
- 10. Matthew 26:17-25
- 11. Matthew 26:26-30
- 12. Matthew 26:31-35
- 13. Matthew 26:36-46
- 14. Matthew 26:47-56
- 15. Matthew 26:57-68
- 16. Matthew 26:69-75
- 17. Matthew 27:1-5
- 18. Matthew 27:6-10
- 19. Matthew 27:11-14
- 20. Matthew 27:15-26
- 21. Matthew 27:27-31
- 22. Matthew 27:32-37
- 23. Matthew 27:38-44
- 24. Matthew 27:45-49
- 25. Matthew 27:50-56
- 26. Matthew 27:57-61
- 27. Matthew 27:62-66
- 28. Matthew 28:1-7
- 29. Matthew 28:8-10
- 30. Matthew 28:11-15
- 31. Matthew 28:16-20

USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD



BEFORE THE GROUP TIME

1. STUDY THE CORE PASSAGE.

Prepare early. Read the passage, listing key people, places, words, phrases, and actions. Use the commentary included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* and the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* to dig deeper into the items you listed. If a QR code is available in a lesson, scan it to gain additional information on what's found in the passage. Write a summary of the session's main idea. Use the statement printed under each session title as a starting place.

2. READ THE GROUP TIME PLAN.

Study the Group Plans in the *Explore the Bible Leader Guide*, which include ideas for integrating the *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide*. Page numbers for related PSG content are provided in the Group Plans. These page numbers correspond to the regular print version of the PSG and may differ from large print versions. Adjust the plan to fit the needs of your group. Identify ways to engage adults, explore the text, summarize the lesson, and challenge the group.

For additional ideas or questions, consult *Explore the Bible QuickSource* and *Explore the Bible Extra* (which identifies a current event to introduce and conclude the lesson and is found at goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras).

Review the items available in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*. Look at the Lifeway Sunday School blog and Groups Ministry blog for additional helps on leading an ongoing Bible study group.

3. GATHER AND REVIEW.

Review the group plan and options again and collect any supplies you will need. Make sure you have additional copies of the *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for guests.

DURING THE GROUP TIME

4. ARRIVE EARLY.

Make sure you are the first person to arrive. Pray as you set up the area. Greet adults as they arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

5. LEAD THE GROUP IN A TIME OF BIBLE STUDY.

Use the plan, recording notes of how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns, so be flexible.

AFTER THE GROUP TIME

6. EVALUATE AND RECORD.

Review and implement the After the Session idea to encourage the group to put the truths they discovered into practice. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you grow as a leader.

7. START PREPARING TO LEAD THE NEXT GROUP TIME.

MEETING THE EXPLORE THE BIBLE FAMILY OF ADULT RESOURCES

CORE RESOURCES

Use the *Daily Discipleship Guide* or *Personal Study Guide* and *Leader Guide* as the core resource for your group.

Daily Discipleship Guide

Resource for both the group members and the group leader. An alternative to the *Personal Study Guide/Leader Guide* model. Includes key words, commentary and questions for the group, daily Bible readings for personal study after the group time, and ideas for smaller groups to discuss the study. Leader helps with targeted teaching plans included in the back.

Personal Study Guide

Resource for the group members to help them prepare for and study during the group time.

Leader Guide

Resource for leaders of groups using the *Personal Study Guide*. Includes commentary and group teaching plans.

ADDITIONAL LEADER HELPS

Commentary

Provides additional insight into the passages studied.

QuickSource

Resource for leaders, providing additional discussion questions, an object lesson, and dig deeper feature. Also provides ease of use for an individual called on to step in and lead the group on short notice.

Leader Pack

Resource filled with posters, masters for informative handouts, and access to a digital leader pack (includes DOC files of the *Leader Guide* commentary, group plans, the pack items in PDF format, and other helps for the leader).



Find out more or order at [goExploreTheBible.com](https://www.goExploreTheBible.com)

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Matthew's Gospel is the longest book in the New Testament. Nowhere does the writer of this Gospel identify himself by name, but Matthew's human authorship was universally affirmed in the early church.

Author: Matthew's name appears in every list of Jesus's apostles (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). According to his own account, he had been a tax collector (Matt. 9:9). Both Mark and Luke identify him as Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), the man who then made a great feast for Jesus at his own house and invited many fellow tax collectors and other "sinners" as his guests (Luke 5:29; see also Matt. 9:10; Mark 2:15). We don't know what happened to Matthew after Acts 1, but church tradition claims he traveled extensively in the Middle East and eventually suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia.

Recipients: That Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience of believers has been claimed since the end of the second century. The early church asserted that Matthew was written to a primarily Jewish audience with a particular emphasis on proving Christ was the Messiah, the awaited descendant of David.

Date: Many believe Matthew depended on Mark's Gospel and place its writing in the 80s or 90s. However, Irenaeus stated that Matthew issued his Gospel "while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome." This would place the writing closer to the early 60s.¹

Structure: Bible students offer two main suggestions as to how Matthew structured his Gospel. The first focuses on the five discourses of Jesus (Matt. 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Each culminates with a statement that Jesus had finished His teaching. These statements separate His discourses from the Gospel's narratives (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

A second option is geographical, moving from north to south. This structure begins with Jesus's Galilean ministry and the northern areas beyond it (4:12-19:1) and

moves toward Jerusalem (19:2-20:34). It concludes with His final days in Jerusalem (21:1-28:15) before His appearing back in Galilee as the risen Lord (28:16-20).

The lessons for this quarter include the close of Jesus's Galilean ministry, His fourth and fifth discourses, and His journey to Jerusalem. These chapters consider His activities during Holy Week—including His trials, crucifixion, and resurrection. Matthew also described His commission to make disciples of all nations after His resurrection.

JESUS'S TITLES:

Christ/Messiah: In his opening lines, Matthew identified Jesus as the "Christ" (the Greek form of the word "Messiah"). Matthew repeated this title at the end of Jesus's genealogy (1:16-18; 2:4). The Messiah was God's "Anointed One" (Dan. 9:25-26; Ps. 2:2), and Peter boldly identified Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), an identification Jesus confirmed in verse 20. During His trial, the high priest ordered Jesus under oath, "Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (26:63). In both of these passages, Matthew linked Jesus to the titles Messiah/Christ and Son of God.

Son of David: Matthew also used this royal and messianic title in the first verse of his Gospel. It connects Jesus to the covenant of 2 Samuel 7:16,25-26, where God promised that a descendant of David would rule over a kingdom that never ends. Those seeking healing often addressed Jesus by this title (Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31), along with those who praised His arrival in Jerusalem (21:9). In 22:41-45, Jesus tied together the titles "Messiah," "Son of David," and "Lord" in emphasizing that He was greater than David.

King: When the wise men sought Jesus, they asked for the "king of the Jews" (2:2). When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday it was in fulfillment of Isaiah 62:11—"Your King is coming to you" (Matt. 21:5).



Pilate asked Jesus about being the King of the Jews (27:11), and the soldiers and the religious leaders mockingly acknowledged such in 27:29,42. At the crucifixion, a placard for all to see proclaimed Jesus was King (27:37).

Son of God: Matthew used this title eight times. At Jesus's baptism (3:17) and transfiguration (17:5), the Father acknowledged Him as the Son. Satan challenged the title (4:3,6), but both demons (8:29) and His disciples (14:33) affirmed it. Peter (16:16) and Caiaphas (26:63) link the title to the Messiah. Matthew also noted a Roman centurion confessing Him as the Son of God (27:54).

Lord: Matthew repeatedly applied the divine title of *Yahweh* (LORD) to Jesus. He began his Gospel with John the Baptist preparing the Lord's way (3:3). In Matthew 7:21-22, entrance into the kingdom is based on Jesus's judgment as Lord. He also declared Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (12:8) and to His future return as the coming of the Lord (24:42).

Son of Man: Jesus called Himself "Son of Man" thirty times in Matthew's Gospel. Initially associated with the prophecies of Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14), He used it to claim the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6) and to explain how He would sacrifice His life as a ransom (20:28). He is "seated at the right hand of Power" (26:64) and will return as Judge of all people (13:41; 16:27-28; 24:27,30,37,39; 25:31; 26:64). The title stresses Jesus's humanity, deity, and authority all at the same time.

MAJOR THEMES:

Kingdom of Heaven: God's kingdom is a major theme in Matthew. The phrase occurs more than thirty times and emphasizes that Jesus was not establishing an earthly political entity, but a reign that was not of this world (see John 18:36). The kingdom was the heart of John the Baptist's call for repentance (Matt. 3:2), as well as Jesus's own message (4:17,23; 9:35) and the message of His apostles (10:7; 24:14).

The phrase "the kingdom of heaven" starts and ends the Beatitudes (5:3,10) and provides the foundation for Jesus's followers to live out the Christian ethic in practical terms. The growth of the kingdom is assured, despite opposition. But the kingdom also demands vigilance (25:1-13). Matthew 13 records eight parables that help Jesus's followers understand the kingdom better. He added another kingdom parable in 18:21-35 and seven more in chapters 20-25.

Fulfillment of Scripture: Matthew recorded about fifty direct quotations from the Old Testament, plus numerous other allusions to it. Many of these are observed in the ten different formulas Matthew used to introduce Old Testament quotations, all of which contain the Greek verb for "fulfill" (*pleroo*). In other cases, Jesus referred to the fulfillment of Scripture Himself (13:14; 26:54,56).

Every Scripture was fulfilled because the prophecies were of divine origin. They either came "by" (*hupo*) the Lord or "through" (*dia*) a prophet speaking for God. All of this emphasized that what happened to Jesus was not the result of circumstances or unforeseen events. God was in control of the human events regardless of the choices and schemes of humans.

Summary: Matthew began his Gospel with an emphasis on the worship of Jesus—by the wise men in Matthew 2:2,11—and closed it with worship of the risen Jesus by the women at the tomb (28:9) and by the eleven disciples in Galilee (28:17). This is the response every reader of Matthew's Gospel should have after encountering Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God, and Lord.

1. Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325. Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973 [1867/1885]; McGiffert, Arthur Cushman, translator. *The Church History of Eusebius, in vol. 1: A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series.* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976 [1890].



MATTHEW

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



Courage

JESUS IS GREATER THAN ANYTHING WE FEAR.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 14:22-33 Memory Verse: Matthew 14:27

This lesson emphasizes several facts about Jesus that leaders should take to heart. First, Jesus sent His disciples out onto the lake—and into a storm. This means that following Jesus doesn't guarantee difficult circumstances won't arise. But it's also important to remember that Jesus is aware of where His people are and what they are facing, including their need for Him to come to them.

Also, Peter's attempt to walk on the water reveals the importance of keeping our focus on Jesus instead of the surrounding circumstances. As the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers, we too need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2). We also learn from Peter's experience that while faith may motivate us, "little faith" will never sustain us in the overwhelming tides that hit us in life.

Matthew left his readers focused on Jesus as the "I am," the Savior, and "the Son of God." As you prepare to lead this session, reflect on the storms of your life and what Jesus has taught you through them. Ask God for wisdom as you seek to help the adults in your Bible study learn to focus on Jesus in the face of every fear.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Fear is a powerful foe that hinders us from progressing in life. Listen to people around you and you will hear any number of fears mentioned. Many people are terrified at the idea of public speaking. Others have fears of heights, failure, the dark, crowds, spiders, and snakes. Personal fears include injury and illness. Our fears impact our thinking, relating, and acting. Fear influences all aspects of life. Dealing with fear correctly is essential for a well-balanced life. (PSG, p. 9)

What do you consider to be your biggest fears?



Understand the Context (Matthew 14:1-36)

In Matthew 3, John the Baptist heralded the start of Jesus’s ministry; and after His baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1-11). By 4:12, Jesus had heard that John had been arrested, and He began ministering in Galilee, specifically the city of Capernaum (4:13). From that point until 18:35, Jesus’s ministry was focused in Galilee.

Thus from Matthew 4–18, the Gospel highlights Jesus’s “Great Galilean Ministry.” In these chapters Matthew did not seek to offer a chronological, step-by-step account of Jesus’s movements. Instead, he grouped his narrative generally around Jesus’s teachings (chaps. 5–7), Jesus’s miracles (chaps. 8–10), and various reactions to Him (chaps. 11–18).

Toward the end of His Galilean ministry, Jesus began a series of withdrawals into the districts around Galilee. Some of this time was spent in special training of the Twelve. Matthew 14:13 records the start of the first withdrawal into Bethsaida. During this time, the events of this session occurred. The second withdrawal saw Jesus take His disciples into the Syrophenician area around Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:1-28). Jesus’s third withdrawal took them from Syrophenicia to a Gentile area known as the Decapolis on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 15:29; Mark 7:31).

The fourth and final withdrawal took Jesus and the apostles into the sparsely populated

and cool northern hill country around Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13–18:35). Combined, the four times of withdrawals totaled about six months, from the Passover in the spring to the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall.

Jesus’s first withdrawal, covered in this session, was sparked by two significant rejections. The first came in the response to Him and His message in His hometown of Nazareth (13:53-58). The second occurred when Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded (14:1-12). Jesus’s withdrawal took Him outside the Galilean territory controlled by Antipas and put Him into the tetrarchy of Philip, who had shown little interest in opposing Jesus. This is also where Jesus multiplied the fish and loaves to feed a multitude (14:13-21).

After feeding the crowd, Jesus sent His disciples back across the water while He dismissed the people. He also wanted to spend some time alone in prayer. Meanwhile, the disciples had difficulty crossing the sea because of a storm. Jesus then walked across the water and approached their boat. At Jesus’s urging, Peter got out of the boat and also walked on the water briefly. However, when Peter’s distractions and fears kicked in, Jesus rescued him from sinking and brought the boat safely to the other side.

Read Matthew 14:22-33 in your Bible. Identify the variety of fears experienced by the disciples in this passage. (PSG, p. 10)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus’s Ministry Beyond Galilee*) and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Peter in Matthew’s Gospel*). Print one copy of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) for each adult in your group.

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 9 of the PSG.

ASK: **What do you consider to be your biggest fears?** (PSG, p. 9) Allow adults to share their responses. Discuss how fears change over time, highlighting the difference between things we fear as children and things we fear as adults.

SAY: *Regardless of what forms the fears take, they are still very real. And they have the potential to throw our lives into chaos.*

CONTEXT: Point out that today’s session focuses on how Jesus helps His people face their fears and respond in faith. Highlight this information from Understand the Context to share background for this session.

Following John’s death, Jesus withdrew to be alone with the disciples to sort through His response to such tragedy. This desire to be alone was interrupted by the crowds that followed. Jesus showed compassion by healing the sick late into the afternoon. The result was a hungry crowd of five thousand men, not including the women and children. Jesus miraculously fed all of them. (PSG, p. 10)

TRANSITION: *As you reflect on today’s verses, let your fears come to the forefront of your heart and mind. Intentionally face those fears as you study what Jesus did in this passage.*



Peter in Matthew's Gospel

Throughout Matthew 16:28, Peter appears in a variety of key moments. These encounters reveal the ongoing growth of Peter as a disciple and also the context for his responses in the next chapter after Jesus says that the Son of Man will be resurrected in the future.

LOCATION	REFERENCE	EXPERIENCE
Sea of Galilee	Matthew 16:1-13	Peter accepted Jesus's invitation to leave the boat and walk on water.
Caesarea Philippi	Matthew 16:13-20	Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah and built upon that faith.
Caesarea Philippi	Matthew 16:21-23	In the heat of his controversy, Peter refused to renounce his confession of faith.
Mount of Transfiguration	Matthew 17:1-9	Peter, James, and John witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus along with appearances by Moses and Elijah.
Caesarea Philippi	Matthew 17:24-27	Peter paid the temple tax for Jesus and himself and is later found in the crowd at the trial.
Caesarea Philippi	Matthew 18:1-11	Jesus asked Peter to follow him and to deny him three times.
the temple of Jerusalem	Matthew 21:12-13	After a question from Peter about ceremonial washings, Jesus stated that the temple and its worship will be destroyed.
Jerusalem	Matthew 26:69-75	Despite the absence of a crowd, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times.
Jerusalem	Matthew 26:76-78	When the absence of a crowd in the garden, Jesus asked Peter specifically why he wouldn't deny Jesus to save his life.
Jerusalem	Matthew 26:75	As predicted, Peter denied Jesus three times and responded with bitter weeping.

PRAYING SCRIPTURE IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

1. Read the opening paragraph on page 9 of the PSG and reflect on the context of the passage. Write down the key verses that you will be praying in the PSG. Write down the key verses that you will be praying in the PSG. Write down the key verses that you will be praying in the PSG.

VERSE	VERSE	VERSE	VERSE
Matthew 16:1-13	Matthew 16:13-20	Matthew 16:21-23	Matthew 17:1-9
Matthew 17:24-27	Matthew 18:1-11	Matthew 21:12-13	Matthew 26:69-75
Matthew 26:76-78	Matthew 26:75		

Group Activity Option

Music

Show a video of Zach Williams’s song “Fear Is a Liar.” (If you don’t have access to a video, simply play a recording.) Comment on how fear looks different based on the seasons of life, but it remains an ongoing part of our broken world. Ask: **What fears have you faced recently? What made them so difficult?** Share that this session examines how Jesus helps us walk through fearful times.

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

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Well into the night, he was there alone. **24** Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them. **25** Jesus came toward them walking on the sea very early in the morning. **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. **27** Immediately Jesus spoke to them. “Have courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

(v. 22) *Immediately* is one of Matthew’s characteristic words. In this story, he used it three times (vv. 22,27,31). His first use ties this section to the feeding of the five thousand. In Greek, *made* often indicates compulsion. Matthew did not state why Jesus sent His disciples away or why He did so before *he dismissed the crowds*. However, John noted that the crowds wanted to make Him a king (John 6:15). Jesus likely did not want His disciples caught up in that frenzy, so He compelled them to *go ahead of him*. The phrase *other side* refers to the western side of the Sea of Galilee.

(v. 23) Matthew never named the *mountain* where Jesus retreated. Rather, the expression refers to the steeply rising hills near the lake where Jesus went *to pray*. Matthew also did not indicate the content of Jesus’s prayer, but emphasized that He wanted solitude, stressing it twice with the words *by himself* and *alone*.

(vv. 24-25) *Meanwhile* turns the focus back to the disciples in the boat. *Early in the morning* (v. 25) provides a timeframe, while *some distance from the land* provides a location. According to John’s account, they were “three or four miles” out into the lake (John 6:19).

Nothing indicates that these experienced fishermen feared for their lives, but they were dealing with difficult conditions. Matthew noted their boat was *battered by the waves* and that *the wind was against them*. The word *battered* sometimes referred to torture or great distress. The disciples were struggling against the natural elements. By this point they probably were wet, cold, and exhausted.

They also had been rowing for several hours! Jesus had dismissed them around sundown and now it was nearing sunrise. The wording suggests

between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. And that’s when *Jesus came toward them walking on the sea*.

The simple sentence carries a much deeper meaning. The words are a Christological statement identifying Jesus as God. Job testified that God walks on “the waves of the sea” (Job 9:8). In Psalm 77:19, Asaph proclaimed that God makes His way “through the sea and . . . through the vast water.” (See also Isa. 43:16.) In other words, Jesus was doing what only God can do!

(v. 26) Seeing this, the disciples had three reactions: *they were terrified*, thought they saw *a ghost*, and *cried out in fear*. *Terrified* is used of both physical and mental anguish, and their cry of fear was a shriek. Meanwhile, superstition held that disembodied spirits haunted the lake and wandered upon it at night.

(v. 27) To calm the disciples’ fear, *Jesus spoke to them*. This is the second use of *immediately* in the passage (vv. 22,27).

He told them three things. *Have courage* is an expression usually spoken by Jesus (except in Mark 10:49). *It is I* is more than just a self-identification; it relates to the divine name (“I Am”) in Exodus 3:14. Thus, along with walking on the sea (Matt. 14:25), Jesus also claimed equality with God by using the divine name for Himself. Jesus’s words, *Don’t be afraid*, were the standard greeting in a theophany or epiphany (Matt. 1:20 17:7; 28:5,10; Luke 1:13,30; 2:10; Rev. 1:17). The present imperative could be translated, “Stop being afraid,” thus forbidding an action already begun.

Key Doctrine

God the Son

Christ is the eternal Son of God. (See John 1:1; Philippians 2:5-8.)



APPLICATION POINT: We can trust Jesus to walk with us in the storms of life.

OVERVIEW:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) to set the geographic focus for the upcoming sessions.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 14:22-27 aloud as the group notes words that stick out to them from the verses. Encourage adults to talk about how the crowd might have felt at being sent home and how the disciples felt being sent out on the lake by Jesus.

EXAMINE:

Enlist a volunteer to read "Did You Know?" on page 11 of the PSG. Remind adults that many of Jesus's disciples were experienced fishermen who probably had dealt with storms on the Sea of Galilee before. Use information from verses 24-25 of the Leader Guide (p. 18) to describe the meaning of "battered" and the wind being against them. Share:

Jesus came to the disciples for two reasons: to join them and to help them. . . . When His disciples cried out in terror and fear, Jesus immediately called out to them. His words were intended to encourage them and allay their fears. Have courage, He said, it is I. Literally, Jesus declared, "I am." . . . With this short exclamation, Jesus was hinting at the presence of the great "I Am," the Lord God Almighty. This was God Himself who was with them during the wind and waves. There was no need to be afraid. (PSG, pp. 12-13)

ASK:

When has Jesus's presence been especially meaningful to you? (PSG, p. 13)



Group Activity Option

Storm Sketch

Give each adult a sheet of paper and a pencil. Ask them to sketch the boat, storm, disciples, and Jesus from Matthew 14:22-27. Ask: ***What might the storm and boat represent in your life? How are you watching Jesus reveal Himself in the storm?*** Instruct adults to consider this sketch through the week, labeling the elements of the storm and security of the boat in terms of their own fears.

Jesus's Invitation (Matt. 14:28-30)

28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter answered him, “command me to come to you on the water.” **29** He said, “Come.” And climbing out of the boat, Peter started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. **30** But when he saw the strength of the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

(v. 28) Verses 28-31 contain “the story-within-a-story” that is not found in other Gospels. Bible students debate what Peter implied by **Lord**. In its common use, the term can mean “Sir,” as in Matthew 8:21. In its strongest sense, it is an address to the divine. Based on the audacity of Peter’s request, he likely meant it in this strongest sense.

The conditional statement **if it’s you** could be read as a statement of uncertainty, perhaps even doubt. But Matthew used the Greek conditional form that assumes the truth of the statement. Thus Peter’s words could be rendered, “Lord, since it’s you.”

Peter requested Jesus to **command** him to **come to you on the water**. *Command* is the same word Jesus used when He ordered the crowds to sit down in verse 19. Whatever his reasoning, Peter’s request demonstrated courage. In verses 28-29, Matthew switched the term he had used to describe Jesus’s walking on the “sea” in verses 25-26 to “water” for Peter’s experience. Matthew probably did so to indicate that Jesus had walked some distance, whereas Peter took only a few steps on the water.

(v. 29) Jesus responded favorably to Peter and instructed him to **come**. The word is, as Peter requested, a command. In answering Peter in this way, Jesus was indicating that He not only had the power to walk on the water Himself, but He also was able to share that power with others. This provided more evidence that Jesus is God and that He is the Messiah.

Of course, Peter had to get **out of the boat**. From there, he **started walking on the water**. However, the phrase **came toward Jesus** (as well as v. 30) indicates that Peter’s miraculous achievement was short-lived. Regardless, Peter did walk on the water, and he must have gotten close enough for Jesus to reach out and take hold of him (v. 31).

(v. 30) **But** indicates a major change in the narrative. Peter became rattled when he **saw the**

strength of the wind. Since one cannot see wind literally, the text suggests that what Peter started to focus on was the *effect* of the wind. This could include the white caps, the sea surges, the sea spray, and so forth.

Shifting his focus from Jesus to his dire circumstance caused Peter to be **afraid**. Once his fears overcame his faith, the disciple began to **sink**. In verse 27, Jesus had told the disciples not to fear, but now Peter panicked because he focused on his circumstances. Once he began to sink, he was living up to his name—“the stone” or “the rock.” He was sinking like one!

To his credit, Peter sought help from the proper Source. Even though he realized he was going down, Peter still believed his Lord could save him. Peter cried to the same **Lord** who had commanded him to come out of the boat in verse 29. And his cry was simple: **save me!**

Save means “to rescue” or “to deliver from danger,” whether physical or otherwise. And that is its primary meaning here. Peter was asking to be saved from drowning in the depths of the lake. But “save” also has a salvific meaning, and Matthew clearly used this episode to recall David’s words in Psalm 69:1-2: “Save me, God, for the water has risen to my neck . . . I have come into deep water, and a flood sweeps over me.”

Bible Skill

Examine and reflect on similarities between two passages.

Look for similarities between the event in Matthew 14:22-33 and Matthew 8:23-27. Then look for differences between the two events. Explain why you can be certain these were two different events.

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

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” **32** When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. **33** Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

(v. 31) For the third time in this episode, Matthew used the word *immediately* (vv. 22,27,31). Peter's cry for rescue in verse 30 needed an immediate response from Jesus. In response, the Lord took two actions represented by two verbs: He *reached out his hand* and He *caught hold of* Peter. In Psalm 144:7, David also prayed for God to “Reach down from on high; rescue me from deep water.”

Only after Jesus rescued Peter did He correct him. A present tense verb highlights how Jesus responded to His disciple. Jesus called out Peter's *little faith*. This is not the first or last time that Jesus rebuked His disciples for their lack of faith in Matthew's Gospel (see 6:30; 8:26; 16:8; 17:20). Yet, in spite of Peter's inadequate and insufficient faith, the Lord still saved him. Peter and the disciples' faith was weak, but it was much different from the total unbelief of others (see Matt. 13:58).

Jesus then asked Peter, *Why did you doubt?* The word *doubt* refers to having a divided mind, wavering, or hesitating between belief and unbelief. Matthew used the word again in 28:17 to describe responses to a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus in Galilee. Thus this unique experience ends with the focus more on Peter's failure than on his singular accomplishment.

(vv. 32-33) After Peter and Jesus entered the boat, *the wind ceased*. The term *ceased* literally means “to grow weary.” In other words, the wind tired out! It was the wind that had so frightened Peter (v. 30). Now, even that had died out.

The disciples in the boat responded in a way not recorded in the other Gospels: They *worshiped him* and confessed Him as the *Son of God*. *Worshiped* literally refers to prostrating oneself. Possibly the disciples did that, but based on the conditions in the boat the term may simply mean they gave Jesus honor, praise, and glory.

As good Jews, they knew to worship God alone (Ex. 34:14); thus, this was a clear affirmation of Jesus's deity. *Truly* is a strong affirmation of certainty. So, at this point, there was no doubt in the disciples' minds as to Jesus's identity.

In their confession, the emphasis is on *God* since it comes first in the original text. This is the first full confession of Jesus's identity in the Gospel, and it anticipates Peter's words in 16:16. However, Matthew had presented Jesus as the Son of God previously (2:15; 3:17; 4:3,6; 8:29) and would later (16:16; 17:5; 27:54). The narrative ends with the focus totally on Jesus and who He is.

With everyone back in the boat and the storm calmed, the disciples arrived safely at their harbor (v. 34). No matter what circumstances they may encounter, Jesus ultimately brings His followers to a safe harbor.

Praying Scripture

Matthew 14:31

Spend time praying Scripture using Matthew 14:31. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in this verse?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Ask God to reveal areas where your faith might be weak. Confess your doubts and commit to keeping your focus on Christ alone.

During the session, invite adults to pray this Scripture as well. You and the adults in your group can also take advantage of the Explore the Bible Prayer Guide. This QR code also appears on page 17 of the *Personal Study Guide*.



Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter's Bible passages.



APPLICATION POINT: Jesus's power should lead us to worship Him.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 14:31-33 aloud as the group carefully listens for what caused the storm to calm. Point out that the storm was not rebuked by Jesus in this instance; rather, it simply stopped when Jesus and Peter got into the boat.

RECAP:

Summarize the following from page 15 of the PSG and engage adults in responding with their own insight:

“Unlike the calming of the storm in Matthew 8, Jesus said nothing to the elements of nature. The storm apparently stopped without a word from Jesus. Calm occurred the moment Peter and Jesus got into the boat. The presence of Jesus in the boat most likely calmed the storm in the hearts of the disciples as well. Not only did the wind stop, but suddenly the boat was at the shore, a goal the disciples had labored for most of the night to accomplish. . . . These nature miracles of Jesus were not for show, but always to meet the need of the moment. In this case, it was the rescue of the disciples. This was a tangible response to a desperate situation.”

ASK:

How do you tend to respond to Jesus's power when you experience it? (PSG, p. 16)

PRAY:

Highlight Jesus's words to Peter in verse 31. Challenge adults to consider the measure of their own faith and the strengths of their doubts. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) to each adult and invite them to pray Matthew 14:31 back to God as noted on page 22 of the Leader Guide.

DISCUSS:

Direct attention to the Summary Statement for this session: *Jesus is greater than anything we fear*. Allow adults to share how they see that truth revealed in today's passage. Emphasize that Jesus has a way of transforming our doubts and fears into faith and worship. Point out that no matter what we are experiencing in life, we can be sure that He is in control and that He can calm any storm we face. Challenge adults to demonstrate Peter's courage by stepping out of their "boat" and to refuse to let the "winds" distract them from what Jesus is doing in their lives.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 17 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can trust Jesus to walk with us in the storms of life.*
- *When Jesus issues an invitation, we can step out with confidence knowing that He is with us.*
- *Jesus's power should lead us to worship Him.*

HIGHLIGHT:

Allow adults to share which of these statements provide the greatest encouragement for them today.

DISCUSS:

Direct half the group to read and reflect on the first set of questions on page 17 of the PSG. Instruct the other half to do the same with the second set of questions. After a few minutes, review responses from each group. Talk about how the responses to each question should shape their prayers and their daily walk with Jesus.

REFLECT:

Help adults remember that Jesus is Lord of every storm and that no struggle is outside of His power and authority. Say: *As we walk toward Jesus in our storms, we can believe He has the power to get us where we need to be.* Challenge the group to reflect on God's faithfulness each day as a way to gain courage and to establish hope for the future.

PRAY:

Remind adults to use **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) as a way to pray the truths of today's session back to God. Invite adults to pray silently for the people beside them, specifically that they would know Jesus is with them in their storms.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send a text or email to the group reminding them of the truths of this session. Note that there are hundreds of verses that urge us to reject fear. Suggest they choose one verse to reflect on this week and to share that with the group. You may also want to share the video to "Fear is a Liar" by Zach Williams from the Engage activity. Challenge adults to trust Jesus and His promises, not the lies of fear.

LEADER EXTRAS



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Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 15:1-11,16-20 **Memory Verse: Matthew 15:8-9**

Several implications arise out of this lesson about which leaders can challenge the adults in their groups. One implication for believers is to examine where we have allowed our traditions to go beyond the limits of the Word of God. Many Christ followers accept extra rules that leave us carrying a heavier burden than God Himself ever intended. Even more important, believers need to examine whether any of our traditions work against God's Word. Often, man-made regulations actually diminish the power of God's Word in our lives. We never want to be guilty of ignoring or circumventing what God has said in order to follow our own agenda.

Finally, this lesson challenges us to examine our spirituality. We need to steer clear of superficial, outward conformity to rules and expectations that are designed to meet the approval of others. Instead, we are called to pursue what arises from God's Word and moves us to be transformed by His Spirit. As you dig into today's passages, take time to examine these points in your own life. Then ask God to help you know the best way to share them with the adults in your Bible study.



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We tend to like things that are genuine. We generally say no to knockoffs, artificial, or substitute anything. Don't give us blended vegetables and call them hamburgers. We've developed an eye for spotting imitation leather and knockoff purses. Our taste buds can discern the real thing compared to artificial sweeteners. We like the genuine. The same is true in relationships. We want friends who are genuine, not superficial. Likewise, God desires our relationship with Him and the practice of our faith to be genuine. (PSG, p. 18)

What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life?



Understand the Context (Matthew 15:1-39)

The opening word of chapter 15 (“then”) could indicate some aspect of sequence after the events of chapter 14. Primarily, though, it provides an introduction to the event examined in this session. The passage underscores the rising conflict that marked the attitude of the religious leaders in Jerusalem toward Jesus.

The concerns of the Pharisees seem to have begun with good intentions; but, over time, these leaders ended up taking people in the wrong direction. For example, the fourth commandment stated that the Jews must avoid working on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). But what constituted work? In Numbers 15:32-36 a man was executed for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. How would one know what was work and what wasn't, what was allowed and what was forbidden?

Likewise, according to the Mosaic law, priests were required to wash their hands (and feet) before performing their duties in the tent of meeting (Ex. 30:18-21; 40:30-32) or eating the sacrificial meal (Lev. 22:4-7). However, Moses also taught that the Lord considered the whole nation to be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). Thus, the Pharisees reasoned that the requirements of the priests should apply to everyone in the covenant community.

In order to help pious Israelites define these matters, an abundance of regulations and traditions grew up and were passed down from generation to generation. With the best of intentions,

rabbis tried to build a “fence” for the law, much like we put up guardrails to keep people from getting too close to danger or too close to the edge. Soon, however, the cautions took on a life of their own and multiplied exponentially. The rules were codified first in the Mishnah and later in the Talmud. Eventually, whole commentaries were devoted to various topics of the law.

The episode on which this lesson is based divides into three natural sections. In the first scene, the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus over the actions of His disciples related to ceremonial washings before a meal (vv. 1-9). In verses 10-11 Jesus instructed the crowds based on the challenge from the religious leaders. Then in verses 12-20 Jesus elaborated further on the matter to His disciples.

The whole episode ends where it began, returning in verse 20 to the conclusion of the challenge raised in verse 2. This episode includes an abundance of direct speech—from the Pharisees and scribes, from Jesus, from the disciples, and from Peter.

Read Matthew 15:1-11, 16-20 in your Bible. Identify what was superficial about the religion of the Pharisees. (PSG, p. 19)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Traditions of the Elders*).

ASK:

What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life? (PSG, p. 18)

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 18 of the PSG. Highlight the importance of genuine relationships, especially when it comes to one's relationship with God.

ASK:

What are some things that can make our relationship with God superficial?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that, in Jesus's day, religious leaders had added so much to God's laws that it was hard to know what was true and what was legalism. Summarize this content from *Understand the Context* (PSG, p. 19) to provide additional context:

“In Matthew 12, the Pharisees had challenged the disciples and Jesus over failure to keep their traditions regarding the Sabbath. In chapter 15, these religious leaders challenged the disciples and Jesus concerning their failure to keep dietary laws regarding the ceremonial cleansing of the hands. Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for their unbelief and their adherence to man-made tradition. . . . [Jesus] pointed out that what a person eats doesn't make a person unclean. Rather, uncleanness comes from within a person's heart.”

TRANSITION:

Over time, the Jewish religious leaders began focusing on their own man-made rendition of God's genuine law. Today, we'll consider Jesus's definition of true religion.



Group Activity Option

Music

Select a traditional or contemporary version of “Be Thou My Vision” for your group. Play the song and challenge adults to listen to the words carefully. Ask: ***What phrases in the song point toward a genuine bond between a worshiper and God?***

Broken Rules (Matt. 15:1-6)

1 Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, **2** “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat.” **3** He answered them, “Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition? **4** For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. **5** But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,” **6** he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.”

(v. 1) Matthew named the ●**Pharisees** more than any other Gospel writer (29 times). According to Josephus, at the time of Jesus there were more than six thousand Pharisees, making them the largest sect of Judaism. For the most part, they were centered in Jerusalem.

Pharisee means “separatist.” They were proud of their rigorous keeping of both the written law of Moses and an oral law passed down over time. The primary stress of the Pharisees was on ritual purity, Sabbath observance, and tithing.

●**Scribes** were “experts in the law” (Luke 11:45-46,52; 14:3) and “teachers of the law” (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34). They not only copied the law, but they also taught their interpretation of God’s Word. Some *scribes* were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were scribes. Some also were members of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews (Matt. 26:57-59). The Pharisees and scribes came all the way from **Jerusalem** to Galilee, suggesting they were an official entourage.

(v. 2) With a judgmental spirit, the leaders asked why Jesus let His followers **break the tradition of the elders**. The fact that they applied their question to the disciples rather than directly to Jesus was a subtle way of attacking the teacher by attacking His students. *Break* is a present tense word that indicates a continuous practice.

The so-called *tradition* referred to all the rules and regulations passed down in an oral law through the rabbis. The Pharisees believed these traditions were as binding as the written law. Failure to **wash their hands** before eating was not just about hygiene, but about ritual purity.

(vv. 3-4) Rather than answering their question, Jesus posed one of His own, contrasting **God’s commandment** with **your tradition**. In this challenge, He used their own word: **break**. Jesus’s disciples broke tradition, but the Pharisees more

seriously broke God’s ordinance. In fact, Jesus said their **tradition** led them to violate God laws. The fence that was supposed to protect Israel became the cause of the people’s disobedience.

Jesus focused on the command to honor one’s parents. He quoted two Old Testament passages—Exodus 20:12 (Deut. 5:16) and Exodus 21:17 (Lev. 20:9)—and attributed both to **God**. The **honor** due parents is positive and required. Speaking **evil** of them is negative and forbidden. It was taken so seriously that it demanded violators be **put to death**.

Key Doctrine

Salvation

Regeneration is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Luke 13:3; John 3:3.)

(vv. 5-6) **But you say** is emphatic and sets the Pharisees against what God says. The specific example Jesus mentioned concerned a person who would withhold benefits from his parents by committing them **to the temple**. By designating one’s estate as a gift to the temple, a person could claim that he could not use those resources to support his elderly parents, even though he still owned them and could use them for himself during his lifetime.

Applying the strongest double negative available in Greek, Jesus said that such people did not **honor** his parents, but they actually **nullified** (or invalidated) **the word of God**. Indeed, it was human **tradition** that opened this loophole and led people to use this legal subterfuge.

EXPLORE Matthew 15:1-6



APPLICATION POINT: Honor God's laws above all other rules.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 15:1-6** aloud as the group listens for why Jesus was being reprimanded by the Jewish leaders.

CONTEXT:

Point out **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Note that this encounter took place in Galilee, though the leaders had come from Jerusalem. Share this to help identify Jesus's opponents:

The Pharisees were the leading religious party in Israel and were strict adherents to the law of Moses. Even more radical was their personal interpretation and application of the law. Their interpretation, or oral law as it was called, took precedent over the law given by God to Moses. Many of these Pharisees were also scribes who were learned scholars and copyists of the law. As such, they joined the Pharisees in a constant scrutiny of every word and move of Jesus. (PSG, p. 20)

DISCUSS:

Give each learner a copy of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Traditions of the Elders*). Allow adults a few minutes to scan the article. Facilitate a brief discussion on the difference between man-made traditions and God's Word.

SHARE:

Emphasize that Jesus had little use for man-made rules, so He pointed out the hypocrisy of His accusers. Use information from page 28 of the Leader Guide to explain how the leaders were encouraging people to break God's laws.

ASK:

Why is it easy to confuse human rules with God's commands? (PSG, p. 22)



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Direct the group to list some of the traditions of their church or denomination on a whiteboard. Lead a brief discussion on why those particular traditions are considered to be so important and whether people see them as ways to measure the spirituality of others. Read Matthew 15:1-6 and encourage the group to consider if these are based on Scripture or simply “human commands.” Conclude by challenging adults to consider how they can avoid the trap of substituting such human expectations for true spirituality and purity of heart.

Lip Service (Matt. 15:7-11)

7 “Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: 8 This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 9 They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.” 10 Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: 11 It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person.”

(v. 7) The term *hypocrites* arose out of the Greek theater and referred to one who acted a part on stage behind a mask. In fact, in Jesus’s day there was a large Greek theater in Sepphoris, near Nazareth. Over time, *hypocrite* came to be applied to people who pretended to be something they were not. Spiritually speaking, this would include those who were not on the inside what they appeared to be on the outside.

After responding to the Pharisees and scribes from the Law (v. 4), Jesus now spoke to them from the Prophets. Specifically, He cited Isaiah 29:13. While *Isaiah* prophesied against the people of his own time in the eighth century BC, Jesus said he also *prophesied correctly about you*—Jesus’s contemporary hearers. This does not mean Isaiah’s words did not apply to his original context, only that what Isaiah said also pertained to this people living in the first century AD.

In saying this, Jesus demonstrated that the Word of God that came in one particular historical setting applies to any similar situation. Put another way, God has the power and authority to apply His prophetic words to any people from any time who demonstrate similar characteristics. His Word is eternal, so it is not limited to a specific people living at one time.

(vv. 8-9) The quotation from Isaiah is appropriate as it expands on Jesus’s previous theme of honor (vv. 4,6): ***This people honors me with their lips.*** *Honors* is present tense, indicating an ongoing superficial action. *Lips* refers to what people say. This stands in contrast with the word ***heart***, which refers to the center or core of one’s being—one’s true self.

Through Isaiah, Jesus emphasized a people who spoke well of God, even though their hearts were ***far from*** Him. This dichotomy had major negative impacts on both ***worship*** and ***teaching***. Insincere worship means ***vain*** worship. Jesus likely listed this vain worship first in the sentence for emphasis. It refers to that which is

of no purpose. Ideally, worship brings honor and glory to God. But hypocritical worship is nothing more than outwardly going through the motions.

Second, the Jewish leaders’ doctrinal teaching consisted of repeating ***human commands***. The words *teaching* and *doctrines* are related and provide an alliteration in the Greek language—*didaskontes* and *didaskalias*. The Jewish teachers claimed to be sharing divine doctrines when, in reality, they were replacing God’s truth with ideas springing from human origin.

(v. 10) Having called out the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus turned His attention to ***the crowd***. He probably addressed them to explain His teaching since the Pharisees were very influential among the common people. Up to this point, these spectators had remained in the background. Now, the leaders would fade into the background as Jesus urged the people to ***listen and understand***. Jesus saw this as a teaching moment. Both words are present tense, indicating ongoing actions. The twin terms indicate receiving and thinking about what Jesus was about to say.

(v. 11) In verse 11 Jesus expanded His teaching from ritual hand washing to the broader topic of moral purity. Using two present tense participles He contrasted ***what goes into*** (*eis*) and ***what comes out of*** (*ek*). The word ***not*** comes first in the Greek sentence structure to provide emphasis. In direct opposition to what the Pharisees taught, what enters people is not what ***defiles*** them, but what comes out of them.

Defilement doesn’t come from simply touching something that easily can be washed off. Instead, it comes from what’s deep inside a person. As Jesus will clarify in verses 18-19, what’s in the heart comes out of the mouth. As a result, genuine purity before God isn’t about food going in. It’s defined by what we allow to rule our hearts each day.



APPLICATION POINT: Pray for your heart to remain close to God.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 15:7-11 aloud, instructing the group to listen for Jesus’s complaints against the Jewish religious authorities.

SHARE:

Explain that the Greek word for “hypocrites” relates to an actor who puts on a mask to play a role. As a group, consider why this term appropriately described the Pharisees and scribes. Briefly discuss how Isaiah’s prophecy supported Jesus’s criticism:

Isaiah denounced the people of his day for their inauthentic worship. They gave the appearance of a genuine relationship with God through their worship. In reality, they were simply going through the motions while ignoring God’s desires. Their relationship with God was shallow at best, and non-existent at worst. . . . Because following God’s law perfectly is unobtainable, it was easier to create man-made rules that could be followed successfully. Keeping these traditions would provide a sense of self-satisfaction and pride. But following man-made traditions actually moved them farther from God. (PSG, pp. 22-23)

GUIDE:

Note that Jesus turned His attention to the crowd and explained that moral purity begins with the heart. Highlight that what goes into a person’s mouth (like food) has no real impact on spiritual health. Instead, we have to be careful about what goes into our hearts because that is what reveals our spiritual condition, whether we are loyal to God’s Word or drifting farther from Him.

ASK:

What tempts our hearts to drift from God? (PSG, p. 23)

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: A Rulebook

Prior to the session, obtain a rulebook for a popular sport. During the session, show adults the rulebook. Point out that it provides the basics for competition in that sport. Note that rulebooks take other forms like employee handbooks at work or instructions for assembling a toy. Show adults a copy of the Bible. Affirm that God’s Word is the ultimate rulebook for our lives—and no man-made list of rules can compare.

Real Problem (Matt. 15:16-20)

16 “Do you still lack understanding?” he asked. **17** “Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated? **18** But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person. **19** For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander. **20** These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

(v. 16) After Jesus had finished with the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-9) and admonished the crowds (vv. 10-11), His disciples gathered around Him. As usual, Peter served as the spokesman, asking Jesus to explain His teaching (vv. 12-15). When Jesus asked, **Do you still lack understanding?**, He was referring to what He had said in verse 10. The *you* is plural as Jesus was speaking to all of His disciples (v. 12). The rhetorical question is a rebuke for their lack of discernment.

(vv. 17-18) The construction of Jesus’s second question (**Don’t you realize?**) expected a “yes” answer. They should have perceived the meaning of Jesus’s teaching.

Where Jesus said, **Whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated**, we might say, “What goes in one end, comes out the other.” Jesus said the waste is eliminated from the stomach through excretion. But Jesus was not merely describing the process of digestion. His point was that this natural, physiological process has no impact on a person’s relationship with God.

Verse 17 explains the first part of Jesus’s statement in verse 11, while verse 18 explains the second part of verse 11. As earlier, **heart** refers to the core of one’s being, and that is what defines what **defiles** a person before God.

(v. 19) Jesus then gave a sampling of seven sins that arise **from the heart** and represent real defilement. The list is not comprehensive by any means, but Jesus emphasized that these sins are rooted in the heart by placing it first in the sentence. In addition, *from* further emphasizes their origin.

First, and underlying all the others, Jesus named **evil thoughts**. All actions and deeds begin in one’s thinking (see 9:4), so this item serves as an umbrella for the rest. The other sins Jesus named follow the order of the second table of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13-17; Deut. 5:17-21).

Interestingly, these commands follow the fifth commandment about honoring parents, which Jesus had noted in verse 4.

These sins are plural in Greek to emphasize that they are not merely abstract categories but specific acts committed many times. **Murders** violate the sixth commandment. It refers to taking a person’s life with premeditation, which begins in one’s thinking and takes planning (see Matt. 5:21-26). **Adulteries** and **sexual immoralities** violate the seventh commandment (see 5:27-32; 14:3-4; 19:9). This too begins in one’s thinking (5:27-28), whether one violates their marriage vows or commits other sexual sins.

Thefts are a violation of the eighth commandment. This also begins in the realm of thoughts and violates the tenth commandment related to coveting. The word refers to taking what belongs to someone else for one’s own. **False testimonies** refer to lying or committing perjury, violating the ninth commandment (see 26:59-61). **Slander** is related to blasphemy. The Greek wording can refer to attacks against another person (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Tim. 6:4; Jude 9) or against God (Matt. 12:31-32). Jesus’s plural use of the word covers both.

(v. 20) Again, **these are the things** is not meant to indicate a comprehensive list, but Jesus’s use of seven items offers a complete sample. His final pronouncement, **eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person**, provides a “bookend,” or *inclusio*, to the opening question of the Pharisees in verse 2. Such a simple external act does not have anything to do with true moral defilement before God.

By associating defilement with an internal source rather than merely as contact with external objects, Jesus undermined the whole of the Pharisees’ system of rules and regulations in one stroke!



APPLICATION POINT: Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 15:16-20 silently, imagining Jesus's voice as He spoke these words.

ASK:

How do you imagine Jesus's tone? Angry? Frustrated? Compassionate? Why?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that Jesus's disciples approached Him in verses 12-15, concerned that He had offended the Pharisees. Share that Jesus pointed out that they were "blind guides" (v. 14) who led people astray. Note that when Peter asked Jesus to explain His teaching, he revealed that he'd missed the point.

CONTRAST:

Read the following content to reveal how Jesus contrasted the physical body with the spiritual one:

It was not so much that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had said. More likely, they found such a hard teaching difficult to accept. . . . Jesus began His reply by setting up a contrast between the physical and the spiritual. He told the disciples that food is only physical and does not impact the spiritual. Instead, what is eaten goes through the digestive system and is eliminated. No matter how "clean" or "unclean" food might be, eating it does not impact a person spiritually. (PSG, p. 24)

HIGHLIGHT:

Write the word *heart* on the board. Encourage adults to share different ways we use the word "heart" in our culture. Direct them to read Matthew 15:18-20 again silently. Lead a brief discussion on how Jesus was using "heart" as He spoke to His followers. Affirm that the heart is the core of our spiritual lives, so we need to take seriously what we allow to take root in our hearts as believers.

ASK:

How can we evaluate our hearts to prevent sinful attitudes from taking root? Why is it important to examine our hearts for sinful attitudes? (PSG, p. 25)

SAY:

Jesus was pointing His disciples to the most important element: a heart turned to God. No amount of outward obedience or acts of piety can replace a genuine heart of worship and love. If we want to follow Jesus in a genuine way, we have to reject superficial religion the way He did.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 26 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- Honor God's laws above all other rules.
- Pray for your heart to remain close to God.
- Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

REVIEW:

Invite adults to share which is the most difficult for them to obey in genuine faith. Challenge them to spend time in prayer this week reviewing the list and asking God to fill in the gaps they experience in their lives.

DISCUSS:

Direct the group to the second set of questions on page 26 of the PSG. Read the content aloud and instruct adults to silently ponder what they might be substituting for a genuine relationship with God. Remind them that Jesus's questions were given to us to consider today, and we can go to Him with our responses. Share how God has spoken to you personally as you studied this week.

PRAY:

Close the session in prayer, inviting God to help adults honor Him above every other standard. Urge the group to identify ways they can reject superficial religion so God can give them pure hearts as they draw close to Him.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or email. Suggest that they review the first set of questions on page 26 of the PSG. Encourage them to share ways they will commit to helping other believers toward a deeper relationship with God. Remind adults that the words of their mouths reflect what is in their hearts.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
Explore the Bible Adult Commentary offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.
(Available for purchase at [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).)

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.

Following Jesus

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 16:13-26 Memory Verse: Matthew 16:24

Imagine taking a walk in a park and asking random people, “Who was Jesus?” You probably would get any number of interesting responses. Some folks might ignore you completely. Others might say Jesus was a prophet or a good teacher. A few might question if He ever really existed, while others might say He was a man who was greatly misunderstood.

The question of Jesus’s identity is an important one for each adult to answer for themselves. But the question that really needs answering is not “Who is Jesus to me?” but “Who is Jesus?” Individual takes on Jesus will vary from person to person. But who Jesus actually is, no matter what anyone thinks about Him, is crucial to understand. This lesson presents Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

As you prepare to lead this session from Matthew 16, examine your heart. Take time to reflect on what it means for Jesus to be who He said He is—and how that applies to your life. Seek God’s wisdom for ways to guide adults toward acknowledging and committing themselves to Jesus by denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Him.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week’s study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



The world is made up of leaders and followers. The majority of us are followers. As followers, it is critically important who we follow. History is replete with people who followed others to destruction and death. Leaders like Jim Jones of the Jonestown massacre, cult leader Charles Manson of the murderous Manson family, or David Koresh of the Branch Davidian tragedy, all led their followers to disaster. Each of us must choose leaders wisely. Follow those who lead to life and not to death. You'll be glad you did! (PSG, p. 27)

What are the traits of leaders you want to follow?



Understand the Context (Matthew 16:1-28)

Following His confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 15:1-20), Jesus and His disciples traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. (15:21). This move into modern-day Lebanon was Jesus's second withdrawal toward the end of His Galilean ministry.

Shortly after arriving in this Gentile area, a Canaanite woman, a descendant of the people Israel drove out of the land more than a millennium earlier, pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus clearly told her that His mission focused on “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). When she continued to beg for help, Jesus replied with a seemingly harsh rejection. In response, the woman humbly acknowledged her place in a way that reflected her faith. Based on that great faith, Jesus healed the woman's daughter (15:26-28).

Nothing else is recorded about this brief time in Syrophenicia, but we read that Jesus moved on from there, avoiding the territory of Herod Antipas coming to the region of the Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (15:29). This was the third of Jesus's withdrawals from Galilee.

The Decapolis, mentioned specifically in Mark's parallel account (Mark 7:31), originally was a federation of ten Gentile towns east of the Jordan River. Early in Jesus's ministry residents of the Decapolis were part of the crowds that followed Him (Matt. 4:25), but the people asked Him to leave the area after He drove a legion of

demons out of a local man (Mark 5:1-20). Now, large crowds again came, bringing all kinds of people in need. Jesus's healing ministry lasted for three days (Matt. 15:29-32), leading Him to feed more than four thousand people with seven small loaves and a few small fish (15:32-38).

From there, Jesus went to Magadan (or Magdala, 15:39) on the west side of the sea. This brought Jesus back into Jewish territory. As soon as He arrived, He was accosted by the Pharisees and their rival Jewish sect, the Sadducees. Jesus had just fed a multitude with only a small amount of bread and fish, but these religious leaders asked Jesus to “show them a sign from heaven” (16:1). Jesus used the occasion to rebuke them and to warn His disciples about their teaching (16:1-12).

Crossing the lake again (16:5), Jesus began His fourth withdrawal. The area around Caesarea Philippi (16:13) once again took Jesus out of the realm of Herod Antipas and deep into the Gentile region ruled by Herod Philip. Jesus had not gone into this sparsely populated area before, but He stayed there a few months. Whether Jesus actually went into Caesarea Philippi itself is not clear. Matthew refers to the “region of Caesarea Philippi” (16:13), while Mark wrote of the “villages of Caesarea Philippi” (Mark 8:27).

Read Matthew 16:13-26. Contrast the opinion of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the opinion of the disciples regarding Jesus. (PSG, p. 28)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) and **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Why Caesarea Philippi?*).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 27 of the PSG. Stress that we all must follow someone at certain points: our teachers, bosses, traffic enforcers, and others.

ASK:

What are the traits of leaders you want to follow?
(PSG, p. 27)

CONTEXT:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Explain that Matthew 16 continues to move toward the close of Jesus's ministry in Galilee. Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) and page 36 of the Leader Guide to explain Jesus's "withdrawals" in Matthew 15–16.

RECAP:

Summarize the following from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 28) to describe the setting for today's passage:

"Jesus withdrew with the disciples to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (v. 5). Their journey would take them north to the area of Caesarea Philippi, where the events in this week's study take place. Thus began a new phase in the ministry of Jesus. From Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would travel south directly to Jerusalem. This move signaled the end of the Galilean ministry and the beginning of the final weeks of Jesus's earthly life, culminating in His arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem."

TRANSITION:

In today's passage, Jesus focused on what His disciples believed about Him. The question of who Jesus is remains the key question for every person who claims to have faith in Jesus.



Group Activity Option

Music

Encourage adults to listen to a recording of "What a Beautiful Name" by Travis Cottrell. Ask: **What does this song tell us about the identity of Jesus?** Discuss responses. Challenge adults to consider their personal understanding of who Jesus is as they study today's session from Matthew 16. (Note: For groups who prefer hymns, consider "The Solid Rock," No. 511 in the *Baptist Hymnal 2008*.)

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

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** “But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” **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. **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. **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.” **20** Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

(vv. 13-14) • **Caesarea Philippi** was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee near the base of Mount Hermon. In the third century BC, it was called Paneas because a shrine there was dedicated to the worship of the half-man, half-goat Greek god Pan. Sometime around 20 BC Herod the Great built a white marble temple there and dedicated it to Caesar Augustus. After Herod’s death, the city came under the jurisdiction of his son Philip, who renamed it Caesarea Philippi, honoring both Augustus and himself.

Son of Man was Jesus’s favorite title for Himself. The **people** He was asking about refers to the general public, and they had several opinions related to Jesus’s identity. Although **John the Baptist** was dead, even Herod Antipas, the man who had ordered his execution, wondered if John had come back to life (14:1-2). Some thought Jesus was **Elijah** because Malachi had prophesied Elijah would return before the Messiah came (Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6). Only Matthew included the name of **Jeremiah**. Those who were not prepared to identify Jesus specifically still grouped Him positively as **one of the prophets**.

(vv. 15-17) **But** calls for a contrast and the **you** is plural and emphatic. **Peter** gave a double answer. **Messiah** referred to the “Anointed One” whom God had promised to send. **The Son of the living God** was an Old Testament designation that also distinguished Jesus from all the pagan idolatry in the area of Caesarea Philippi.

Blessed are you represents a divine blessing (see Matt. 5:3-10). Jesus also emphasized that Peter’s understanding did not come from **flesh and blood**, meaning from human insight. Rather, it was a revelation from **my Father in heaven**. In saying this, Jesus highlighted His

unique relationship with God. According to John’s Gospel, Jews once tried to kill Jesus for using this expression and “making himself equal to God” (John 5:17-18).

(vv. 18-19) Jesus’s pronouncement has been the source of controversy. Roman Catholics contend **this rock** means Peter himself, but most Protestants reject this understanding. Instead, they focus either on the confession Peter made in verse 16 or believe Jesus was pointing to Himself and His teachings as the rock of our faith.

What is clear is that Jesus promised to establish His **church**, pointing to Pentecost in Acts 2. And, while Satan might attack God’s people, **the gates of Hades** would never be strong enough to **overpower** His church.

Scholars also wonder about the **keys** Jesus offered Peter. Here the **keys** are said to **bind** and to **loose**. Jesus’s language indicates that He had Isaiah 22:20-22 in mind. The Greek wording suggests that whatever decisions Peter would make already had been made in heaven, thereby enabling Peter to carry out God’s purpose. We see Peter demonstrating this type of binding and loosing when he supported Gentiles at the church council in Acts 15:7-11. Jesus further expanded this privilege to all His disciples in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23.

(v. 20) **Gave . . . orders** is a strong term for stating a command to be followed in no uncertain terms. Jesus recognized the political and nationalistic misunderstandings related to **the Messiah**. Even the disciples had not yet grasped the true nature of Jesus’s messiahship, as the next verses make clear. So, Jesus did not want them to speak out until they understood things more clearly.



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 16:13-20** aloud as they imagine being in the group of disciples, carefully considering the words of Jesus.

DISCUSS:

Allow volunteers to suggest ways people view Jesus today. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Why Caesarea Philippi?*). Encourage adults to scan the article and to underline key thoughts. Discuss what made this city such a significant backdrop for Jesus’s conversation with His disciples.



RECAP:

Share this as you encourage adults to reflect on Peter’s response to Jesus:

Peter declared that Jesus was “the Messiah.” In the Greek, this word means “the Christ.” The name Christ (taken from the Greek Christos) means “the Anointed One.” Peter acknowledged that Jesus was uniquely the Messiah; there is one and only one Messiah. The name pointed to the Deliverer who was coming from God. Peter also acknowledged that Jesus was the “Son of the living God.” The use of the definite article “the” pointed to the fact that Jesus is uniquely the Son and there is no other. (PSG, p. 30)

ASK:

Why is it important to understand who Jesus is? (PSG, p. 32)

EXPLAIN:

Point out that Jesus pointed to Peter as a representative for all the disciples in receiving the keys to bind and loose things in heaven. Share that this foreshadowed their role in leading people toward the kingdom once Jesus established His church in Acts 2. Note that since the disciples did not have a full grasp of what it meant for Jesus to be Messiah, He ordered them to remain silent for the time being.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: A Key

Hold up the key to your car. Say: *You may need to borrow my car sometime; but even if I give you the key, the car is still mine. You have my permission to use it, but I’m still the owner.* Help adults understand that Peter did not own the authority of heaven, but his confession of Jesus as Messiah gave him and the other disciples access to God’s authority, something they would need as they spread the message of the kingdom across the known world.

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

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

(v. 21) **From then on** points back to Peter’s confession in verse 16. The words indicate an ongoing new activity. **Began to point out** implies that Jesus would not lay out His future comprehensively, but gradually. **Necessary . . . to go** indicates a divine imperative regarding **Jerusalem**.

He announced that in the capital city He would **suffer many things**. *Suffer* indicates anguish, pain, or agony. *Many things* covers a wide variety of particulars. Jesus also identified three groups that would cause His suffering. **The elders** were the heads of aristocratic families. The **chief priests** included the high priest and the heads of the priestly orders. Many of them were Sadducees. The **scribes** were experts in the law of Moses, and many of them were Pharisees. The only other time these three groups are mentioned together is in Matthew 27:41 when they mocked Jesus while He was on the cross. When Jesus named these three groups, He used only one definite article, suggesting that they actually constituted one group: the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin.

The outcome of Jesus’s suffering at the hands of the Jewish leaders would mean that He would **be killed**. Probably overwhelmed by this shocking announcement, Jesus’s additional words **and be raised the third day** must have gone right by the disciples. The phrase *be raised* is a divine passive, alluding to God’s approval and action. *The third day* includes Friday evening to Sunday morning.

(v. 22) After Jesus’s revelation, **Peter took him aside**. The Greek wording suggests that the disciple tried to speak privately with Jesus in a friendly manner, rather than making a more forceful move. However, **rebuke** is a strong word that highlights the supposed superiority of the speaker. While He addressed Jesus as **Lord**, he included a negative tone in **oh no**.

He then told Jesus that He was wrong and repudiated what his “Lord” had just said: **This will never happen to you!** For Peter, what Jesus just announced was unthinkable.

Key Doctrine

God the Son

In His substitutionary death on the cross Christ made provision for the redemption of men from sin. (See Isaiah 53:5-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

(v. 23) Apparently Jesus had not been looking directly at Peter. Now, though, **Jesus turned** toward him and forcibly said, **Get behind me, Satan!** Jesus’s reprimand was intended to place Peter (and his words) in a submissive position behind Jesus’s back. The words clearly recall those spoken directly to Satan in Matthew 4:10.

With these words, Jesus was not equating Peter as Satan or saying he was possessed by demons. Rather, He was indicating that any attempt to thwart Jesus’s divine mission (no matter how well-intentioned) made Peter “an adversary” (the literal meaning of *satan*). **Hindrance** translates the Greek word *scandalon*, a word that may be rendered as “a stumbling block” (see Isa. 8:14). Ironically, the man Jesus called a “rock” had become a stumbling stone in Jesus’s path toward fulfilling God’s will.

The Greek wording reflects present tense and refers to Peter’s ongoing state of mind. He was failing to focus on **God’s concerns**. In contrast, his thinking was dominated by **human concerns**. That is, he was leaning into natural human patterns of thinking (see Isa. 55:8-9).



Three Predictions

Jesus foretold His death three times in Matthew’s Gospel. Scan this QR code to learn more about His journey to the cross.



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.

READ:

Invite two volunteers to read Matthew 16:21-23 aloud, one reading Peter’s words and one reading Jesus’s response.

DISCUSS:

Encourage adults to share what they believe motivated Peter to contradict Jesus’s words. Facilitate a brief discussion on ways people might mistake their own wisdom for God’s plans and purposes in life.

RECAP:

Summarize this information from page 32 of the PSG to help adults consider Peter’s motives:

“This was the turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Not only is this the transition point between the Galilean ministry and the events in Jerusalem, but it is also a shift in focus for Jesus. No longer are His teachings about the kingdom and His compassionate healings the central thrust. Now Jesus’s life moved rapidly toward the real reason He came. . . . Presumably Peter knew what was best for Jesus and took it upon himself to rebuke Jesus for speaking of His impending death. This may have arisen from Peter’s brash personality, or his supposed ‘authority’ he had received from Jesus calling him the ‘rock.’ Or it could have arisen out of love for Jesus and fear of the future.”

ASK:

How do we let our own agendas replace God’s greater plans? (PSG, p. 33)

SHARE:

Point out that the literal meaning of Satan is “adversary” or “opponent.” Explain that Jesus wasn’t saying Peter was under demonic influence, but that he was standing in opposition to God’s divine plan for the salvation of the world. Share a time in your own life when you felt like Peter: ready to “correct” God on His plan because it wasn’t going the way you imagined or expected. Help adults see their own Peter-like tendencies, wanting to take control rather than trusting Jesus.

SAY:

Peter was a good leader, and His faith in Jesus was grounded in truth. But he hadn’t yet realized what would be involved in truly following Jesus. He didn’t realize at this point that it would cost him everything. Jesus needed Peter to recognize that his own plan was not God’s plan.

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

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

(v. 24) **Jesus** now addressed all of *his disciples*. His pronouncement concerned *anyone* who *wants to* (a choice of the will) *follow after me* (a present ongoing decision that affects the rest of one’s life). *Anyone* with this desire must do three things. **Deny himself** refers to leaving behind all self-interest and everything related to natural human tendencies.

To **take up his cross** referred to the Roman practice of crucifixion in which a condemned person carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the place of execution. From there, it was attached to the upright stake already in place. The implication is not about denying our desires. It means dying to our desires.

Follow me uses a different word for “follow” than the idea of “coming” found earlier in the verse. This word (*akoloutheito*) is a present imperative and suggests one who keeps on following Jesus. It reflects a whole life of discipleship. Discipleship is not merely a matter of correctly confessing Jesus (Matt. 16:16). It requires total commitment of a person’s life to following Him.

(v. 25) Jesus followed these demands of discipleship with three statements containing incentives for making such a commitment. The first reason in verse 25 is a paradox: Anyone trying to **save** their **life** by living for themselves will **lose it**. But anyone who **loses his life** for the sake of Jesus **will find it**. Jesus’s words are similar to what He said in Matthew 10:39 and in John 12:25. But He always emphasized that this was a matter of choice: *whoever wants to*.

(v. 26) As in verse 25, **for** identifies another reason why discipleship is worth the sacrifice. Focusing on the folly of accumulating extreme wealth in this world, Jesus used two rhetorical questions related to the world of commerce. His first question focused on what **benefit** comes if someone **gains the whole world yet loses his life**. *The world* here refers to the riches of this life, and *the whole* emphasizes the extent of those

riches. Of course, the proper answer is “Nothing.” The writer of Ecclesiastes wrestled with this same question and came to the same conclusion (Eccl. 1:3; 2:4-11). Gaining the whole world also reflects the offer Satan made to Jesus in exchange for worship (Matt. 4:8-9).

The Greek word *life* in verses 25-26 is *psyche*, meaning both “life” and “soul.” Those who pursue such foolish goals and distorted values will lose not only their present life, but also their souls for eternity.

To **give in exchange** is another example of commercial language, referring to a trade or purchase. Jesus noted that those who have lost their life/soul (v. 26a) will never be able to buy it back again. This is what Psalm 49:6-7 emphasizes: “They trust in their wealth and boast of their abundant riches. Yet these cannot redeem a person or pay his ransom to God.” Jesus also may have been warning His followers that nothing in this temporal world compares to one’s soul.

The final motivation Jesus named can be found in verse 27 and relates to Jesus’s return. When He comes back in glory with His angels, He will reward His faithful followers. Paul grasped the significance of this incentive for a life of discipleship as he testified in Romans 8:18.

Bible Skill

Read, reflect on, and apply a Bible passage.

Focus on Matthew 16:24. Identify the three qualifications for becoming a true disciple of Jesus. Reflect on the meaning of each qualification by responding to these questions: *What does it mean to deny oneself? What are some things that hinder me from denying myself? What does it mean to take up your cross? What does it mean to follow Jesus? For you, what is the next step in following Jesus?*



APPLICATION POINT: We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.

READ:

Instruct adults to read Matthew 16:24-26 silently, inserting their own names throughout the verses.

ASK:

How does making the passage personal by inserting your own name affect the meaning for you? Discuss responses.

EXAMINE:

Direct adults to identify the three qualifications for a true disciple of Jesus (v. 24). Encourage them to reflect on each qualification by responding to these questions:

- *What hinders people from denying themselves?*
- *How does the image of a cross today differ from how crosses were understood by Jesus's audience?*
- *Why is simply holding an orthodox view of Jesus not enough in the Christian life?*

ASK:

What does it mean to deny ourselves and to carry our cross? (PSG, p. 34)

RECAP:

Note that Jesus shared more about why discipleship is important. Read this to help adults better understand Jesus's teaching:

Jesus pictured a person gaining all that the world has to offer in riches, fame, security, and pleasure. Tragically none of this will rescue them at the end of life. Death and judgment will not be delayed by the accumulations of life. The ultimate question in life is simply this: what are we willing to exchange to experience life to the fullest, now and for eternity? (PSG, p. 34)

CHALLENGE:

Urge adults to reflect on what they may be holding that distracts them from complete devotion to God.

Group Activity Option

Lay Down My Life

Ask adults to consider how their life plan at age 16 is different from the path they've actually traveled. Allow volunteers to share responses. Affirm that Jesus had a plan, even if it was different from their plan. Assure them that He still has a plan that will lead to their good and His glory. Challenge them to surrender their own plans to God so that they can follow Jesus as He leads them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 35 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we know and accept His true identity.*
- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we accept His mission as Messiah and Savior.*
- *We cannot follow Jesus fully until we sacrifice our personal agendas to Him.*

REFLECT:

Invite adults to look back through the direct quotes of Jesus in today's passage. Encourage them to share how they see the summary points from this lesson revealed in these statements from the Lord. Highlight the value of living out each one.

DISCUSS:

Invite a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. Review the various ways people in the world view Jesus and how that differs from what we find in the Bible. Emphasize that Matthew wanted his readers to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, the One sent by God to save the world. Note that this is the view genuine disciples of Jesus understand and embrace.

PRAY:

Direct adults to respond to the second set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. Invite them to meditate on their lists and to talk to God about what each one means to their relationship with Him. Close in prayer, asking God to help each person know Him for who He is and to follow Him without reservation.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or email during the week. Encourage them to continue reflecting on their lists from the second set of questions on page 35 of the PSG. As appropriate, share ways God has been speaking to you through this exercise. Challenge adults to consider how their personal worship time can move them toward knowing Jesus better and following Him sacrificially.

LEADER BLOG



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Glory

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 17:1-13 Memory Verse: Matthew 17:5b-6

Matthew 17:1-13 records the account of Jesus's transfiguration. The episode is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36), each with their own various emphases. The event fulfilled Jesus's statement in Caesarea Philippi that some of His apostles wouldn't die before seeing the Son of Man's glory (Matt. 16:28). Peter, James, and John—Jesus's inner circle—witnessed this majestic event.

During Jesus's transfiguration God's divine voice repeated the words He had proclaimed at Jesus's baptism. Then God added, "Listen to him!" (17:5). After Moses, Elijah, and the cloud disappeared, the three disciples "saw no one except Jesus alone" (17:8).

Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets. They also served as a vivid reminder that Jesus fulfilled every detail of God's message and God's plan perfectly. As you prepare to lead this session from Matthew 17, reflect on the reliability and validity of Jesus's ministry. Examine your life for areas where you might not be seeing His work and glory fully. Prayerfully seek ways to lead adults toward an absolute focus on Jesus.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week's study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



Decision making can be difficult. Often, we seek some sign that this is the right direction and the correct decision to make. Is this the right job to take? Is this the best house to buy? Is she the one for me? How do we know for certain? If we only had a sign! Wouldn't it be great if someone magically appeared to give you affirmation that what you are doing is correct? How about a sign in the sky, or a voice out of the blue? (PSG, p. 36)

What sign would you like to receive concerning a decision you need to make?



Understand the Context (Matthew 17:1-27)

The specific reference in Matthew 17:1 dates Jesus's transformation six days after Peter's great confession of Him as Messiah in Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:16). At that time, Jesus predicted that some of His disciples "will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). Chapter 17 clearly is connected to the event of chapter 16 by a number of close links. Elijah is mentioned in 16:14 and appears in 17:3,10-12. John the Baptist is mentioned in both episodes (16:14; 17:13). Jesus's resurrection is addressed in both stories (16:21; 17:9). Peter served as the spokesman in both accounts (16:16; 17:4); and, in both accounts, he demonstrated a messianic misunderstanding (16:22; 17:4).

In addition, Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man in both chapters (16:13,27-28; 17:9,12), and He is called God's Son in both stories (16:16; 17:5). In both episodes, Peter addressed Jesus as Lord (16:22; 17:4). In both stories Jesus predicted His suffering (16:21; 17:12). Both accounts end with Jesus's injunction to silence (16:20; 17:9). In all these ways chapter 16 provides the near context for the account of Jesus's transfiguration in chapter 17.

The more distant context and background of chapter 17 harks back to the early history of Israel at Mount Sinai. Matthew presented Jesus as the new Israel and the new Moses. Like Israel's twelve tribes, Jesus had twelve apostles. Like Israel's forty years in the wilderness, Jesus

spent forty days in the wilderness. Like Moses at Mount Sinai, Jesus ascended "a high mountain" (Ex. 19:3; Matt. 17:1) and descended again (Ex. 19:14; 32:15; Matt. 17:9). Like Moses, the event took place "after six days" (Ex. 24:16; Matt. 17:1). Like Moses, Jesus took three named companions with Him (Ex. 24:1,9; Matt. 17:1). Like with Moses, a "cloud covered them" (Ex. 24:15-18; 34:5; Matt. 17:5). Also, just as Moses encountered a consuming fire cloud, Jesus experienced "a bright cloud" (Ex. 19:16; 24:17; Matt. 17:5).

Like with Moses, the divine voice spoke "from the cloud" (Ex. 24:16; Matt. 17:5). And as with Moses's companions, Jesus's disciples reacted in fear (Ex. 34:29-30; Matt. 17:6). Just as Moses's skin shone, Jesus's "face shone like the sun" (Ex. 34:29-30; Matt. 17:2). Moses was on Mount Sinai, and he was on the mount of transfiguration. But as great as Moses was, Jesus deserves "more glory than Moses" (Heb. 3:3). There can be no equal shelters built for them because only Jesus is God's beloved Son (Matt. 17:5). He alone is the one to whom Moses pointed the Israelites to thousands of years earlier (Deut. 18:15). Indeed, that is exactly what the divine voice proclaimed in Matthew 17:5.

Read Matthew 17:1-13 and jot down questions you have about the narrative in these verses. (PSG, p. 37)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 3** (Poster: *Peter in Matthew's Gospel*). Make copies of **Pack Item 12** (Handout: *The Mount of Transfiguration*).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 36 of the PSG.

ASK:

What kind of sign would you like to receive concerning a decision you need to make? (PSG, p. 36)

DISCUSS:

Lead a brief discussion on why decisions can be hard to make at times. Share a situation in which you desperately needed a voice from a cloud or a message in the sky telling you what to do—and how you responded when it didn't come. Allow a few volunteers to share their stories.

SAY:

As humans, we approach decisions in a lot of different ways. Some of us make decisions quickly and confidently. Others of us put off making decisions until absolutely necessary. And then many of us take our cues from other people, letting their decisions shape our decisions.

CONTEXT:

Affirm that waiting around for a sign or a voice from heaven is rarely the best approach, but in Matthew 17 Peter, James, and John received a special sign from Jesus that was impossible to ignore.

TRANSITION:

As we study the disciples' "mountaintop experience," let's consider how we can see Jesus as the fulfillment of everything the Law and the Prophets predicted—and how that offers hope to all who believe Him.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play a recording of the song “Psalm 121 (I Lift My Eyes)” by Kristyn Getty, Jordan Kaufin, and Matt Merker. Invite the group to recall specific mountaintop experiences in the Old Testament, carefully considering the significance of those events in the history of the Israelites. Possible sites you could mention to start the conversation include Mount Ararat (Noah’s ark landed), Mount Moriah (Abraham told to sacrifice Isaac), Mount Sinai (the law was given), and Mount Carmel (Elijah faced Baal’s prophets). Note that we all have our own mountaintop experiences where we experienced God in a special way. Share that today’s session will help us learn from a literal mountaintop experience for three of Jesus’s disciples: Peter, James, and John.

Transfigured (Matt. 17:1-3)

1 After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. **2** He was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun; his clothes became as white as the light. **3** Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

(v. 1) *After six days* is found in both Matthew and Mark 9:2. Luke used “about eight days after” (Luke 9:28). The time references suggest approximately a week interval between this event and chapter 16. The time reference also links the transfiguration to Jesus’s announcement that some of His disciples would see His glory revealed in Matthew 16:28.

From other Scriptures we know that **Peter**, **James**, and **John**, made up the inner circle of Jesus’s disciples (Matt. 26:37; Mark 5:37; 13:3). That John is referred to as James’s **brother** (as in Matt. 10:2) hints that James had more prominence at this point than John. Most likely, Peter is mentioned first because of what Jesus said about him in Matthew 16:18. Taking the three disciples up the mountain recalls when Moses took Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu up Sinai with him (Ex. 24:1,9).

Many have tried to identify the **high mountain**. Mount Tabor in southern Galilee is the traditional site of the transfiguration. It stands at 1,900 feet and could have been reached in a six-day walk from Caesarea Philippi. However, the Romans occupied a fort on this mountain’s peak, making it harder for Jesus and His disciples to be **by themselves**.

Mount Hermon stands just northeast of Caesarea Philippi and is the highest mountain in the region at 9,232 feet. The high mountain could have been one of Mount Hermon’s foothills. However, when Jesus and the three apostles came down the mountain, they met a Jewish crowd, which would not be expected near Mount Hermon.

Others have suggested Mount Meron, the highest mountain in Galilee at 3,926 feet. The specific mountain on which Jesus’s transfiguration occurred is not important. What happened there is important.

(v. 2) *Transfigured* comes from the same Greek word from which we get our word *metamorphosis*. Another possible translation is “transformed.” Matthew described how this affected Jesus’s **face** and **his clothes**. Jesus’s **face shone like the sun** and **his clothes**

became as white as the light. Mark added that His garments were “dazzling,” purer than any earthly launderer could make them (Mark 9:3). When God or heavenly angelic beings appear in the Bible, they often appear bright as lightning and in white clothes (Dan. 7:9; 10:5-6; 12:3; Matt. 28:3; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; John 20:12; Acts 1:10). The risen Christ appeared this way in Revelation 1:13-16. God Himself “wraps himself in light” (Ps. 104:2), and believers one day will be dressed in white clothes (Rev. 3:4-5) that “shine like the sun” (Matt. 13:43; see also Dan. 12:3).

The whole image is one of brilliance and purity. Unlike Moses’s face after his encounter with God at Sinai (Ex. 34:29-35), Jesus’s transfiguration was not a temporary, external radiance. It was the intrinsic, divine glory of the eternal Son of God bursting through the veil of His human flesh (see John 17:4-5; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9; Heb. 1:1-4; Rev. 5:6-14).

(v. 3) Matthew used the Greek word translated **suddenly** three times in this passage (including twice in the original language of v. 5) to grab the reader’s attention. **Moses**, the great Old Testament lawgiver, and **Elijah**, the great Old Testament prophet, **appeared** and were **talking with** Christ. Both of these Old Testament figures had previous mountaintop experiences with God (Ex. 19:20; 24:15-18; 33:18-23; 1 Kings 19:8-14). Matthew did not record the topic of their conversation, but Luke stated that they spoke “of his departure” (Luke 9:31). Jesus’s death would serve as the defining moment of His journey to Jerusalem and His ministry.

Key Doctrine

The Scriptures

All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation. (See Luke 24:44-46; John 5:39.)



APPLICATION POINT: Pray that you would see the glory of Jesus.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 17:1-3** as the group imagines what the disciples felt walking up the mountain.

ASK:

How do you imagine Peter, James, and John reacting to Jesus’s transfigured appearance?

DISCUSS:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: The Mount of Transfiguration*). Encourage adults to scan the article. Along with the article, use the information for Matthew 17:1 in the Leader Guide (p. 48) to lead a brief discussion about the location of the mountain. Highlight Matthew’s description of how Jesus’s appearance changed. Note that Jesus had said some of His disciples would experience His glory (Matt. 16:28).

CLARIFY:

Point out that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. Summarize this content from page 39 of the PSG to explain their presence:

“Moses, of course, was directly connected to the law given to Israel. He was representative of the unique covenant relationship between God and Israel. Elijah represented all the prophets of Israel that pointed to the coming Messiah. Here were the representatives of the law and the prophets. In the New Testament, the Scriptures were sometimes called ‘the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt. 7:12; Rom. 3:21). Their purpose was to point to the coming Messiah. With the presence of Moses and Elijah, the affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah moved to an even higher level in the eyes of the three disciples.”

ASK:

Where do we see Jesus’s glory revealed each day?
(PSG, p. 40)



Group Activity Option

Eyewitness Testimony

Invite a volunteer to read John 1:14 and 2 Peter 1:16-18 aloud, pointing out that John and Peter wrote these words specifically pointing to the transfiguration. Say: *Peter and John wrote about how Jesus revealed Himself to them.* Emphasize the power and authority of an eyewitness account. Invite a few volunteers to share one memorable “mountain-top” moment with Jesus. Say: *Just like Peter and John, we’re called to share how Jesus has revealed Himself to us. He has called us to be eyewitnesses to His saving and sanctifying work in our lives.*

Overshadowed (Matt. 17:4-8)

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.” **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!” **6** When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown and were terrified. **7** Jesus came up, touched them, and said, “Get up; don’t be afraid.” **8** When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

(v. 4) As usual, **Peter** was the one to speak up. Mark and Luke each share that Peter spoke without really knowing what to say (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33). He really had nothing meaningful to add to the experience, but he still felt the need to speak.

Peter addressed Jesus as **Lord**, as in Matthew 16:22. While **it’s good for us to be here** could refer to a great privilege, it probably served as an affirmation of the idea Peter was about to present. He suggested that he could **set up three shelters**. Most likely, he was including James and John in his plan.

Shelters is the word for “tents” and was used of both the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temporary booths Israelites set up to live in during the Feast of Tabernacles. Peter probably was referring to shelters or lean-tos to protect them from the sun, much like Jonah built for himself (Jonah 4:5-8).

The sentence construction (**if you want**) may hint that Peter thought his suggestion would be what Jesus would desire. Matthew doesn’t tell us how Peter recognized **Moses** and **Elijah**.

(v. 5) Peter hadn’t finished what he was saying before a **bright cloud** of God’s presence enveloped everyone. This was the cloud that manifested God’s presence on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16; 24:15-18) and guided the Israelites in the wilderness (13:21-22; 40:36-38).

Them probably refers to Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. As in Exodus, the **voice** belonged to God the Father (19:9; 24:16; 34:5); and, as at Jesus’s baptism, He affirmed He was **well-pleased** with His **Son** (see Matt. 3:17). The Father’s declaration also highlighted the favored status of Jesus over Moses and Elijah.

Son stresses Jesus’s deity and relationship to God the Father. **Well-pleased** means God takes great delight in Jesus—especially as He carried out the Father’s will (John 5:30; 6:38).

God’s final exhortation of **listen to him** is based on Deuteronomy 18:15,19 where Moses demanded that the people listen to the prophet who would come. This command does not refer merely to passively hearing what Jesus said, but to heeding His words intentionally.

(vv. 6-8) **Terrified** recalls how the Israelites reacted when God spoke at Sinai (Ex. 20:18-21). To fall **facedown** is a common reaction to God’s appearing to a human being (Ezek. 1:28; 44:4; Dan. 8:17; 10:9,15; John 18:6) and indicates humility and submission.

Then Jesus did three things: He **came** to them, **touched them**, and encouraged them to not **be afraid**. A caring person with a familiar voice can reassure those who are terrified. Human contact also offers comfort. The exhortation to stop being afraid reestablishes normality.

When the disciples looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone. Only Jesus was there. **Alone** is emphatic and puts the emphasis on Jesus. His singular presence reinforced God’s command to listen to Him alone.

Bible Skill

Use cross references to gain a better understanding of a biblical concept.

The New Testament not only records Jesus’s transfiguration, but it also teaches that believers likewise will experience transformation. Read the following passages and determine what each says about a believer’s transformation: Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Philipians 3:20-21. *How and when does this transformation take place in the life of a believer? How is our transformation similar to or different from what Jesus experienced?*



APPLICATION POINT: **Worship is always the appropriate response to Jesus.**

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 17:4-8 aloud as the group underlines words that stick out to them from the verses. Allow a few volunteers to share the words they highlighted and to explain why those words resonate with them.

ENGAGE:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Poster: *Peter in Matthew's Gospel*). Point out Peter's role in previous sessions. Note that he once again played a role in this account.

ASK:

What was Peter suggesting in verse 4? Why do you think he spoke up?

RECAP:

Discuss responses and provide more insight into Peter's words:

Mark and Luke comment that Peter was at a loss for words and uttered the first thing that came to mind (Mark 9:5-6; Luke 9:33). His declaration was that it was “good for us to be here.” Most likely, Peter was indicating that it was “good” in the sense that he, James, and John were there to help. He was not content to observe this scene but wanted to be in the scene. Apparently, Peter didn't grasp the significance of the conversation of Jesus with Moses and Elijah concerning His coming arrest and crucifixion (see Luke 9:31). (PSG, p. 40)

SAY:

As Peter talked, God stepped into the conversation. In a scene reminiscent of His actions at Mount Sinai, the Father spoke from a bright cloud. And, as He had at Jesus's baptism, God affirmed Christ as both His Son and as One in whom He was pleased. His final command was to listen to Jesus. Instead of talking without thinking, the disciples were challenged to see Jesus for who He really is and to respond appropriately.

ASK:

What hinders our ability to hear and act on Jesus's words? What may hinder a person from taking Jesus's teachings seriously? (PSG, p. 42)

CHALLENGE:

Note that once the cloud moved away, the disciples saw only Jesus standing there. Emphasize that while the experience made a huge impact on their lives, the presence of Jesus is really what mattered. Urge adults to consider changes they might need to make to focus on Jesus first and foremost in their lives each day.



Instructed (Matt. 17:9-13)

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.” **10** So the disciples asked him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” **11** “Elijah is coming and will restore everything,” he replied. **12** “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.” **13** Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

(v. 9) In Exodus, after Moses ascended the mountain, he descended the mountain (Ex. 19:13-14; 32:15). Likewise, Matthew noted that Jesus and the disciples *were coming down the mountain*. As in Matthew 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; and 16:20, Jesus *commanded* the three apostles not to *tell anyone*, including the other apostles waiting at the bottom of the mountain. *Anyone* is placed first for emphasis. Jesus left no room for exceptions.

However, He did place one limit on the injunction. The disciples would be able to share their story once *the Son of Man is raised from the dead*. After Jesus was resurrected by the Father (a divine passive), His identity as the Son of God and Messiah would be clear, along with the significance of what the disciples had seen.

This is exactly what Peter and John, two of the three witnesses, did. In his Gospel, John wrote that Jesus had revealed His glory as the “one and only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). Likewise, Peter testified that he had been among the “eyewitnesses of his majesty” on the mountain, hearing the voice of God as He affirmed His Son (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

(v. 10) Having just seen Elijah talking with Jesus, the disciples recalled that *the scribes* taught *that Elijah must come first* before the Messiah’s arrival. These experts of the Mosaic law based their beliefs on Malachi’s prophecy (Mal. 4:5-6). According to Malachi, Elijah would help usher the day of the Lord when evil would be judged and proper order would be restored.

Since Elijah had just appeared on the mountain, Peter, James, and John may have wondered if they were on the cusp of the Messianic Age. If that was so, they also may have questioned the need for Jesus to die in Jerusalem as He recently had told them (Matt. 16:21).

(vv. 11-13) Jesus’s response noted three things about Elijah. First, He affirmed that Malachi’s prophecy was correct. Using future tense (as Malachi did), Jesus agreed that Elijah would come to *restore everything*. *Restore* refers to bringing things back into their proper state (Acts 1:6; 3:21). *Everything* emphasizes that the restoration prompted by Elijah will be thorough and complete. Some scholars also relate this to John’s vision in Revelation 11:3-6.

Second, Elijah had *already come*. Jesus’s words *but I tell you* are a strong adversative and place emphasis on this second item. In other words, it sets Jesus’s statement above whatever the scribes were teaching.

Jesus had identified His forerunner, John the Baptist, with Elijah in Matthew 11:14. John had preached repentance and drawn many back toward God. In that, he brought a measure of restoration in anticipation of the Messiah’s ministry. So, as Jesus noted, “Elijah” had come through John’s work, but the prophetic role would not be complete until the Messiah’s return (Rev. 11:3-6).

Thanks to their hardness toward John, the leaders had failed to *recognize him*. Most likely, the word *they* included both Jewish leaders and the people in general. Those who did not accept John *did whatever they pleased to him*, even to the point of executing him (Matt. 14:6-12).

Third, Jesus’s veiled reference to John’s death allowed Him to connect John’s suffering and His own coming suffering: *In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands*. Jesus already predicted this in Matthew 16:21. *Is going to suffer* expressed the absolute nature of the suffering. In the same way as John’s life was taken from him, so will Jesus’s life be taken from Him.

Only Matthew included the comment that *the disciples understood* that Jesus identified the “Elijah who was to come” as *John the Baptist*, who had already come.



APPLICATION POINT: Seek to know Jesus better by learning God's Word.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 17:9-13 silently, carefully noting the discussion between Jesus and His disciples.

ASK:

Why do you think Jesus instructed His disciples to remain silent about the transfiguration until after His resurrection?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that the other disciples almost certainly would not believe the account; however, after He was raised from the dead, this story would be easier to accept and would help them see God's plan to send His only Son.

RECAP:

Draw attention to the disciples' question about Elijah. Explain the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist.

Jesus affirmed the scribes were right about Elijah coming. The problem was that the religious leaders didn't recognize Elijah when he came. . . . Not only did the religious leaders fail to recognize John the Baptist as the promised coming of Elijah, but they treated him harshly. "In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." The ill-treatment of John the Baptist served as a foreshadowing of the Messiah's own suffering. Jesus pointed to the death of "Elijah"—John the Baptist—as a harbinger of His own death by the Jewish leaders. (PSG, pp. 42-43)

SHARE:

Read Matthew 17:13 again for the group. Emphasize that the disciples were beginning to grasp some important things Jesus was trying to teach them. Encourage adults to consider how they can grow in their knowledge of Jesus.

ASK:

How are you making an effort to grow in your understanding of Jesus, His identity, and mission? (PSG, p. 43)

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Stones of Remembrance

Give each adult a small stone. Say: *We know that both Peter and John referred back to the transfiguration in their New Testament writings. We can be certain that they never forgot this event.* Challenge adults to reflect on their own "mountaintop experiences" with God, symbolized by the rocks in their hands. Challenge them to keep the rock in a visible place this week, remembering times they worshiped God and considering how that experience shaped them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 44 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *Pray that you would see the glory of Jesus.*
- *Worship is always the appropriate response to Jesus.*
- *Seek to know Jesus better by learning God's Word.*

REFLECT:

Invite adults to determine which of these statements will be the greatest challenge for them this week.

ASK:

Have you ever prayed to see God's glory? How do you feel about asking that of God?

DISCUSS:

Read aloud the first set of questions from page 44 of the PSG. Encourage volunteers to share where they have seen God's glory revealed in their lives. Lead a brief discussion about how God's glory should lead us to know Him better and to worship Him more.

CHALLENGE:

Urge adults to read and respond to the second set of questions on page 44 of the PSG during the week. Suggest they write their responses in a journal and compose a prayer that specifically asks God to reveal His glory through them this week.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking Jesus to show His glory in the lives of each adult. Invite God to speak through times in His Word and through our corporate worship experiences.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group an email or text during the week. Prompt them to engage with God's truth on their own even outside of the group time. Encourage individuals to share any truths that are revealed through their quiet times this week. Remind them that Peter, James, and John were called to listen to Jesus's voice and to focus on His presence.

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Forgiveness

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 18:21-35 Memory Verse: Matthew 18:33

Jesus's words in Matthew 18:15-20 gave rise to a question from Peter about forgiveness. In answer, Jesus moved from a general idea to the specifics of personal forgiveness. Peter thought he was being generous by forgiving seven times. Jesus, however, used a kingdom parable to show why it's necessary to practice a lifestyle of forgiveness.

Relationships are difficult because people offend one another. Some never confront those who have offended them, while others allow bitterness and resentment to overwhelm them. Unfortunately, hurt feelings and broken relationships are as common in the church and in families as anywhere else. Christ followers must decide how we are going to respond when we need to seek forgiveness—and when we need to offer it to others.

As you prepare to lead this session on forgiveness, examine your life and identify things that might keep you from seeking or offering forgiveness. Ask God to remove those roadblocks and look for ways to help the adults in your group understand what it means to be a forgiving community. Remember that our forgiveness should be fueled by the great forgiveness we receive from God.



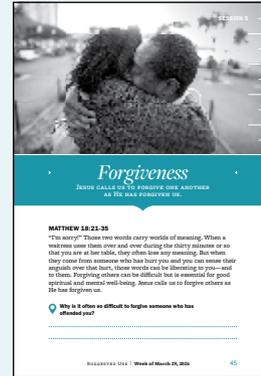
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“I’m sorry!” Those two words carry worlds of meaning. When a waitress uses them over and over during the thirty minutes or so that you are at her table, they often lose any meaning. But when they come from someone who has hurt you and you can sense their anguish over that hurt, those words can be liberating to you—and to them. Forgiving others can be difficult but is essential for good spiritual and mental well-being. Jesus calls us to forgive others as He has forgiven us. (PSG, p. 45)

Why do you think it is often hard to forgive someone who has offended you?



Understand the Context (Matthew 18:1-35)

Following His transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-13), Jesus and His disciples made their way back into Galilee. Here, Jesus made His second great prediction of His death and resurrection (17:22-23; Mark 9:30-32). In time, they returned to Capernaum, which had served as the home base of Jesus’s Galilean ministry (Matt. 4:12-19:1). Jesus’s teaching in chapter 18 concluded His final ministry in Galilee before He began His final trip to Jerusalem.

Matthew organized his Gospel around five major discourses of Jesus, addressed mainly to His disciples (chaps. 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Each one ends with a note about Jesus finishing His teaching (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Matthew 18 is the fourth of these discourses and focuses on the believing community. This message is unique to Matthew’s Gospel and carries a sense of urgency because of His impending journey to Jerusalem.

In the discourse, Jesus shows that the kingdom of heaven turns the world’s values upside down. Members of His new community, the church, are called to base their lives and actions on kingdom values. In chapter 18, those values include humility (vv. 1-4) and a concern for the lost (vv. 5-14). Jesus also highlighted the importance of accountability, discipline, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration (vv. 15-35).

Matthew 18:15-35 represents Jesus’s longest treatment on the topic of forgiveness and

reconciliation. Verses 15-20 focus on the steps to maintaining a culture of forgiveness within the believing community. The process of Jesus involves offended believers first confronting the offender in private. The focus is on resolving the issue one-on-one.

When that doesn’t work, the second step calls for the offended person to come back to the offender with one or two other believers as witnesses. If such an intervention falls short, believers can take the third step, which means bringing the matter before the entire church for resolution. If the offender remained adamant in his refusal to listen to the church, he should be treated as an unbeliever and outsider by the church.

The three-step process is based on intentional thought and mutual respect. Nothing is done as a knee-jerk reaction. The extra steps allow time for emotions to cool and truth to take root. It should be noted that the goal throughout this process is bringing about restoration and reconciliation of relationships.

Verses 21-35 focus on forgiveness between individual members of the believing community. Such complete, unconditional, and unqualified forgiveness stands in stark contrast to the world’s values, and it may be the most difficult kingdom value for the world to comprehend.

Read Matthew 18:21-35 and list some principles concerning forgiveness. (PSG, p. 46)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) and **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*).

ASK:

Why is it often so difficult to forgive someone who has offended you? (PSG, p. 45)

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 45 of the PSG. Stress that forgiveness sometimes comes easily, but it often remains a struggle—even for believers.

IDENTIFY:

Direct adults to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*), pointing out that the study is drawn from Jesus’s fourth major discourse in Matthew’s Gospel. Summarize this content from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 46) to provide background for this discourse:

“The immaturity of the disciples led Jesus to teach extensively about relationships. First, He placed a small child in their midst. Referring to the child, Jesus pointed out that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven was the one who, like a child, was characterized by humility. . . . Jesus spoke of ‘little ones,’ by which He was speaking figuratively of those who follow Him. He gave a stern warning about causing a fellow believer to stumble. The one who caused ‘one of these little ones . . . to fall away’ would be better off suffering a terrible drowning than to face God’s wrath for their actions (vv. 6-9).”

TRANSITION:

Believers are called to demonstrate humility and to care for one another. Those are kingdom values. Another important kingdom value is forgiveness. As we study this session, remember that we should forgive as Jesus forgives. Look for ways to apply that forgiveness in practical ways each day.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play “O Come to the Altar” (Elevation Worship, 2016). If possible, provide lyrics and encourage adults to sing along. After the song ends, provide a few moments of quiet reflection. Close with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s forgiveness to each adult present.

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

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

(v. 21) The phrase *Peter approached* closely links Peter’s question about forgiveness to Jesus’s previous teaching about relationships in verses 1-20. For the second time (see Matt. 16:18) Jesus referred to “the church” (18:17) and gave instruction about discipline, forgiveness, and reconciliation in that context (vv. 15-20).

As usual, Peter spoke up first. Only Matthew records this event and Peter’s question that moved the issue of forgiveness from the context of the congregation to personal reconciliation. He had heard Jesus’s earlier teaching about forgiveness. For example, this was the only issue that Jesus elaborated on in the Lord’s Prayer (6:14-15).

Peter began his question respectfully, addressing Jesus as **Lord**, as in Matthew 16:22. And, since Jesus had started His instruction with the words, “If your brother sins against you” (18:15), Peter framed his question similarly: **my brother or sister who sins against me**. *Brother or sister* here does not refer to a blood relative. In this context, it means any fellow believer. *Against me* indicates that the hypothetical offense Peter had in mind was deliberately directed at him.

Peter’s question envisioned manipulative individuals who would twist Jesus’s teaching for personal benefit. Then, after repeated offenses, they would emphasize the obligation of offended believers to keep on forgiving sinful actions directed toward them. Peter’s word **forgive** is emphasized throughout the narrative (vv. 21,27,32,35). Peter went on to suggest an answer to his own question of **how many times** by suggesting **seven times** as a reasonable limit.

Peter’s proposal actually went beyond first-century rabbinic teaching, which held that individuals only needed to forgive repeated offenses three times. Peter more than doubled this total, increasing it to the number of perfection—**seven times**. This idea is similar to the Lord’s warning that anyone who attacked Cain would suffer vengeance seven times (Gen. 4:15). Peter simply applied the number to forgiveness instead of revenge.

(v. 22) Jesus began His response with a formulaic expression that set His teaching above traditional standards: **I tell you**. Peter had heard Jesus repeat these words to establish His authority on forgiveness and other topics in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:22,28,32,34,39,44; 6:25). Here, though, Jesus used a strong adversative (**but**) to correct Peter’s suggestion of seven times. Jesus’s **seventy times seven** greatly expanded what Peter thought was already a gracious expression of forgiveness. As Peter’s suggestion reflected Genesis 4:15, Jesus’s answer reflected Lamech’s boast in Genesis 4:24.

Bible students debate whether the idiom should be translated “seventy-seven times” (NIV, ESV) or “seventy times seven” (CSB, KJV). Either way, Jesus’s point was not mathematical, but hyperbolic. He was emphasizing unlimited forgiveness.

In other words, a Christ follower should never count to seven and then retaliate after offense number eight (or 78 or 491). Calculation of another’s offenses does not reflect genuine love that keeps no record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5) or the boundless nature of Christian mercy and forgiveness. Believers’ lives should demonstrate unlimited forgiveness toward others.

Praying Scripture

Matthew 18:22

Spend time praying Scripture using Matthew 18:22. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in this verse?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Thank God for His gracious forgiveness. Ask Him to help you learn how to demonstrate similar forgiveness without keeping track.



APPLICATION POINT: We are not to put limits on our willingness to forgive.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 18:21-22** as the group reflects on the significance of “seven.”

ASK:

What do you think is a reasonable number of times to forgive someone who hurts you? (PSG, p. 47)

RECAP:

Read this to provide more context for Peter’s question:

In verses 15-20, Jesus spoke about the situation where one believer sins against another. This raised a question in Peter’s mind. He asked: “How many times must I forgive?” He wondered, what’s the limit on forgiving and restoring my brother, a fellow believer? (PSG, p. 47)

ASK:

What kind of response do you think Peter expected from Jesus?

EXPLAIN:

The rabbinical guidelines for forgiveness set the limit at three times. In this case, Peter went beyond that standard and suggested seven. He may have seen this as a number of completion, or it may reflect the transformation God was working in his life. Whatever the case, Peter likely saw this as a generous and gracious expansion on conventional wisdom. But Jesus’s response didn’t give Peter a new number to count. It gave him a new theology to live out.

PRAY:

Emphasize that knowing about forgiveness means nothing without practicing forgiveness. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (Handout: *Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) to each adult and invite them to pray Matthew 18:22 back to God as noted on page 58 of the Leader Guide.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Scoreboard

Prior to the session, find a photo of a scoreboard. You also could use a scorecard from a familiar board game. Show adults the scoreboard and discuss how scores are kept in different games. Ask: **Why is it so important for us to keep score?** Discuss responses. Point out that Peter was trying to “keep score” in forgiveness, but Jesus debunked that idea by emphasizing unlimited forgiveness among believers.

Compassionate King (Matt. 18:23-27)

23 “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him. **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. **26** At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.”

(v. 23) Jesus’s answer to Peter’s question involved a parable that is recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel. The parable naturally divides into three sections. In the first section, a king’s compassion and forgiveness is demonstrated (vv. 23-27). **For this reason** links the parable to Jesus’s words about forgiveness in verse 22. Jesus introduced this parable with virtually the same formula He used to introduce other parables—**the kingdom of heaven can be compared to** (see also Matt. 13:24,31,33,45,47; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1).

In the comparison, this king **wanted to settle accounts with his servants**. This means he had made up his mind that it was time for a day of reckoning. The servant—possibly a high official, like a governor or treasurer—was being called in to answer for his actions, along with other servants to the king.

(v. 24) As it turned out the servant owed the king **ten thousand talents**. A talent was a measure of weight amounting to between 75 and 100 pounds. It was the maximum amount a Roman soldier could carry on his back. In monetary language, it relates to the Greek word for *myriad* and represents the highest number the language could express in one word.

Thus Jesus combined the highest number used in math and the largest monetary unit. But no matter how it was calculated, the debt was a huge sum and impossible for the servant to repay. **Brought before him** may indicate the king had to force the servant to appear before him.

(v. 25) Given the enormous amount the servant owed, it might not be surprising that he could not **pay it back**. Throughout the parable, Jesus emphasized the servant’s inability to pay **the debt** by using some form of the word *apodidomi* (rendered “pay”) twice in verses 25 and once each in verses 26,28,29,30,34.

The king **commanded** that the servant, **his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt**. The wording emphasizes that the servant was legally obligated to repay the king, but selling all the servant’s family and possessions would never put a dent in what he owed. At that time, the highest price for a slave was around two thousand denarii. Even with a large family, the king would only recover a small portion of the debt. Ultimately, the point was to punish the man, not to recover the missing funds.

(v. 26) **Fell facedown** is a combined Greek verb often used of worship (see 2:11; 4:9). Here, though, it vividly refers to total submission. The servant begged his master to **be patient** and promised to **pay you everything**. *Patient* (*makrothumeo*) is a word often used of God and sometimes translated “longsuffering.” The imperfect tense paints an ongoing desperate action—“Keep having patience with me.” *Everything* comes first in the sentence to emphasize the servant’s desperation.

(v. 27) The king **had compassion**, which perfectly characterizes Jesus when confronted by people in need. The mercy of the **master** led him to give the servant infinitely more than he had requested. The king **released him, and forgave** the debt completely. *Released* includes both erasing the debt and removing the threat of being sold.

Key Doctrine

Man

Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. (See Romans 5:6; Ephesians 2:8-10.)



APPLICATION POINT: We can know that God is compassionate and willing to forgive.

INTRODUCE:

Hand out copies of **Pack item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*). Give an overview of the information and encourage them to read and reflect on it during the week in light of the many parables Jesus taught.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Jesus’s parable in Matthew 18:23-27 as the group records in the margin of their PSG what sticks out to them about the kingdom of God from this parable.

EXAMINE:

Draw a three-column chart on the board with the following headings: *King, King’s Servant, and Other Servant*. Encourage adults to work in teams of two or three to identify characteristics of the king and his servant in verses 23-27. After a few minutes, discuss their insights. Record their responses under the appropriate columns.

INFORM:

Emphasize the servant’s desperate situation:

As this king began to settle accounts with his servants, he came across a servant who owed him an enormous sum of money—ten thousand talents. . . . This would have been an inordinate amount of money in the Roman and Hebrew monetary system. While various scholars have sought to estimate the debt of this man as being in the millions of US dollars, Jesus was not attempting to set an exact amount. . . . Jesus’s point is that the man owed an enormous amount that he would never be able to repay. For the king, the only remedy was that the man, his family, and all his possessions be seized and sold to pay the debt. Such actions were not uncommon in that day and time. Keep in mind that Jesus was moving to a conclusion to Peter’s question, showing that those who follow Christ have a huge debt that we cannot pay—the debt of our sin against God. (PSG, p. 48)

ASK:

How do you see grace at work in these verses? (PSG, p. 49)

TRANSITION:

Mercy and compassion are the only reasons the servant wasn’t punished; in no way did he earn it or deserve it. As humans, we deserve to suffer the consequences of our debt to God, but He made a way for us to find forgiveness through Jesus. As Jesus would soon show, that forgiveness should transform our lives.



Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:28-35)

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!’ **29** At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ **30** But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. **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. **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. **33** Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ **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. **35** So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

(v. 28) Verses 28-30 contain the second scene of Jesus’s parable. The servant who had been forgiven a huge debt went out from the king’s presence and **found one of his fellow servants**. *Found* may hint that he was searching for him. A **hundred denarii** was not a small sum since one denarius equaled an average laborer’s daily pay. But compared to his own ten thousand talents of debt, it was a paltry sum. **Owed** is emphasized through the rest of the parable, occurring twice in verse 28 and once in verses 30, 32, and 34. **Grabbed him** and **choking him** vividly picture the violent means the servant used in demanding immediate repayment.

(vv. 29-30) In the words and actions of his victim, the demanding servant should have heard an echo of his own pleas to his master—except this servant was more realistic in saying, **I will pay you back**. He could have never repaid the king, but his fellow servant could reasonably pay his debt.

He wasn’t willing is written in imperfect tense, showing the first servant’s will was set in opposition to the request. **Threw him into prison** pictures a forceful action. A debtor would be confined in a debtor’s prison **until he could pay what was owed** (see 5:25-26).

(vv. 31-33) Verses 31-35 contain the final scene of the parable. **Other servants saw** what happened and **were deeply distressed**. While the Greek wording could involve grief and sorrow, it also suggests anger and indignation. **Reported** means “to explain in complete detail.” In response, the king called the man a **wicked** (or evil) **servant**. In places, Matthew used the same term to describe Satan (6:13; 13:19,38).

The master reminded the man of **that debt**, which had been forgiven completely. As a result, **mercy** should have been a natural response for the man toward his **fellow servant**. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, those who show mercy will be blessed with mercy (5:7).

(v. 34) **Angry** means “filled with wrath.” The master then revoked his mercy, replacing it with a punishment similar to what the man had imposed on his fellow servant. However, the master’s judgment went beyond mere detention. The wicked servant also was **tortured** in prison. Obviously this was much worse than being sold into slavery (v. 25). Given the vast sum owed, **until he could pay everything** meant he would never be free.

(v. 35) As in Matthew 16:17, Jesus identified Himself as intimately related to **my heavenly Father**. As the earthly king had done in the parable, the heavenly King will do on the day of judgment. Mercy will not be extended unless one **forgives his brother or sister from your heart**.

Those who have received mercy and forgiveness should practice mercy and forgiveness. Jesus’s use of *brother or sister* recalls Peter’s use of similar wording (v. 21) and forms a closing bracket to the narrative. Such forgiveness cannot be superficial. It must be from the heart. In forgiving from the heart, believers reflect the very character of God (Ex. 34:6-7).

It also should be emphasized that believers who struggle with a lack of forgiveness cannot lose their salvation. However, their lack of forgiveness will strain their relationship with God and other believers.



APPLICATION POINT: We are to forgive one another in the way God has forgiven us.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 18:28-35 silently, picturing the scene as it is described in the passage.

ASK:

How much did the second servant owe? How does that contrast with the amount the first servant owed the king?

RECAP:

Summarize this content from page 50 of the PSG to provide more insight into the debt the second man owed:

“Jesus introduced another servant who owed the forgiven servant a paltry amount—a hundred denarii—the equivalent of 100 days’ wages. This was a debt that could reasonably be paid off over time. . . . One would have thought that the similarity between the two petitions would have stirred the unforgiving servant to also be forgiving. After all, he had been forgiven an impossible sum of debt. . . . ‘But he wasn’t willing’ points to the fact that this forgiven servant made the deliberate choice to close his heart to mercy.”

ASK:

What are some dangers of believers failing to forgive others? (PSG, p. 52)

DISCUSS:

Allow adults to share their responses. Lead a brief discussion related to the master’s response. Remind adults that a believer who refuses to forgive cannot lose their salvation, but it will damage their fellowship with God and others.

FOCUS:

Enlist a volunteer to read Matthew 18:33 aloud. Explain that this is this week’s memory verse and poses a great question to ponder throughout this week.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Compare Matthew 18:27 with verses 34-35. In verse 27, the king released and forgave his servant’s huge debt. In verse 34, the king revoked his forgiveness and cast the unforgiving servant into a place of torture. Verse 35 states this is what God will do to “every one of you” unless you forgive other believers “from your heart.” Reflect on the following questions: ***What is the danger of basing a doctrine on a parable? What other passages can you cite to indicate that a believer does not lose his or her salvation?*** Summarize the main point of Jesus’s parable and how His warning in verse 35 should be understood.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 53 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We are not to put limits on our willingness to forgive.*
- *We can know that God is compassionate and willing to forgive.*
- *We are to forgive one another in the way God has forgiven us.*

DISCUSS:

Challenge adults to consider which statement resonates most deeply with their own struggle to forgive.

ASK:

Enlist a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions on page 53 of the PSG. Be ready to share your own reasons for not forgiving another person. Stress that forgiveness is required and that relationships suffer when mercy and compassion are missing from the equation.

REFLECT:

Play “O Come to the Altar” from the Engage option (p. 57) to close the session. Encourage adults to shape the song’s message into a silent prayer to God.

PRAY:

Encourage adults to read and respond silently to the second set of questions on page 53 of the PSG. Challenge them pray for the people they have listed and for the relationships that are suffering from a lack of forgiveness. Close in prayer.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send an email or text to the group this week encouraging them to continue praying about relationships that need forgiveness. If the Lord leads you to forgive someone this week, share that with the group as appropriate. Encourage adults to continue using **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) to continue reflecting on Matthew 18:22 and other verses in this week’s passage as God leads.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
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Our Task

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 28:1-10,16-20 **Memory Verse: Matthew 28:19-20**

Friday was a horrible day! Jesus, the one His followers believed was the Messiah sent by God to deliver Israel and establish His kingdom, had been arrested. He had been informally questioned before Annas, the patriarch of the high priestly family, along with the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council. He was sent to Pilate on a trumped-up political charge and shuffled on to Herod Antipas for interrogation. Eventually, He was sent back to Pilate for sentencing.

The death sentence sent Jesus to the cross and to six hours of intense physical and spiritual suffering as the One who “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). After a hasty burial, a great stone sealed the tomb. By Saturday, the Sabbath, all hope seemed to be lost. But Sunday morning made all the difference!

As you study this familiar passage, ask God to restore your awe and gratitude for the risen Savior. Challenge your group to remember that this is not just a story told once a year. It is a turning point—in history and in our lives as believers. Whatever we face, Jesus is alive, and He is with us each step of the way.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week’s study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



Most of us often remember the details of the moments we received bad news. We probably remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. Interestingly, sometimes we don't remember details when we receive good news. The joy of the news overshadows the specifics of how and when the news was received. This was not the case for the eyewitnesses to Jesus's resurrection. They could look back on the greatest news of all and remember vividly. (PSG, p. 54)

Why do you think we are selective in what we remember and what we forget?



Understand the Context (Matthew 28:1-20)

April 5 is Easter, bringing a glorious end to Passion Week and the start of a new week. A more appropriate name for Easter is Resurrection Sunday, which is how Christians in many places refer to it. Because Easter falls in the middle of this series in Matthew's Gospel, we have jumped ahead from chapter 18 to chapter 28.

Chapter 18 ended Jesus's extensive ministry in Galilee, while chapter 19 represents the beginning of His journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. By chapter 28 Jesus had not only completed His trip south to Judea, but He also had experienced arrest, trials, crucifixion, and burial. In the coming sessions, we will go back and pick up on Matthew's specific details of Jesus's move from Galilee to Judea. We'll even close with a study of Matthew's account of Jesus's crucifixion in chapter 27. But this week, we focus on the power of the empty tomb!

The immediate context for Matthew 28 relates to everything that happened after Jesus died on the cross (Matt. 27:33-56). All four Gospels record the story of Joseph of Arimathea going to Pilate and requesting that Jesus's body be released to him for burial (Matt. 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42). John added that Nicodemus was also involved in the burial of Jesus's body (John 19:39-42).

All three Synoptic Gospels record that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus held vigil at both the cross and the tomb, although

Luke refers to them as "the women" rather than by their names (Matt. 27:56,61; Mark 15:40,47; Luke 23:49,55). All of those involved in Jesus's burial had to leave before the job of preparing His body was finished because the Sabbath was set to begin at sunset.

However, Sabbath restrictions did not stop Jesus's religious enemies from going to Pilate "the next day," an episode only Matthew records (Matt. 27:62-66). The reason for their meeting with the Roman governor involved a request that he place soldiers at the tomb to guard it. They wanted to make it as secure as possible, in case Jesus's disciples might think about stealing His body and claiming He had risen from the dead.

They needn't have worried. Honestly, it was Jesus's opponents, not His followers, who took His prediction about rising after three days seriously (27:63). From the Gospel accounts, it appears none of Jesus's genuine followers had a resurrection on their radars. Instead, they spent their time in hiding, fearing that the Jewish leaders would come after them next.

Pilate granted the request and sent soldiers to the tomb. They placed a seal on the stone and stood guard. This action on Saturday prepares us for the next act in the narrative as Matthew 28 opens.

Read Matthew 28:1-10,16-20 and note the reactions of those who encountered the risen Savior. (PSG, p. 55)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28) and **Pack Item 4** (Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 28:19-20a).

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 54 of the PSG. Highlight September 11, 2001, and allow adults to share where they were on that day. Encourage the group to identify other significant cultural events people might remember in the same way. (Examples: a celebrity dying, a space shuttle disaster, a hurricane or tornado strike)

ASK:

Why do you think we are selective in what we remember and what we forget? (PSG, p. 54)

EXPLAIN:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28), explaining that the group temporarily is skipping to the end of Matthew to study Jesus’s resurrection.

CONTEXT:

To set the context for this session, share this information from Understand the Context:

The resurrection is crucial to the gospel message of salvation through Jesus. If Jesus had not risen, nothing would have been accomplished by His death. The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval on all that Jesus did on the cross. The resurrection is also factual. One of the most powerful testimonies in court is the word of eyewitnesses. Each of the Gospel writers in their own way highlighted the role of eyewitnesses to Jesus’s resurrection. Matthew . . . chose to emphasize the eyewitness account of two women: Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary. (PSG, p. 55)

TRANSITION:

We know that Easter is a special day for Christians. Today, we’ll consider how the resurrection should change our lives each and every day.



Group Activity Option

Music

Provide hymnals and direct adults to “Christ Arose” (or “Low in the Grave He Lay”) (*Baptist Hymnal 2008*, No. 273). Review the lyrics and encourage adults to share what words and phrases help them focus on the resurrection of Jesus. Invite them to suggest other favorite hymns or songs that highlight the importance of Jesus’s resurrection.

Believe (Matt. 28:1-7)

1 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb. **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. **3** His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. **4** The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men. **5** The angel told the women, “Don’t be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. **6** He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. **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.”

(v. 1) *After the Sabbath* was not meant to be understood as immediately after the Sabbath ended on Saturday evening, thus Matthew added *as the first day of the week was dawning*.

The two women, *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary*, are identified at Jesus’s crucifixion and burial (Matt. 27:56,61), as well as the empty tomb. Luke recorded that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene, and she began to follow Him and His disciples (Luke 8:2). The “other Mary” was the mother of James and Joseph (see Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40,47; 16:1; Luke 24:10) and also was among the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Aside from the crucifixion/resurrection accounts, we have no additional information about her.

The women left early that Sunday morning *to view the tomb*, thus continuing their vigil of Matthew 27:61. Mark added that they brought spices to anoint Jesus’s body (Mark 16:1).

(vv. 2-4) This is the second *earthquake* associated with Jesus’s death and resurrection. The first was on Friday afternoon when Jesus gave up His spirit (Matt. 27:51-54). Only Matthew mentioned this one, and he labeled it as *violent*. Matthew made it clear that this was no natural event. Instead, the source was *an angel of the Lord*. The angel, not the earthquake, *rolled back the stone* that had sealed the tomb. To further emphasize God’s work in the matter, he took his place *sitting on it* as he waited for the women to arrive.

Matthew compared the angel’s appearance to *lightning*, while his raiment was *white as snow*. These indicate power and purity. When the guards saw the angel they were *shaken*. Fear is the typical reaction to an appearance of an angel. *Shaken* (*seio*) shares a linguistic root with

“earthquake” in verse 2 (*seismos*, from which we get our word “seismology”). Like the earth, the soldiers also quaked and became *like dead men*.

(vv. 5-6) The angel encouraged the women to not *be afraid*. Again, fear was a typical response for those who encountered angels. Jesus also used similar wording in Matthew 14:27 and 17:7 (see also 28:10). The angel affirmed that the women had come *looking for Jesus who was crucified*, but he quickly let them know that *he is not here* because *he has risen* and is alive.

Just as he said points back to Jesus’s words to the apostles. On numerous occasions, Jesus had said that He would die and that He would be raised from the dead (12:40; 16:21; 17:9,23; 20:19; 26:32). Now, that prediction had come true. As always, Jesus is faithful to His promises.

In addition to providing information, the angel provided an invitation: *see the place where he lay*. Some suggest the women arrived at the wrong tomb, either because of the darkness or because of their grief. The angel’s words made it clear that they were at the correct tomb and that Jesus’s resurrection was physical, as well as spiritual.

(v. 7) Information and invitation were followed by instructions. The angel commissioned the women to *tell his disciples* two items: *He has risen* and *he is going ahead of you to Galilee*. The command to *go quickly* stresses the urgency of their task. Going to Galilee recalls Jesus’s promise of Matthew 26:32. Much of Jesus’s ministry, teaching, and miracles took place in Galilee (Matt. 4:12-19:1). The words did not preclude Jesus from meeting them in other places, but He would spend time with His disciples in Galilee, as verses 16-20 and John 21:1-23 verify.



APPLICATION POINT: We can trust that Jesus is risen because the tomb was empty.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 28:1-7 aloud as adults highlight words that describe the sights, sounds, and emotions.

RECAP:

Encourage adults to share what they know about Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Provide additional background:

In Matthew's Gospel, the eyewitnesses to the resurrection included the angels, the soldiers, and a group of women. Specifically, Matthew identified two of the women as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. These two women plus several others were at the crucifixion and had witnessed the burial of the body (see Matt. 27:61). Mary Magdalene was the one whom Jesus delivered from demon possession (Luke 8:2). The other Mary is identified in Mark's Gospel as the mother of the disciple James, known as James the younger to set him apart from James the brother of John (Mark 16:1). . . . These women had prepared spices to anoint the body of Jesus. (PSG, p. 56)

EXAMINE:

Group adults into three teams with the assignments below. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what they discussed in their teams.

- *Team 1: Identify the information provided by the angel in verses 5-6 and why it's important.*
- *Team 2: Identify the invitation extended by the angel in verse 6 and why it's important.*
- *Team 3: Identify the instructions given by the angel in verse 7 and why they are important.*

TRANSITION:

The encounter with the angel was shocking for the women. But it was only a prelude to a more amazing encounter to come.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Proof of Identity

Bring an example of personal identification to the session: driver's license, name badge for work, passport, and so forth. Allow adults to suggest what the item proves about you. Briefly discuss other forms of identification and why they are important. Point out that Jesus's empty tomb proved His identity as God's Son and Messiah. Challenge adults to reflect on what they can learn from the empty tomb.

Worship (Matt. 28:8-10)

8 So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news. **9** Just then Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. **10** Then Jesus told them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”

(v. 8) As commanded by the angel, the two Marys departed **quickly from the tomb**. In fact, Matthew wrote that the women **ran** to fulfill their new task. This is the second use of the word *quickly* (see v. 7), and it stresses their haste and obedience. Two emotions characterized the women as they left the tomb—**fear and great joy**. To this point, fear has dominated the narrative. In verse 4, the guards succumbed to fear, which says a lot considering the experiences of Roman soldiers. In verse 5 the angel urged the women not to fear. Here in verse 8, they ran from the tomb in fear.

Matthew doesn't specify the source of their fear. Perhaps they were afraid that the disciples wouldn't believe the magnificent story of the resurrection and would accuse them of being hysterical women. Luke 24:10-11 points out that the apostles initially thought the women's report was “nonsense.” Perhaps, they were still stunned from their angelic encounter. Whatever the cause, they demonstrated obedience to the command and moved forward despite their fear.

The second emotion attributed to the women was great joy. Matthew made significant use of the Greek word *me-gas* (translated here as “great”) across his passion narrative. In Matthew 27:46 Jesus “cried out with a loud (*me-gas*) voice.” In Matthew 27:60 “a great (*me-gas*) stone” sealed the entrance to the tomb. And in Matthew 28:2 he recorded a “violent (*me-gas*) earthquake” to mark the angel's arrival at the grave. Now, in 28:8, the women experienced great joy on hearing that Jesus was alive.

(v. 9) While the women were running to the disciples, **Jesus met them**. Matthew alone records this event. These women were the last at the cross (27:56), the last at the burial (27:61), but the first at the tomb (28:1). Now they were the first to see the risen Lord. This is the only appearance in Matthew's Gospel of the risen Lord in Jerusalem.

From the angel's message the women would not have expected to see the risen Lord until

they were back up in Galilee, so this encounter came suddenly and as a total surprise. Jesus's **Greetings!** was a common way to say “Hello” in first-century Jewish culture (see 26:49).

Apparently even while the women were still a little distance from Jesus, they recognized Him. So, when **they came up** to Him they **took hold of his feet, and worshiped him**. These two actions were significant, especially when taken together. For the women to grasp Jesus's feet, they needed to bow before Him. So the words not only emphasize an act of homage, but they also affirm that Jesus was physically present. Despite arguments to the contrary, He was not merely a spirit or hallucination.

Second, *worshiped him* shows they recognized the risen Lord's deity. During the wilderness temptation in Matthew 4:9-10, Jesus had told Satan that only God deserves worship. That Jesus accepted their worship affirmed He is God, just as the Father and the Spirit are God.

(v. 10) Once again the women were told **do not be afraid**. They had received this encouragement earlier from the angel (v. 5), but this time the risen Savior Himself was calming their fears. Jesus's words **leave for Galilee** and **see me there** repeat the angel's instructions in verse 7, as well as Jesus's own promise in Matthew 26:32. However, here Jesus referred to the disciples as **my brothers**. This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus identified the apostles with this intimate relational term (see John 20:17). While Jesus did have biological brothers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), He obviously meant the disciples, His spiritual family (Matt. 12:46-50; 23:8; 25:40; see also Ps. 22:22).

Galilee was where Jesus spent most of His ministry and where He taught His disciples the most. Neither Jesus nor the angel specified where in that large area of Galilee they would see Him, and neither the women nor the disciples asked for further details about the location.



APPLICATION POINT: Our appropriate response to Jesus’s resurrection is worship.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 28:8-10 aloud as adults consider carefully what worship looked like in this moment.

ASK:

What emotions did the women experience as they went to tell the disciples about Jesus’s resurrection? How did they respond to Jesus’s appearing?

ENGAGE:

Point out the phrases “quickly,” “with fear and great joy,” and “ran” in verse 8. Note that these terms reveal the women’s mixed emotions even as they obeyed the angel’s directions.

ASK:

How would you have responded to such an unexpected encounter with Jesus?

RECAP:

Discuss responses, adding the following insights regarding the women’s worship:

Imagine the scene. Suddenly, here is Jesus and He is saying to you, “Hello!” No wonder the immediate response of the women was to take hold of his feet in worship. . . . Jesus knew of both the fear and joy of the women. He told them “do not be afraid.” This was not a time for fear but joy. The joyful news of Jesus’s resurrection must be shared. That is why Jesus repeated the instructions of the angel to the women, “Go and tell the disciples.” (PSG, pp. 58-59)

BIBLE SKILL:

Encourage adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 61 of the PSG. Direct them to the resurrection accounts given in each Gospel: Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-20; Luke 24:1-52; and John 20:1-22 Encourage them to reflect on and respond to these questions: **What similarities do you see in these passages? What are some differences that help you get a more complete picture of the events surrounding the resurrection?** After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what they discovered as they dug into the other resurrection stories.

SHARE:

Highlight the term “brothers” in verse 10. Point out that this is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus used this familial term for His disciples. Note that everything was changing in light of the resurrection, including the way Jesus’s followers would know Him and relate to Him.

Share (Matt. 28:16-20)

16 The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted. **18** Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. **19** 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, **20** teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(v. 16) Both Luke (Luke 24:13-53) and John (John 20:19-29) reported other post-resurrection appearances in Jerusalem. But Matthew went directly to the journey of **the eleven disciples** to Galilee. The number *eleven* provides a subtle reminder of Judas’s betrayal. The **mountain** is unidentified, but the disciples knew where to go because **Jesus had directed them** to it. Also, no timing is mentioned for this meeting.

(v. 17) Matthew recorded two responses **when they saw** Jesus. Appropriately, **they worshiped** Jesus. However, a group also **doubted**. The worship response recalls the two Marys in verse 9 and emphasizes Jesus’s deity.

The fact that some doubted raises two issues. First, readers might wonder who doubted. Were they some of the eleven or were others present?

The second difficulty concerns what **doubted** means. Does it refer to unbelief or to a degree of hesitation and uncertainty? The word carries both meanings. Grammatically, the same Greek word is used in Matthew 14:31 of Peter’s hesitation when walking on the water. Thus, it might indicate some were not certain it was Jesus they were seeing and may have hesitated until He came closer to them. They also may have hesitated because they didn’t know how to respond to Jesus in this new situation (see Luke 24:38,41; John 20:24-29). Whatever the situation, Jesus did not take any specific steps to alleviate any doubts (contrary to Luke 24:36-43; John 20:26-28).

Key Doctrine

Evangelism and Missions

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. (See Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8.)

(vv. 18-20) The concept of **all** dominates the Great Commission. It refers to the **authority** Jesus provides and the **nations** believers are called to reach. Christians are expected to **observe everything** that Jesus commanded and to trust that His presence is **always** with them (literally, “all the days”).

Authority includes power and position. The Father **has . . . given** (a divine passive, see Matt. 11:27) Jesus this authority both **in heaven and on earth**. His authority is universal and all encompassing, and He makes that power available to those who follow Him.

On that basis disciples are commissioned to **go . . . make disciples of all nations . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them**. *Go* expands the mission beyond Galilee and Judea. *Make disciples* is the main verb and thus the emphasis of the commission. What’s more, the commission carries a universal focus, fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 17:5; 18:18; 22:18).

Baptizing and teaching are the means by which disciples are made. Baptizing is the initial step of obedience performed **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**.

The teaching is to ground new believers in their discipleship through Jesus’s own teaching. But this is no mere intellectual exercise. It requires obedience to all of Jesus’s commands.

The commission also emphasizes Jesus’s omnipresence. **I am with you** is emphatic and promises that the risen Lord will walk with His people in any situation **to the end of the age**.

Jesus’s Great Commission was not intended only for the eleven apostles, but for all disciples until He comes back. The resurrection signaled that Jesus’s earthly ministry was moving toward an end. But the responsibility of sharing the gospel and growing the kingdom was just getting started. We should be working at that task faithfully today—and every day until He returns.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers are to share the gospel with people of all nations.

READ:

Direct adults to read **Matthew 28:16-20** silently and to note what they see as the themes in the verses. After a few minutes, discuss responses. Note that these verses are known as Jesus’s Great Commission to His followers.

EXPLAIN:

Direct adults to **Pack item 4** (Poster: Key Verse: *Matthew 28:19-20a*). Summarize this content from pages 60-61 of the PSG to highlight the message of the Great Commission:

“The training of the disciples was now complete. The time had arrived for them to carry on the work Jesus had begun. Based on Jesus’s kingdom authority, the disciples were to draw more of God’s chosen ones into the kingdom. They were to ‘make disciples’. . . These disciples were to come from ‘all nations.’ This term *nations* speaks of all people groups everywhere. . . Making disciples involved two actions. First, they were to ‘mark’ these disciples by ‘baptizing them.’ Baptism was an outward declaration that one belonged to Jesus Christ by faith in His atoning work. . . Second, making disciples involved ‘teaching them to observe’ all that Jesus taught and commanded. Bringing the nations to faith was only part of the job. They would need to be nurtured in the teachings of Jesus.”



ASK:

What does this passage teach us about our role in Christ’s mission? (PSG, p. 61)

SHARE:

This is a huge task. But we don’t carry it out on our own. In addition to our brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus promised His power (v. 18) and His presence (v. 20). He has provided all we need to carry out His work until “the end of the age.”

Group Activity Option

Key Words

On the board, write the following key words from Matthew 28:19-20: *Go, make disciples, baptizing, teaching, with you*. Share that every believer has come to Christ because other believers fulfilled this Great Commission. Ask: **How can we know if our lives are aligned with the Great Commission of Jesus? Who can we tell?**

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:	Review these points from Apply the Text on page 62 of the <i>Personal Study Guide</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>We can trust that Jesus is risen because the tomb was empty.</i>• <i>Our appropriate response to Jesus's resurrection is worship.</i>• <i>Believers are to share the gospel with people of all nations.</i>
CHALLENGE:	Challenge adults to consider how each of these points should be a foundational element of our faith, not only at Easter but as we walk through life.
DISCUSS:	Invite a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions on page 62 of the PSG. Provide your own responses and allow volunteers to share their answers. Record ideas for sharing the gospel with others on the board and challenge adults to follow up on one of these ideas with someone they know this week.
REFLECT:	Draw attention back to Pack Item 4 (Poster: Key Verse: <i>Matthew 28:19-20a</i>). Remind adults that the power of Jesus's resurrection is the power that equips us to share the gospel with others. Challenge them to ask God to reveal His power through them this week.
PRAY:	Briefly share the second set of questions on page 62 of the PSG. Emphasize the power of a transformed life. Allow adults a few minutes to talk with God quietly about how they can live out His resurrection each day. Close the session in prayer.

AFTER THE SESSION

During the week, reach out to the group with an email or text. Encourage them to take time to notice “empty” things this week: an empty bird’s nest, an empty school bus, or even an empty house. Invite them to take a photo of what they see and to share it with your group. Challenge adults to use these spaces to help them focus on Jesus’s empty tomb.

LEADER BLOG



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EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.

Why We Can Trust the Resurrection

Bob Bunn

Within hours, myths surrounding the resurrection of Jesus began circulating on the first Easter morning. In his Gospel, Matthew explained that the religious leaders in Jerusalem—the nation’s spiritual guides—made a deal with the Romans to cover up the truth of the empty tomb. As a result, the story of a stolen body began gaining traction among resurrection skeptics (Matt. 28:11-15).

A MAJOR MYTH

More than two thousand years later, doubters still embrace this myth, even though simple logic states that no one had a good reason to steal the body of Jesus. Few Romans would have wanted to nurture a story about Jesus’s resurrection. If anything, they would have tamped down any messianic fervor a resurrection story could ignite. Likewise, the Jewish leaders understood that Jesus’s resurrection would threaten their authority and their own messianic interpretations.

Of course, the disciples were blamed for the stolen body, but even they didn’t have a good reason for robbing Jesus’s grave. None of them were plugged into the idea of a resurrected Savior. In some ways, they seemed more surprised than anyone by early reports of an empty tomb, even though Jesus had explained it to them on multiple occasions.

Plus, the Bible makes it clear that they spent the hours following the crucifixion hidden away in a locked room. It’s difficult to believe that any of them would have risked their lives trying to overpower trained Roman soldiers at the gravesite.

OTHER MYTHS

So, the “stolen body” theory really holds no water. In fact, none of the so-called “arguments” against the resurrection stand up to scrutiny. While trying to paint the Easter story as a myth, these “explanations” become myths in themselves:

- **The Swoon Theory:** This theory states that Jesus didn’t really die. He just passed out on the cross and revived in the cool air of the tomb. Of course, this completely ignores the soldier who thrust his spear into Jesus’s side to ensure He was dead. Romans were experts at crucifixion, and they were not about to be fooled by a “fainter.” The theory also fails to explain how a man recovering from incredible torture and a botched crucifixion managed to roll away a stone that would have taken several men to move. Honestly, connecting enough points to hold this theory together is more difficult than believing Jesus rose!
- **The Hypnosis Theory:** This theory basically assumes everyone who saw Jesus after the resurrection was the victim of some kind of mass hallucination—possibly a hypnotic suggestion planted by Jesus Himself before His death. But, again, the facts don’t support the claim. One would need to believe that literally hundreds of people would have fallen under the same spell across the course of six weeks. And then they’d have to explain how Saul of Tarsus (who likely would not have been around to experience a hypnotic suggestion) saw and spoke to the risen Christ years after the Lord returned to heaven.

- **The Wrong Tomb Theory:** On the surface, this is probably the most feasible argument against the resurrection. In their grief and confusion, before the sun came up on Easter morning, the women simply visited the wrong tomb. But this idea has two major problems. First, John and Peter ran to the tomb *after* sunrise and found it exactly as the ladies had described it. With the benefit of daylight, the chance that they made the same geographic blunder is unlikely. Even more, it would have been easy enough for the Romans to point people to the correct tomb—the one with Jesus’s body still tucked away inside. That never happened, so this argument ends up supporting a resurrection rather than debunking it.

BETTER EVIDENCE

In contrast to the explanations that don’t make sense, two very important realities provide solid arguments in favor of Jesus’s resurrection. The first is the abundance of eyewitness accounts. This began with the women’s arrival at the empty tomb on Easter morning. Since Jewish law discounted the testimony of women, no group trying to perpetuate a hoax would claim women as primary witnesses. But Christianity affirms the women’s witness because we know the resurrection is true.

Plus, as mentioned, the women were not the only witnesses. Literally hundreds of people encountered the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ. From Peter and John on Easter morning to the travelers on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening to the apostle Paul outside Damascus, biblical history offers a plethora of testimonies regarding a risen Savior.

But, for many, the greatest evidence of the resurrected Savior is the transformation seen in the lives of the disciples. Almost overnight, this band of cowards hiding in a locked room became an army of bold witnesses in the temple courtyards. And the more their enemies turned up the heat, the more determined they became to share the message of Christ with as many people as possible.

Honestly, it’s hard to imagine them enduring persecution—and ultimately sacrificing their lives—for a hoax. If the resurrection was some kind of scam or joke, they would have come clean as soon as the suffering started to hit home. But they didn’t. They remained faithful to the end, which validates the truth of their message.

WHY IT MATTERS

The resurrection of Jesus is vital to us because it provides the backbone for our faith. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, the apostle Paul outlined a spiritual domino effect that topples everything Christ followers hold dear if the resurrection isn’t true. If resurrection is impossible, then Jesus wasn’t raised. If Jesus wasn’t raised, then the gospel is a fraud. If the gospel is a fraud, our faith—and our eternal hope—is worthless.

Going on, Paul noted that if our faith is worthless, we are the most pitiful people on the face of the earth. We should be out doing whatever we want with no guilt or consequences instead of following the teachings of a dead man. Nothing really matters because Jesus isn’t really alive and will never really come back to either judge us or reward us.

But Paul put the brakes on the dominoes with one simple statement of faith: “But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead” (1 Cor. 15:20). As a result, we know that He is alive and that He is at work in us. Our faith is not in vain. We have purpose. All the so-called sacrifices make sense in light of the bigger picture. Best of all, our hope for eternity remains secure.

And no amount of skepticism or philosophical theories can change that.

He is risen indeed!

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Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 19:16-30 Memory Verse: Matthew 19:26

When people brought some children to Jesus for a blessing, His disciples tried to stop them. But Jesus rebuked His followers, telling them to let the children come to Him because they represented what kingdom life should look like (Matt. 19:14). Right after that, a young and wealthy Jewish leader gave Jesus the perfect object lesson. He came seeking eternal life (v. 16), but he walked away grieving once Jesus exposed his true self-centered values. Jesus told His disciples that entering the kingdom requires humble, childlike faith (vv. 23-24), not wealth or influence. He added that all those who surrender the things they hold dear to follow Him would be rewarded in eternity (vv. 27-29).

As you dig into this session's verses, think about what "eternal life" means to you. How does the life Jesus has granted you affect the way you live each day? Ask God to show you ways to remind adults that salvation is impossible to obtain by human merit and comes totally by God's grace. Use the truths of this lesson to provide a biblical perspective on wealth and possessions, including how materialistic values can stand in the way of people becoming followers of Jesus.



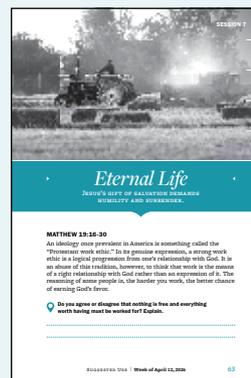
Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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An ideology once prevalent in America is something called the “Protestant work ethic.” In its genuine expression, a strong work ethic is a logical progression from one’s relationship with God. It is an abuse of this tradition, however, to think that work is the means of a right relationship with God rather than an expression of it. The reasoning of some people is, the harder you work, the better chance of earning God’s favor. (PSG, p. 63)

Do you agree or disagree that nothing is free and everything worth having must be worked for? Explain.



Understand the Context (Matthew 19:1-30)

After skipping ahead to Matthew 28 for Easter, we return to Matthew 18, where Jesus concluded His long and extensive Galilean ministry. It was almost time for the annual Feast of Tabernacles in the fall, approximately six months before Jesus’s crucifixion in Jerusalem.

According to Matthew 19:1, Jesus “departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan.” What Matthew doesn’t record is the three-month period of Jesus’s Judean ministry between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication in the winter (John 10:22). Only John’s Gospel (John 7:11–10:39) and Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:1–13:21) record these events in Judea. John recorded that Jesus’s ministry in Judea ended with the Feast of Dedication when He was asked to state plainly if He was the Messiah or not. Because Jesus called God “my Father” and claimed to be one with the Father, the Jews who heard Him tried to stone Him or arrest Him. But Jesus “escaped” and “departed again across the Jordan” (John 10:22–40).

This escape put Jesus in the area of Perea on the east side of the Jordan, an area controlled by Herod Antipas (Luke 13:31–32). Luke recorded several instances of Jesus’s teaching, sharing parables, and healing in Perea (13:22–18:14), and John added the account of Jesus raising Lazarus.

After Caiaphas (the high priest) and other religious leaders heard about Jesus raising Lazarus, they were fearful that “everyone will

believe in him,” so they began their plans to kill Him. Meanwhile, Jesus headed north to a small town called Ephraim (John 11:45–54), after which He traveled through Samaria and back up to Galilee (Luke 17:11).

As Passover neared, crowds traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the holy day and the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread that followed it. To make this journey from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, Jews crossed over the Jordan River to the east into the territory of Perea and moved south to avoid Samaria. Luke picked up the southern journey in Perea, sharing that Jesus visited several small towns on His way toward Jerusalem (Luke 13:22). Luke also recorded much of this early travel in Perea in Luke 13:23–18:14.

At this point, the narratives recounted in Matthew 19:1–12 and Mark 10:1–12 coalesce. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15) begin to match toward the end of Jesus’s Perea ministry. This takes readers to the opening of this session, a story about the path to eternal life found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Read Matthew 19:16–30 in your Bible. How would you describe what the young ruler thought would give him eternal life? (PSG, p. 64)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Greatness in the Kingdom*).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 63 of the PSG. Engage adults to share some of the things they learned about work as they were growing up.

ASK:

Do you agree or disagree that nothing is free and everything worth having must be worked for? Explain. (PSG, p. 63)

INFORM:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Greatness in the Kingdom*) to each person in the group. Encourage adults to scan the article silently and to note insights about how ancient Israelites defined greatness.

CONTEXT:

Share that after another heated confrontation with religious leaders, Jesus took time to bless a group of children. Draw attention to the following from Understand the Context to explain why Jesus allowed the children to come to Him:

Jesus spoke of the dependence of children as an example of the childlike humility needed by all to be a part of the kingdom of God. . . . This thought links this humility with the proper way to enter eternal life as explained in the next verses in this chapter. (PSG, p. 64)

ASK:

How is childlike humility different from our cultural understanding of a strong work ethic?

TRANSITION:

Matthew connected being like a child (Matt. 19:13-15) to our focal passage about the young man looking for eternal life. As we study this walking object lesson, consider what eternal life means to you and how you can demonstrate your relationship with God in practical ways each day.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play a recording of “The Lord is My Salvation” by Keith and Kristyn Getty. If possible, provide lyric sheets and invite adults to sing along. Challenge adults to consider their own salvation experience as they sing the song in worship. Encourage them to use this session as a chance to evaluate their walk with God and to remove anything that looks like works-based faith in their lives.

Unwilling (Matt. 19:16-22)

16 Just then someone came up and asked him, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” **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.” **18** “Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; **19** honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself. **20** “I have kept all these,” the young man told him. “What do I still lack?” **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.” **22** When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

(v. 16) Matthew opened this narrative with the phrase *just then*. The *someone* who approached Jesus is identified in verse 20 as a “young man” (possibly in his 20s to 40s). Luke 18:18 also labeled him a “ruler,” perhaps in a synagogue like Jairus (Mark 5:22). Each of the Synoptic Gospels state that the man was wealthy (Matt. 19:22; Mark 10:22; Luke 18:23). Combining all these descriptions explains why this account is often referred to as that of “The Rich Young Ruler.”

The man addressed Jesus as *Teacher*, a form of respect. Mark noted that he also knelt before Jesus (Mark 10:17). The man’s first question concerned *eternal life*. The way the man formulated his question, *What good must I do?*, reveals that he believed salvation could be earned by merit.

(v. 17) Jesus’s first response to the young man’s question was a question of His own: *Why do you ask me about what is good?* Jesus then continued, *there is only one who is good*. Jesus was not denying His own deity by this statement. Instead, He was reminding the man that God already had defined what was good. Thus the man should not have needed to ask what he needed to do. The answer was to obey God’s revelation.

Likewise, when Jesus told the man to *keep the commandments*, He was not affirming salvation by works. As the dialogue moves forward, it will become clear that Jesus verified that the young man had not kept God’s commandments in spite of his claims to the contrary.

(vv. 18-20) When the man asked his second question (*Which ones?*), he should have known the correct answer would have been “all of them.” However, since the rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Pentateuch, his question perhaps

was reasonable. Jesus answered by listing the sixth through the ninth commandments, along with the fifth commandment. Each one highlights ethical duties and human relationships (Ex. 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20). Jesus placed the commandment to honor one’s parents out of order, giving it special attention and emphasis. To these commands Jesus appended Leviticus 19:18.

The man claimed to have *kept all these* commandments since childhood. The word *all* comes first in his statement, giving it emphasis and including all of the law’s expectations. But he realized he needed something more in his life, so he asked a third question: *What do I still lack?*

Key Doctrine

Salvation

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. (See John 14:6; Acts 4:12.)

(vv. 21-22) *Perfect* refers to a complete commitment to God’s will. This is what the man believed he wanted, so Jesus put His finger on his fatal flaw. The man needed to *sell your belongings and give to the poor*. The young man’s response showed that he had fallen short of the first commandment on other gods and the tenth commandment on covetousness. He also failed to love his neighbor as himself.

Jesus was not giving the man a task to earn salvation, but He did confront a major hindrance to eternal life. In the end, the man loved his *many possessions* more than obtaining eternal life. Unlike disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew who had left everything to follow Jesus, this man walked away *grieving*.



APPLICATION POINT: We can affirm that eternal life cannot be achieved by human achievement.

EXPLAIN:

Direct adults to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28). Point out that the events in today’s session took place as Jesus’s ministry turned back toward Jerusalem.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 19:16-22 aloud as the group considers the man’s motivation for coming to Jesus. Use information from Matthew 19:16 in the Leader Guide (p. 80) to describe the man’s background.

ASK:

What was the significance of this man’s question?

ENLIGHTEN:

Read the following content to explain the “why” behind the man’s questions about eternal life:

From every indication this inquiry was sincere. What is surprising is the fact that this wealthy young man would admit he lacked eternal life. He knew something was missing from his life. . . . He was eager to fix his emptiness. Here was a young man seeking hope for this life and for life after death. (PSG, p. 65)

ASK:

What are some common views on how to receive eternal life? (PSG, p. 67)

SHARE:

This man thought he had it all together. He claimed to keep all the commands, including those focused on our “horizontal” relationships with others. But Jesus cut through the man’s delusions. He revealed some gaps in the man’s understanding of what it means to keep the law. More important, He pinpointed the man’s biggest failure: allowing his stuff to become his god. None of us can fill God’s spot in our lives with material possessions. We can’t earn salvation, and we can’t earn a meaningful relationship with Him.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Umbrella

Bring an umbrella to the session. Lead a brief discussion about how an umbrella can protect us from either the heat of the sun or rain and other precipitation. Explain: *While it’s not a perfect comparison, God also protects us. He covers us with the umbrella of His grace. But many choose to step outside that protection and face storms and heat alone.* Encourage the group to embrace the protection Jesus provides.

Possible (Matt. 19:23-26)

23 Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. **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.” **25** When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, “Then who can be saved?” **26** Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

(vv. 23-24) The encounter with the wealthy young man provided a teachable moment for Jesus’s disciples. **Truly I tell you** emphasizes that Jesus was about to share something important, something that needed to be listened to carefully (see Matt. 5:18).

Jesus said it is **hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven**, but it’s not impossible. *Enter the kingdom of heaven* is another way of referring to salvation (5:20; 7:21; 18:3). The words **again I tell you** show that Jesus’s saying in verse 24 is a basic repetition of verse 23.

In verse 24, Jesus used hyperbole to illustrate a ridiculous situation—a **camel**, the largest of the animals in the Middle East, trying **to go through the eye of a needle**, the smallest opening in a commonly used item. People sometimes suggest that Jesus was referring to a very low, narrow gate that a camel would have to get on its knees to crawl through. This is an attempt to make an impossible situation seem difficult, but doable. However, no such gate existed and trying to interpret Jesus’s words in this way actually reverses His point. Jesus wanted to emphasize the utter uselessness of trying to squeeze a camel through a needle.

Personal wealth, or any other merit an individual might be tempted to trust, will never get anyone into heaven. But what is impossible for humans to do on their own can be accomplished through God’s power (as verse 26 will make clear). The phrase **kingdom of God** is rare in Matthew’s Gospel. He uses it only three times: here, in 12:28, and in 21:31,43. But it is the equivalent to his preferred term “kingdom of heaven” in the previous verse.

(v. 25) **The disciples** clearly understood Jesus’s meaning and were **utterly astonished** by it. Elsewhere in his Gospel, Matthew noted that crowds were astonished at Jesus’s teaching (7:28; 13:54; 22:33). The imperfect tense of the verbs in those passages indicates that the people were left in a

continuing state of astonishment. To this sense of amazement Matthew added the word *utterly*, which also can be translated “exceedingly.”

Their shock at Jesus’s pronouncement is understandable within historical context. In the theology of that day, wealth and prosperity were taken as signs of God’s blessing for a pious life. Ancient Jewish scholars would point to passages like Deuteronomy 7:12-13; 28:1-14; Proverbs 10:22; 22:4; and the example of Job (Job 1:1-3) to validate their arguments. So, it ran counter to all conventional wisdom for Jesus to say that rich people would struggle to enter the kingdom.

In light of this new idea, the disciples wanted to know **then who can be saved?** As they understood Jesus’s statement the answer would have been “No one.” The disciples’ word *saved* is the fifth term used to refer to salvation in this narrative. The rich ruler used “eternal life” (v. 16), to which Jesus responded with the shorter form “life” (v. 17). Jesus then used the phrases “to be perfect” (v. 21), “kingdom of heaven” (v. 23) and “kingdom of God” (v. 24). The Greek word for *can* in the disciples’ question (*dynatai*) literally means “power.” So, it can be rendered, “Who has the power to be saved?”

(v. 26) Matthew said that **Jesus looked at them**, which means that He fixed His gaze on them as He declared two things. First, He emphasized the total impossibility of humans to save themselves (**with man this is impossible**). Second, He stated that God is not limited by humanity’s limitations (**with God all things are possible**).

The word **but** marks the contrast between what people cannot do and what God can do. This declaration was not new, and the disciples should have known it from God’s interaction with Abraham (Gen. 18:14), Job’s reply to the Lord (Job 42:1-2), or Jeremiah’s confession of God’s power (Jer. 32:17).



APPLICATION POINT: We can be encouraged knowing salvation is received as a gift from God.

INTRODUCE:

Remind the group that a crowd (Matt. 19:2) and the disciples (19:13) were with Jesus during the encounter with the young man. Explain that, in the next verses, we see that even Jesus's closest followers were flabbergasted by the scene.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 19:23-26 aloud as adults listen carefully for the reaction of the disciples.

ASK:

Why were the disciples “utterly astonished” (v. 25)?

EXPLAIN:

Note that Jesus reinforced His statement with a hyperbole of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Point out that the picture of a large camel trying to fit through such a tiny opening would have seemed impossible. Share that, in essence, Jesus was saying squeezing a camel through a needle and a rich man getting into the kingdom both required acts of God.

RECAP:

Explain why the disciples were shocked by Jesus's words:

Jesus's statement here was in direct contradiction to the traditions of Judaism that intimated that a person's wealth gave evidence of God's favor. Wealthy Jews often thought they could purchase a more favored position with God through their gifts to the temple or through the giving of alms to the poor. Jesus, however, taught something very different. . . . Wealth or poverty didn't matter. Only God can bring salvation to a person, for with Him all things are possible. Salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God is dependent on God and God alone. (PSG, p. 68)

ASK:

Why was Jesus so hard on rich people? (PSG, p. 68)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Compare Jesus's teachings in Matthew 19:16-22 to Matthew 6:19-24. Identify Jesus's statements in chapter 6 that are represented in the life of the would-be disciple in chapter 19. Reflect on the following: **How might possessions become detrimental to a believers' commitment to follow Jesus? What are some things that God might be calling you to surrender in order to follow Him?**

Reward (Matt. 19:27-30)

27 Then Peter responded to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?” **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. **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. **30** But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

(v. 27) As usual, Peter spoke up for the disciples (Matt. 14:28; 15:15; 16:16,22; 17:4; 18:21). Having heard Jesus tell the man to sell his possessions, Peter pointed out that the apostles had done just that: ***We have left everything and followed you.*** In Greek, *we* is placed first for emphasis. Peter’s follow-up—***what will there be for us?***—may seem presumptuous, but it was a natural question arising out of his (and the other disciples’) confusion or uncertainty.



The Synoptic Gospels

Learn more about how the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer a unified, yet distinct, portrait of Jesus’s life and ministry.

(v. 28) Again Jesus began His announcement with ***truly I tell you***, as in verse 23, to stress its importance. The phrase ***renewal of all things*** refers to the cosmic renewal of the whole creation (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; Rev. 21:1). At that time, ***the Son of Man***, Jesus’s favorite title for Himself, will sit ***on his glorious throne***. Drawn from Daniel 7 and Psalm 110, this image does not merely describe the throne itself, but also the glory of the reigning Christ. Additionally, Jesus promised that His apostles ***will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.***

The word *judging* can mean “having authority over” and has led to various interpretations. Some think it means each apostle will judge a particular tribe of Israel. Others believe the apostles will judge the tribes collectively.

Those who believe God has a separate plan for Israel and the church understand this promise to mean that the apostles will have ruling authority over those redeemed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Those who believe that the

promises to Israel are spiritually fulfilled in the church understand this to mean that believers will be involved in the judgment (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

(v. 29) Jesus’s shift to ***everyone who*** widened His reference from the apostles to all believers who follow Jesus across the ages. While these other believers won’t sit on thrones judging, they will be rewarded for their sacrifices. Jesus said that those whose loyalty to Him led them to leave ***houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields . . . will receive a hundred times more.*** Jesus named seven items. Two of those items referred to possessions—*houses* and *fields*—and are plural, indicating that a person might own at least one or both.

The other items referred to the closest of three generations of family relations—*brothers* and *sisters*, along with *father*, *mother*, and *children*. Elsewhere, Jesus used *hundred times more* to refer to a disproportionate, miraculous increase (Matt. 13:8,23). The point is that the reward far exceeds whatever was sacrificed.

And in addition to that great reward, Jesus’s followers also carry the assurance that they ***will inherit eternal life.*** This brings the conversation back to the young ruler’s original question (19:16), which led to this teaching opportunity. *Eternal life* means a life with no end, but it also involves more than that. It refers to the quality of one’s life, a quality that is fit for eternity and still has an impact on our lives here on earth.

(v. 30) God’s kingdom turns this world’s values upside down. ***Many who are first*** now ***will be last*** in God’s kingdom. At the same time, many who might be considered last in this present age, will be first in the eternal kingdom. The kingdom is all about faithfulness. Anyone who entrusts their future to Christ now will realize the reward of life with Him in eternity.



APPLICATION POINT: We can know that following Jesus is worth it, no matter what it costs—the greatest reward being eternal life.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 19:27-30 aloud as the rest of the group considers the tone of Peter’s words and Jesus’s response.

ASK:

How would you characterize Peter’s tone with Jesus? Why?

SHARE:

Acknowledge that Peter’s statement and question sounds greedy or self-serving. Remind adults that he probably was trying to process what Jesus was saying. Note that he may have been confused and wondered how the sacrifices he and the other disciples had made fit into Jesus’s bigger plan.

ASK:

What have you left behind to follow Jesus? Is there anything that hinders you from following Jesus? (PSG, p. 70)

RECAP:

Note that Jesus did not chastise Peter, but pointed him beyond worldly rewards toward eternity. Summarize this information from pages 69-70 of the PSG to highlight what Jesus promised:

“To the disciples, Jesus gave the promise that they would also sit on twelve thrones and judge over the twelve tribes of Israel. . . . The reference to the twelve tribes of Israel might refer to the actual tribes of Israel or could be a reference to all of God’s redeemed people. . . . Jesus next included all those who make Him their priority. They, too, will be rewarded. Everyone who forsakes everything and everyone because of my name will be rewarded a hundred times more. The reward of a hundred times more speaks of a reward that is out of proportion to what is sacrificed. It will be much more than is expected. . . . On the other hand, people like the rich young ruler may be regarded as first in this life, but in the judgment to come will find they are last and left out of God’s heavenly reward.”

EXAMINE:

Guide adults through the Plan of Salvation on the inside front cover of the PSG. Explain that the young man walked away from Jesus because he wasn’t willing to accept Him as Lord and Savior. Urge adults to consider where they stand with Jesus and let them know that you will be available to speak with anyone who has questions about a relationship with Jesus.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 71 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- We can affirm that eternal life cannot be achieved by human achievement.
- We can be encouraged knowing salvation is received as a gift from God.
- We can know that following Jesus is worth it, no matter what it costs—the greatest reward being eternal life.

ASK:

How are you trying to “do good” as a way to please the Lord? How has today’s study pointed you toward a different standard for your relationship with God?

CHALLENGE:

Challenge adults to reconsider their work ethic in terms of faith.

DISCUSS:

Direct adults to read the first set of questions on page 71 of the PSG. Remind adults that, while hard work is noble and good in many areas of life, it’s not a way to connect with God. Challenge the group to consider how to receive salvation and God’s daily blessings as His gift of grace, not as a payment for hard work.

PRAY:

Close by giving adults an opportunity to pray, assigning one person to open and another to close. Encourage adults to consider their own tendency to “work” for their salvation and blessings, as well as how they might better yield to God, accepting His free gift of grace.

AFTER THE SESSION

This week, spend time praying for each adult, especially those who may need to speak with you about the Plan of Salvation. Text or call each person, thanking them for being in the group and offering to pray for them. Send a text or email to the larger group, encouraging them to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 71 of the PSG. Remind them that anything they give up to follow Jesus is not really lost.

LEADER EXTRAS



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EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.



Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 20:1-16 Memory Verse: Matthew 20:16

In Matthew 20, we instinctively agree with the men in the first group. They were hired early, labored for twelve hours, and sweated through the hottest part of the day. On the surface, their compensation does seem unfair when compared to those who worked only an hour. But, as the owner pointed out, he had the right to show generosity to everyone who worked for him. What some might call unfairness actually represented grace.

Sometimes, we expect more for what we've done, and we begin to grumble and complain. We think we deserve better—maybe even from God. But God's values run counter to our natural way of thinking. He is a generous God who loves to give—even to those who don't "deserve" it. Truth is, none of us really deserve any grace from His hand. Thankfully, God does not pay based on merit. He gives based on His generosity.

As you prepare to lead this lesson on God's grace to all people, write down what you remember about times God has shown His amazing grace toward you. Reflect on how your life has changed because of His mercy. Consider sharing it with the adults in your Bible study as a way to challenge them to remember His grace.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Everybody wants to be treated fairly. We become resentful when we perceive we have not received equal treatment. “Unfair,” we cry as we demand justice. “He got a bigger piece of cake!” “Her bonus was larger than mine, and I did most of the work.” We always want what we think we deserve. Yet life often is unfair. Life never levels the playing field for all those participating. Some are treated better, others are pushed down, but all suffer under the inequalities of life. (PSG, p. 72)

Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?



Understand the Context (Matthew 20:1-34)

Matthew 20 is a continuation from chapter 19. Many scholars note that the Bible’s chapter divisions are not found in ancient manuscripts. Instead, they were introduced in the thirteenth century and, unfortunately, obscure the connection between the narrative in chapter 19 and the parable in chapter 20.

Bible students also propose different explanations for why Jesus told this parable. Some think He intended to contrast the religious who thought they had earned God’s favor with the tax collectors and sinners who didn’t “deserve” such grace. Others believe Jesus intended to contrast the Jewish people with Gentiles who were considered outsiders and unworthy of the kingdom. Still, others take the long view and suggest that Jesus was warning His contemporaries not to presume greater privileges than those who would believe in the centuries to come. And some think that Jesus was warning those who served Him faithfully not to despise those who either came to faith late in life or even on their deathbed.

However, since chapter 20 continues the episode of chapter 19, it is best to understand the main application of Jesus’s warning as being to His own apostles to whom He had just promised great rewards in the future kingdom (Matt. 19:28).

In chapter 19, a rich, young ruler had come to Jesus, asking about eternal life (19:16). Jesus gently led the man to see that his passion for possessions was stronger than His desire to follow

Jesus. He challenged the man to sell his belongings so He could follow Jesus with his whole heart. But the man walked away (19:21-22).

Speaking for the other disciples, Peter pointed out their commitment to Jesus. They had left their old lives behind and wondered what it meant for their future (19:27). Jesus assured them that they would be rewarded in God’s eternal kingdom. In that renewed era, they would sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28).

Jesus then shared that in God’s kingdom, the values of this life are reversed. Those who think they are first will be last, while those who seem stuck at the end will be first (19:30). To impress this lesson on His disciples, Jesus told a parable called “The Workers in the Vineyard” in Matthew 20:1-16. This story describing the kingdom of heaven and its rewards ends with a similar note as 19:30, except in reverse order.

Jesus’s parable is another way in which He stated, “the kingdom of heaven is like.” By one count, of the forty-three parables Jesus told, thirteen were about the kingdom. Twelve of those are in Matthew’s Gospel. Of the twelve that Matthew included, seven are in chapter 13 alone (13:11,24,31,33,44,45,47,52). This one is unique to Matthew’s Gospel.

Read Matthew 20:1-16 in your Bible and put yourself in the story. How would you react had you been among those who were hired at the first hour? (PSG, p. 73)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Parables of Jesus*). Make copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Matthew Time Line*) and **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*).

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 72 of the PSG. Stress the sentence “We always want what we think we deserve” by re-reading it.

ASK: **Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?** (PSG, p. 72)

CONTEXT: Point out **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Parables of Jesus*). Introduce today’s lesson by explaining that Jesus often used parables to help believers grasp spiritual and eternal questions. Share the following content from Understand the Context to highlight the events leading up to this study:

The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is the capstone of the larger section of teaching found in 19:16–20:16. This sequence of events and teachings began with the inquiry of the rich young ruler. It continued with a discussion between Jesus and the disciples concerning the rewards of following Jesus. To illustrate the truths concerning eternal life and eternal rewards, Jesus shared the parable that begins chapter 20. What is profound about this section is the reversal of all that might be expected from a human perspective. . . . The people of Jesus’s day expected the rich would be treated differently than the poor. The disciples were surprised at Jesus’s teaching about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turned all these expectations on their ear. (PSG, p. 73)

TRANSITION: Last week, we learned that no one gets to heaven based on their position or possessions. Today’s passage emphasizes God’s goodness and grace as He offers salvation to all.



Group Activity Option

Music

Direct adults’ attention to “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” (*Baptist Hymnal 2008, No. 502*). After singing the first verse of the hymn, ask, **According to this verse, why is it so sweet to trust in Jesus?** Discuss responses. Challenge adults to examine each verse of the song to identify more reasons believers can trust Jesus.

Workers Hired (Matt. 20:1-7)

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. **3** When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. **5** About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. **6** Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ **7** ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”

(vv. 1-2) The term *for* continues Matthew’s look at the teaching of Jesus related to topic of rewards (Matt. 19:27-29). **The kingdom of heaven is like** is a formulaic simile that Jesus used to begin other kingdom parables (13:11,24,31,33,44,45,47,52). This parable concerns **a landowner** who owned **a vineyard**.

On a symbolic level, the owner represents God, while vineyards often represented Israel in Scripture (Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 12:10). However, viticulture was common in ancient Israel, especially in the fertile soil of Galilee. That the landowner needed to return to the marketplace so many times to hire more workers suggests that his vineyard was large.

The story is set at harvest. The ripe grapes needed to be picked before they rotted or were damaged by a storm. Grape harvest was labor-intensive as each cluster had to be cut by hand. So the landowner **went out early in the morning to hire workers**. These were day laborers, who would gather in the local marketplace (v. 3) and wait to be hired. Going early suggests the landowner was looking for the best workers who were willing to give him a full day’s work.

Being there early, the landowner had no trouble finding workers. He negotiated with them for the normal rate of **one denarius** for the day (Matt. 18:28; 22:19). A *denarius* was a Roman silver coin. With their compensation set, **he sent them into his vineyard for the day**.

(vv. 3-4) The landowner later returned to the **marketplace**. **About nine in the morning** means “about the third hour.” The Jews began their day at sunrise, approximately 6 a.m.

On returning to the marketplace, the landowner **saw others standing . . . doing nothing** (literally “without work”). The narrative does not record any negotiation for their pay. The landowner simply promised to **give you whatever is right** (that is, something “just” or “fair”). These workers needed to trust the landowner’s word that he would pay them, and they probably figured they would get less than a denarius since they already lost three hours of the workday.

(vv. 5-7) Three more times the landowner returned to the marketplace looking for workers: **about noon** (“about the sixth hour”), **about three** (“about the ninth hour”), and **about five** (literally, “about the eleventh hour”). In none of these hirings did the landowner negotiate payment, but the words **did the same thing** probably indicate that he told those workers he would pay them what was right, as he did with those he hired at 9 a.m.

The case is different with those hired about five because the landowner saw them **standing around**. When he asked why they had been standing there all day, they told him that **no one hired us**. While these men clearly wanted work, their response may hint that they were the most undesirable of workers. Still, the landowner decided to give them a chance—**you also go into my vineyard**, the same words he used to those he hired in verse 4.

This time nothing is said about remuneration at all. The owner did not even promise to pay them what is right (v. 4 and implied in v. 5). However, Jesus placed special emphasis on this group by noting their direct discourse with the landowner. No other group of hired laborers had their words shared in the story.



APPLICATION POINT: We can trust God to always do what is right.

SHARE: Explain that today’s passage is about a kingdom, God’s eternal kingdom. Hand out copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Matthew Time Line*). Encourage adults to list all the kingdoms that had ruled the promised land since the exile in 586 BC.

SAY: *The Jews had been subject to many kingdoms in their history. In Jesus’s day, the Romans were in charge. But God’s kingdom would be nothing like those.*

READ: **Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 20:1-7 aloud** as the group considers the details of Jesus’s parable.

DISCUSS: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*). Lead a brief discussion on how the principles in the article can be applied to this parable.

ASK: **What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay?** (PSG, p. 75)

ENLIGHTEN: Walk through each of the times the landowner hired a new group of workers. Share this insight into the landowner’s actions and motives:

The landowner was filled with compassion for these laborers who desperately needed to work each day. It wasn’t so much that more workers were required. Instead, this was a benevolent landowner giving to these workers what they desperately needed. . . . He promised to give them whatever is right. (PSG, p. 75)

HIGHLIGHT: Affirm that the landowner promised to give each group what was right. Share that since the landowner represents God, we can trust Him to always do what is right in every situation.



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Encourage the group to work in pairs to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 79 of the PSG. Direct them to read articles on “vineyards” and “denarius” from a Bible dictionary and to record significant insights they find. Encourage them to talk to one another about what they find in light of this session’s focal passages. After a few minutes, discuss what made the setting of Jesus’s parable (hiring day-laborers to work in a vineyard) so effective for addressing Jesus’s audience.

Equally Paid (Matt. 20:8-12)

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.’ **9** When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. **10** So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. **11** When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: **12** ‘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.’”

(v. 8) *When evening came*, the 12-hour workday ended. The **owner of the vineyard** can also mean “the lord” (*kurios*). Highlighting *kurios* at this turning point in the parable reminded Jesus’s disciples that the owner represented God.

A **foreman** supervised the property for the owner. At the end of the day, the owner told his foreman to gather the laborers and to **give them their pay**. In the law, day workers were to be paid at the end of each day (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15) because their family’s daily existence depended on it. Further, the foreman was instructed to distribute the wages **starting with the last and ending with the first**. It is not clear if this practice was unusual or not, but it certainly aligns with the point of Jesus’s parable and with Jesus’s sayings in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16.

(vv. 9-10) The workers **hired about five** had worked only one hour, with no guarantee regarding pay (v. 7). Given that, they must have been incredibly surprised when **each received one denarius**—a whole day’s pay!

The groups hired at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. are not essential to the story, but we can assume that they all received a denarius as well. When the time came to pay the workers hired at 6 a.m., **they assumed they would get more** for a full day’s work. However, **they also received a denarius**.

(v. 11) If these workers had been paid first, they would have left and never known what the owner did for the others. But because they were paid in reverse order, their expectations began to build to the point of entitlement. As a result, **they began to complain to the landowner**.

The landowner became a target of their discontent. The Greek wording indicates that once they began to complain, they continued for a while. In fact, the Greek word for *complain* is

related to the Old Testament term that described the Israelites’ ongoing grumbling about God, Moses, and Aaron in the wilderness (Ex. 17:3; Num. 14:2-36).

(v. 12) The men hired earliest in the day felt they had been treated unfairly—even though they had agreed to work for a denarius in verse 2. Once they saw that those who had **put in one hour** were **made . . . equal to us**, they felt the injustice of the situation. Their attitudes were heightened by **the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat**. These workers were resentful that those who had only done what they considered an insignificant amount of work received the same privilege as those who worked a full twelve-hour shift.

They considered equal treatment to be unequal! They also were resentful because the last group was not exposed to the heat of the day. **Bore** carries the idea of “suffered” or “endured a difficulty,” while *burden* suggests carrying a heavy load. Metaphorically, it also can be used to describe hardships in general. *The burning heat* refers not only to the blazing Middle Eastern sun, but also to the hot sirocco winds that swept in from the desert (Job 27:21; Jer. 18:17; Jonah 4:8).

These workers felt their work had been disrespected and discounted. And they were not hesitant about giving voice to their frustrations.

Key Doctrine

God

God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. (See Isaiah 40:25; Matthew 6:9)



APPLICATION POINT: We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.

READ:

Instruct adults to read Matthew 20:8-12 silently, considering the tone of the workers.

EXPLAIN:

Jesus’s parable reached a turning point in these verses. Everyone received a denarius, but those who had been out for twelve hours felt shortchanged by the landowner.

ASK:

Do you think what each worker received was fair? Why or why not?

ENGAGE:

Summarize the following context (PSG, p. 77) to highlight the tensions felt by the other workers.

“No mention was made by Jesus of those hired at three, noon, or nine o’clock. Instead, He skipped to the climactic portion of the story and spoke of the initial hired laborers. They assumed they would receive more. They were expecting ‘fair’ treatment, since they had worked more. . . . But they, too, received a denarius. Incensed, they demanded equality.”

SHARE:

Remind adults that the landowner symbolizes God. So, the story reflects how some might complain about God’s fairness, even when it comes to including people into His kingdom.

ASK:

How do people today question God’s fairness? How do some view His just nature? (PSG, p. 77)

REFLECT:

Enlist a volunteer to read the Key Doctrine (PSG, p. 77). Give adults a few moments of silence to reflect on areas where they might be tempted to think God is unfair—and how they should respond to those feelings.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Money

Prior to the session, collect the amount of money that represents what you were paid per hour in your first job. Show this to the group. Allow others to share what they made in their first jobs. Note that the amount might seem paltry today, but most people are thrilled to receive those early paychecks. Briefly discuss how easy it can be for discontent and ingratitude to set in when it comes to being paid. Apply this principle to the workers described in Matthew 20:8-12.

Grace Exemplified (Matt. 20:13-16)

13 “He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?’ **14** Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. **15** Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’ **16** So the last will be first, and the first last.”

(v. 13) Verses 13-15, and possibly verse 16, provide the owner’s response to the workers’ complaints voiced in verses 11-12. Apparently, one grumbler acted as the spokesperson for the group, so the owner addressed his response **to one of them**.

The landowner called the man **friend**, perhaps because he didn’t know the man’s name. However, the term is not a positive one in Matthew’s Gospel, where it is used elsewhere to distance individuals from those who are in the wrong (22:12; 26:50). In this case, the landowner did not argue or seek to refute the man’s facts. There was no reason to dispute that the 6 a.m. group had worked longer hours under unpleasant conditions. Instead, the owner first addressed the issue from the legal side.

He pointed out, **I’m doing you no wrong**. That’s because he had paid these workers the amount they had agreed on in verse 2. The owner’s rhetorical question, **Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?** expected a “yes” answer. The workers had agreed to that amount, and the owner had paid that amount. There was no injustice.

(vv. 14-15) Unfortunately, the workers associated equality (v. 12) with injustice. They felt like they were being treated unfairly, but they had no legal ground for complaint. With that, the owner simply said, **Take what’s yours and go**. *What’s yours* referred to the man’s pay, while *go* is a command to leave the property.

The owner also pointed out that this was a matter of generosity, not a matter of legal obligation. As the owner of the vineyard and the one who hired the workers, he could do as he pleased with his money. The repetition of **want** in verses 14-15 emphasized his authority to use his resources as he desired.

Specifically, he chose **to give this last man the same as I gave you**. The owner spoke of giving, not of paying. As noted, the early group was the only one to sign on for a specific payment. For the others, no compensation was set.

Instead, the owner had promised to do what was right for each group. The first group agreed to a denarius, while the others agreed to whatever the landowner felt was right to give them.

Then the owner asked two more rhetorical questions. The first related to the owner’s **right to do what I want with what is mine**. The term **right** recalls what he said in verse 4. Again, the expected answer is “yes.” So, the workers could not question either the owner’s legal obligations or his moral rights. The owner thus was drawing a contrast between “what’s yours” (v. 14) and “what is mine” (v. 15).

The second rhetorical question confronted the workers’ real problem. They were **jealous** because the owner was **generous**. The term **jealous** (literally, “have an evil eye”) includes resentment and stinginess. The 6 a.m. workers were angry about the good fortune of others. The Greek language highlights the contrast between the evil or bad in the laborer and the goodness of the landowner. The landowner’s inherent goodness reflects back to Jesus’s statement that only God—the one represented by the landowner in the parable—is good (Matt. 19:17).

(v. 16) Some Bible students think the landowner also spoke the words of verse 16 contrasting the **last** and the **first**. However, since Jesus made the same statement in Matthew 19:30 (albeit in reverse order), it is reasonable to assume that He also spoke these words. The reversed order of the wording (compared to 19:30) fits the flow of the parable. The last workers hired were paid first, while those who were hired first received their compensation last.

These verses remind us that genuine grace costs us nothing, while the grace giver pays dearly. Yet, the ultimate Giver (God) always operates out of a generous heart. Second, God’s application of grace often offends a world that cries out for its own idea of “justice.”



APPLICATION POINT: We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 20:13-16 aloud as adults focus on the landowner's response to the angry workers.

ASK:

Were the all-day workers justified in their complaints about their wages? Why or why not?

RECAP:

Highlight the legal and moral arguments as described in Matthew 20:13 and 20:14-15 on page 94 of the Leader Guide. Read this content to provide more background.

The landowner wanted them to know that they were out of line with their grumbling. He had fulfilled his word to them. They worked the number of hours to which they agreed, and he had paid them accordingly. There was nothing unfair about this. The landowner was not in their debt because they worked longer and harder than others. . . . If the landowner chose to act out of compassion toward those last hired, that was his prerogative. The landowner had every right to do with his money and his vineyard as he chose. He was not acting unjustly; instead, the complainers were jealous of the payment others received. Their complaints didn't arise from some vaulted sense of justice but from sheer greed and jealousy based on their faulty expectations. (PSG, p. 78)

ASK:

What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others? (PSG, p. 79)

EXPLAIN:

In sharing the parable, Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God was not about human effort. Those who "work hardest" are not granted automatic admission, and they should not expect the biggest reward. Instead, entrance into the kingdom is an act of God's mercy and grace. We cannot earn it, and we don't deserve it. The Master provides freely for those who are willing to accept His offer. We have no right to take His grace for granted or to question who He demonstrates that mercy toward.

REFLECT:

Write the application statement for these verses on the board: *We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.* Encourage adults to spend a few moments silently reflecting on God's grace in their lives and confessing ways they have lost their awe for what He has done for them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 80 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can trust God to always do what is right.*
- *We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.*
- *We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.*

REVIEW:

Read the statements aloud, stressing “can” and “should” in each one. At the end of each statement, encourage adults to suggest practical ways they can apply these principles to their lives each day. Point out the first set of questions on page 80 of the PSG. Urge adults to adopt some of these ideas for living out God’s grace and generosity before the world.

DISCUSS:

Read aloud the second set of questions on page 80 of the PSG. Explain that adults need not answer aloud, but challenge them to think of a number that correlates with their honest response. Share a time in your own life when you felt like you needed to earn God’s love and how you came to understand that He offers it freely. Encourage the group to consider keeping a journal for recording God’s blessings so they will be more attentive to His grace.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking God to help adults contemplate God’s love and blessings in their lives. As adults leave, challenge them to share with at least one person this week how God has been gracious to them.

AFTER THE SESSION

During the week, send the group a text or email, sharing the lyrics of “Amazing Grace” with them. Urge them to reflect on God’s grace regularly. Remind them to share His grace with someone who needs to know about it this week. If you personally experience a moment when life seems unfair, reflect on the truths of this week’s focal passage. Be prepared to share that intentional mindset change with the group.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
Explore the Bible Adult Commentary offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.
(Available for purchase at [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).)

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.

Authority

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 21:23-32 Memory Verse: Philippians 2:9

Tuesday of Passion Week was marked by controversy between Jesus and religious leaders in Jerusalem. Matthew recorded five of the specific conflicts. The first related to Jesus's authority (Matt. 21:23-27), while the second involved paying tribute money to Caesar (22:15-22). The third revolved around the topic of the resurrection (22:23-33), and the fourth focused on the greatest commandment (22:34-40). The final dispute dealt with the identity of the Messiah (22:41-46). This session focuses on the first controversy.

Questions about Jesus's authority (21:23) are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. Each person must face similar questions and decide how they will respond to Jesus and His authority over their lives. Unless one accepts Jesus's authority as divine, one cannot accept who Jesus truly is. As you prepare to lead this session on Jesus's authority, spend time examining your life and your response to Him. Confess areas where you are prone to usurp His authority. Identify creative ways to challenge the adults in your Bible study to better understand and embrace Jesus's authority for themselves.



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Steady erosion can eventually undermine a foundation, resulting in destruction. In the same way, erosion of respect for authority can undermine an institution, a business, a government, or a country. Authority is the right to influence or command another. The weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many even actively reject established authorities. (PSG, p. 81)

What are the results of rejecting established authority?



Understand the Context (Matthew 21:1-46)

In Matthew 19–20, Jesus completed His Perea ministry and moved into Judea as Passover approached. During this time, He made His third great prediction regarding His coming death and resurrection (Matt. 20:17-19). He also addressed an issue of selfish ambition after the mother of James and John asked Him to grant her sons positions of honor in the kingdom (20:20-28). Jesus and His followers then crossed the Jordan River at the city of Jericho, where He healed two blind men (20:29-34; see Mark 10:46-52).

In Jericho He also met a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Despite the social stigma associated with publicans, Jesus visited Zacchaeus's house and shared a meal with him. As a result, Zacchaeus became a Christ follower and promised to make restitution for his past dishonesty (Luke 19:1-10). From Jericho, Jesus traveled up the steep road to Jerusalem to begin His final public ministry and face the coming cross.

Since Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims for the festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread, Jesus first went to Bethany to stay with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 12:1). The next day, a Sunday, Jesus borrowed a donkey and rode into Jerusalem as great crowds gathered to witness His arrival (Matt. 21:1-11). Some spread their coats on the road, while others covered the path with palm branches. The multitude praised God, while Matthew associated this “triumphal entry” with fulfilled prophecy (vv. 4-5).

Jesus then stopped at the temple where He healed some blind and lame persons before He returned to Bethany for the night (21:14-17). Monday morning, Jesus returned to Jerusalem. On His way into the city, He cursed a barren fig tree that represented Israel (21:18-19). In the temple complex, Jesus overturned the tables of merchants and moneychangers who had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles (21:12).

Later, some God-fearing Greeks came to see Jesus, and He again predicted His coming death (John 12:20-50). After spending the night in Bethany again, Jesus and His disciples returned to Jerusalem on Tuesday. On this day, Jesus dealt with five different controversies posed by various religious leaders (Matt. 21:23-27; 22:15-22; 22:23-33; 22:34-40; 22:41-46). On each occasion, the leaders were trying to discredit Jesus; and, each time, He turned the tables on them.

The first dispute related to Jesus's authority. Between the first and second debates, Jesus told three parables (21:28–22:14). The first of these parables is part of today's focal passage (21:28-32). It underscores the validity of Jesus's authority and identifies the consequences of rejecting that authority (21:23-27).

Read Matthew 21:23-32 in your Bible. Note the frequency of the use of the word “authority” and jot down how the word is used in these verses. (PSG, p. 82)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee*) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) and **Pack item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*).

ASK:

What are the results of rejecting established authority? (PSG, p. 81) Discuss responses.

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 81 of the PSG. Encourage adults to identify authority figures in their lives. Draw their attention back to the opening question. Allow them to share how rejecting authority carries different consequences depending on the authority being rejected.

SHARE:

Of course, as followers of Christ, we believe He holds ultimate authority in our lives. But even the best of us still might be tempted to question that authority at times. We can be like the religious leaders in the verses leading up to our focal passage for this session.

CONTEXT:

Summarize this information from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 82) to set the stage for today's focal passage:

“Matthew 21 moves into the final week of Jesus’s ministry before His crucifixion. Much of the action recorded by Matthew in chapters 21–22 occurred in the temple. The week began with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the shouts of praise from the crowd of pilgrims entering the city for the Feast of Passover. Once inside Jerusalem, Jesus moved into the temple precinct. Here began a series of confrontations with the religious leaders who opposed Jesus.”

TRANSITION:

As we study today's verses, let's examine our hearts. Let's determine how we tend to respond to Jesus's authority in our lives and surrender areas we've been holding back from Him.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play the song “Honored, Glorified, Exalted” (Semsen Music, 2025) as a prayerful introduction to the session. If your group is not familiar with the song, consider also providing lyrics so they can reflect as they listen. Discuss why Jesus deserves honor and glory. Share that today’s session focuses on the authority of Jesus and the dangers of rejecting His authority over our lives.

Authority Challenged (Matt. 21:23-27)

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?” **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. **25** 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?’ **26** But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.” **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.”

(v. 23) Jesus again *entered the temple* on Tuesday of Passion Week. The area where Jesus *was teaching* was not the temple sanctuary (*naos*). Instead, he ministered in the temple’s large courtyard (*hieron*), known as the Court of the Gentiles. This area was open to everyone and was surrounded by porticoes that provided shade for people to gather in groups.

In this courtyard, *the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him*. The chief priests were the leading priests charged with protecting the temple and its worship. The elders were important laymen from aristocratic families. Mark 11:27 and Luke 20:1 add “the scribes,” who were probably Pharisees. This indicates that all three groups of the Sanhedrin were present.

Interrupting a rabbi was not considered rude. It was a common method of instruction. This delegation had two questions—*By what authority are you doing these things?* and *Who gave you this authority?* *These things* seems to refer specifically to Jesus’s messianic actions more than His teachings. But the real question concerned the nature and the source of His authority (*exousia*).

The second question implies that a school or eminent person granted Jesus’s authority. Their questions were designed to put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If He said His authority came from God, He would be charged with blasphemy (see Matt. 9:3; 26:59-66). If He responded that His authority was from another source, they would argue endlessly about its legitimacy.

(v. 24) Jesus responded in typical rabbinic fashion with a counter question: *I will also ask you one question*. He added that their willingness to respond would determine Jesus’s response to them. Jesus was not being evasive; but, in a sense, He was defining the rules, exerting the very authority they questioned.

Key Doctrine

God

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. (See 1 Peter 1:15-17; Hebrews 12:28-29.)

(vv. 25-26) Jesus shifted the focus from Himself to John the Baptist: *Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?* John’s baptism represented all of John’s prophetic ministry. Jesus set up a contrast between divine mission and human origin.

The leaders *discussed it among themselves*, suggesting a dramatic deliberation. Of course, the proper response (*from heaven*) would have affirmed Jesus’s own authority and led to another uncomfortable question: *Why didn’t you believe him?* The second option (*human origin*) risked the crowd’s anger since the people saw John as *a prophet*. Ironically, the leaders were *afraid of the crowd* they supposedly represented. Indeed, Luke 20:6 states that they were afraid the people might stone them.

(v. 27) *We don’t know* was not a truthful answer. They had an opinion; they just wouldn’t express it. But their refusal to answer Jesus’s one question allowed Jesus to avoid answering their questions directly: *Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things*. Once again Jesus used the very words of their inquiry—*these things* (vv. 23,24,27).

Implicitly, Jesus’s opponents had answered their own questions. The Source of Jesus’s authority was linked to the Source of His forerunner’s authority (“heaven,” pointing to God). And the people who considered John a prophet held the same view of Jesus (v. 46).

EXPLORE Matthew 21:23-27



APPLICATION POINT: We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus’s authority.

BACKGROUND: Show adults **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus’s Ministry Beyond Galilee*). Point out that Jesus had moved out of Galilee and had arrived in Jerusalem to the south.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 21:23-27** aloud as the group counts how many times the word “authority” is used.

ASK: What were the chief priests and elders trying to accomplish by interrogating Jesus?

EXPLAIN: Point out that Jesus had created a stir during the “triumphal entry” and when He had cleansed the temple. Note that He represented a threat to the religious leaders’ power, so they questioned His authority:

The chief priests and elders were confronted with the possibility of losing face before the crowds surrounding Jesus. They could say how they truly felt about John’s ministry, but then they would suffer the wrath of the crowd for that opinion. Or they could admit that John was a prophet with divine authority, and by association, admit that Jesus had the authority of God on His own ministry. Either way, they would come out the loser. (PSG, p. 84)

ASK: For what reasons do people not accept Jesus’s authority? (PSG, p. 85)

EXPLAIN: The leaders ended up affirming Jesus’s authority through their silence. Since Jesus and John shared the same Source of authority (God), the prophetic authority of both was valid. The leaders fell into the very trap they had hoped to set for Jesus.



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Using a Bible dictionary, collect information on the following topics: the chief priests, the elders, tax collectors, and prostitutes in first-century Israel. Reflect on the role each played in Jesus’s ministry. **How did each one impact Jesus’s message and ministry?** Spend time in prayer asking God to help you understand Jesus’s work more clearly and to relate to people in a way that reflects His character.

Authority Recognized (Matt. 21:28-32)

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.’ **29** He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. **30** Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go. **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. **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.”

(vv. 28-31) After the confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus told three parables (Matt. 21:28-32; 21:33-46; 22:1-14). The first of these, the two sons, appears only in Matthew. **What do you think?** is a question Jesus used to call people’s attention to what He was about to say.

A father told his son **work in the vineyard today**. Initially, the young man refused, but **later he changed his mind and went**. The word for *changed his mind* (*metamelomai*) indicates “regret” and a change of heart. Jesus later used the same word in a negative way to describe stubborn religious leaders (v. 32).

The father then gave the same instruction to his other son, whose response was the exact opposite: **I will, sir**. The word *sir* (*kyrie*) can mean “lord.” However, this son **didn’t go** to the vineyard and didn’t obey his father’s command.

(v. 31) Jesus then asked the religious leaders another question: **Which of the two did his father’s will?** The answer was obvious—the **first**. And with that answer they were caught by their own verdict since Jesus already had made it clear that only those who do the will of the Father will enter His kingdom (7:21).

As shocking as that might have seemed, Jesus’s next statement went even farther. At least twenty-six times in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus used **truly, I tell you** to introduce important sayings. Here, He shared that **tax collectors and prostitutes** would enter the kingdom ahead of the religious elite. Jews hated tax collectors. They were seen as collaborators with Rome and known for overcharging people to enhance their own wealth. They also were not opposed to taking bribes or extracting payments with threats of violence.

Likewise, prostitution was forbidden in Israel (Deut. 23:17-18) and considered detestable. The existence of prostitutes in Israel often stemmed

from economic necessity and involved collaboration with Roman soldiers at inns or low class bars that served as brothels. Along with Gentiles and lepers, most Jews saw tax collectors and prostitutes as the worst society had to offer.

Yet, Jesus told the religious leaders these despised groups would enter God’s kingdom **before you**. The word **entering** indicates these sinners had left behind their former lifestyles. Bible students debate the implication of **before you**. Some think the tax collectors will enter first, followed by the religious leaders. Others believe it is the equivalent of “instead of.” In context, the latter seems most likely.

(v. 32) Extending His explanation, Jesus returned to John the Baptist who revealed **the way of righteousness** (Luke 7:29). But the religious leaders **didn’t believe him**. In contrast, the **tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him** (Matt. 9:10-13; Luke 3:12-13), and it changed their lives. When the leaders saw such a transformation, it should have had an effect on them. Still, they **didn’t even change** their **minds**.

Praying Scripture

Philippians 2:9

Spend time praying Scripture using this session’s memory verse, Philippians 2:9. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in this verse?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Acknowledge Jesus’s authority in every area of your life. Seek forgiveness for times you act like the second son in Matthew 21:28-32 and refuse to obey Him.



APPLICATION POINT: We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus’s authority by our obedience to Him.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 21:28-32** aloud as the group notes the responses of the sons.

DISCUSS:

Distribute copies of **Pack item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*) and remind adults of the basic principles of explaining parables. Lead a brief discussion on the characters in this parable and what they represent. Highlight the role of obedience—not just in words, but in actions.

EXPLAIN:

Affirm the role of submission to Jesus’s authority in entering the kingdom of God:

When the religious leaders answered by saying “the first” carried out his father’s will, they indicted themselves for their response to John’s message and subsequently to Jesus’s ministry. Jesus compared the response of the religious leaders to His ministry with that of tax collectors and prostitutes. . . . Jesus told [the leaders] that these outcasts would enter God’s kingdom “before you.” This does not necessarily imply that these leaders would eventually make it into God’s kingdom. The phrase “before you” could be translated “take the place of.” Simply stated, unless the priests and elders changed their thinking about the Messiah, they would be left behind. (PSG, pp. 86-87)

ASK:

Practically speaking, what does it look like to recognize Jesus’s authority? (PSG, p. 87)

REFLECT:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) and invite adults to pray this session’s memory verse, Philippians 2:9, back to God as noted on page 102 of the Leader Guide.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Referee’s Jersey

Bring a referee’s striped jersey to the Bible study. As you show adults the shirt, encourage them to share what it stands for during a game. Emphasize that referees are considered the authority during a game. They identify rule violations and enforce the punishment for those violations. Ask: **How did Jesus demonstrate His authority on earth?** Stress that Jesus revealed His authority by doing the Father’s will (v. 31). Note that we also submit to His authority through obedience.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 88 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus's authority.*
- *We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus's authority by our obedience to Him.*

DISCUSS:

Lead a brief discussion about where adults see people rejecting Jesus's authority in our culture. Remind them of the responses to the question on page 87 of the PSG. Challenge them to find ways to demonstrate the authority of Jesus as they go through their days.

DISCUSS:

Enlist a volunteer to read the first set of questions on page 88 of the PSG aloud. Encourage adults to take time this week to assess Jesus's authority in their own lives and to remember that their example will serve to guide others to do the same. Suggest they read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 88 of the PSG during the week ahead.

PRAY:

Allow the group a time of silent confession, inviting adults to speak with God about how they embrace His authority and any changes that need to be made. Close the session in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to let each person see where and how He would guide them as they take steps into deeper obedience and surrender to Jesus's authority.

AFTER THE SESSION

During the week, text or email the adults in your Bible study. Remind them of Jesus's question from Matthew 21:31: "Which of the two did his father's will?" Encourage them to consider their own willingness to yield their focus and authority to God. Suggest they continue using **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) to reflect on God's truth as they dig into His Word each day.

LEADER BLOG



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EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.



Honor

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 22:15-22,34-40 Memory Verse: Matthew 22:37-38

In the second of the five controversies on the Tuesday of Passion Week (Matt. 22:15-22), the Pharisees and Herodians sent their followers to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Rome. Jesus's response avoided the dilemma and provided a foundational approach to "church and state" that resonates with believers today. While its citizens are responsible to honor the government demands, God has the greatest claim on their lives.

The fourth controversy on that Tuesday involved an expert in the law who sought to trap Jesus with a question about the greatest command (22:34-40). Instead of the Ten Commandments, Jesus cited the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5), the credal statement of Judaism. Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord with one's whole being. For good measure, Jesus added loving one's neighbor as a complement to the vertical and the horizontal aspects of biblical faith.

As you plan for this session from Matthew 22, evaluate where God truly stands in your life. If He does not hold the highest place, identify what needs to change. Encourage the adults in your Bible study to do the same on a personal level.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week's study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



For years in schools across America, the day began with the Pledge of Allegiance. As children, we were taught to honor and respect the American flag and the nation that it represented. That is one of many allegiances in life. We give honor and loyalty to any number of causes and people. The critical issue is how we select what we give honor to. Allegiance to wrong things leads to potential disaster. Allegiance to honorable things can result in more joy and fulfillment in life. Choose wisely. (PSG, p. 89)

What is your highest allegiance in life?



Understand the Context (Matthew 22:1–23:39)

On Sunday, known as “Palm Sunday,” Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. On Monday, He cleared out those who bought and sold in the temple. Tuesday was a day of controversy, as Jesus taught in the temple courtyard (Luke 20:1).

First, the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus’s authority (Matt. 21:23–27). After Jesus avoided their trap, He told three parables to drive home His judgment of them (21:28–22:14). The next challenge came from the Pharisees and Herodians over the issue of paying taxes to Caesar (22:15–22). Once again, Jesus avoided their attempts to discredit Him and His teaching.

A third challenge came when the Sadducees confronted Jesus with a question about marriage in the afterlife. Since the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, they thought their question would make Jesus look ridiculous no matter how He answered (22:23–33). When the Pharisees saw that the Sadducees had failed, they came up with another plan, sending an expert in the law to question Jesus about the greatest commandment (22:34–40). Jesus identified both the greatest commandment and a second commandment, emphasizing the vertical and horizontal nature of faith. In the fifth and final controversy, the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the nature of the Messiah (22:41–46).

The second and fourth of these debates provide the focus of this session. In the second debate (22:15–22), the Pharisees were joined by the Herodians (22:16). Not much is known about the Herodians; but, as their name implies, they were supporters of the Herods (specifically of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39). As a result, they also supported Rome since the Herods owed their positions and power to the Empire.

Possibly those who came to question Jesus were officials attached to Antipas’s court. The mention of Herodians in Jerusalem is surprising since Judea was not under Antipas’s control. In fact, the last Herodian ruler of Judea had been deposed in AD 6. Perhaps the movement of many Galileans to Jerusalem for the festival, including Herod Antipas himself (Luke 23:7), accounts for their presence.

Nevertheless, their presence as it related to their political question was important in case Jesus spoke against the taxation of the Roman government. If He did so, they could witness that He promoted sedition. Indeed, Luke expressly stated this was their intention (Luke 20:20). While the Herodians’ focus may have been more political than spiritual, they were just as eager to see Jesus humiliated as the Pharisees were.

Read Matthew 22:15–22,34–40. Identify the ways we are to respond to the different authorities Jesus identified. (PSG, p. 90)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*) and **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Loving God, Loving Others*).

ASK:

What is your highest allegiance in life? (PSG, p. 89)

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 89 of the PSG. Point out that we don't use the word "allegiance" in everyday speech, but we should carefully consider who or what holds our allegiance as believers.

IDENTIFY:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Point out that, beginning in Matthew 21, Jesus entered Jerusalem and essentially stayed there until His crucifixion. Share that today's passage in Matthew 22 took place on the Tuesday after His "triumphal entry" and examines the balance between our allegiance to God and human authorities, including the government.

CONTEXT:

Share the following content from Understand the Context to provide more background for the session:

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders had been brewing for months. With the cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21:12-13), it had reached a boiling point. What followed would be several more days of confrontation with the chief priests and elders. The thrust of the confrontation centered around Jesus's authority and the rejection of His authority by the religious elite. (PSG, p. 90)

TRANSITION:

The Jewish leaders already had tried to trap Jesus and failed. In today's passage, we'll see how Jesus taught the Jews—and us—to honor both God and human leaders properly.



Group Activity Option

Music

Direct attention to "Jesus Is Lord of All" (*Baptist Hymnal 2008, No. 294*). Encourage adults to work in teams of two or three to examine the verses and to identify words and phrases that stick out to them. Allow a few minutes for teams to report. Emphasize that believers are called to honor Jesus in every area of their lives. Share that this session focuses on how Jesus's conflicts with religious leaders underscored the truth that honoring Him is our highest calling as believers.

Government Authority (Matt. 22:15-22)

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to trap him by what he said. **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. **17** Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” **18** Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, hypocrites? **19** Show me the coin used for the tax.” They brought him a denarius. **20** “Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked them. **21** “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.” **22** When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

(vv. 15-17) Once again it is *the Pharisees* who opposed Jesus (see also Matt. 21:45). And, again, they *plotted how to trap him* (as in 12:14). But instead of confronting Jesus themselves, *they sent their disciples*. This is the only place Matthew mentioned *the Herodians* (see “Understand the Context”).

They addressed Jesus as *Teacher*, a term used in Matthew by outsiders (8:19; 12:38; 19:16; 22:16,24,36). Then they made four truthful statements about Him. They affirmed that He was *truthful*, which referred to His integrity. Next, they said He taught *truthfully the way of God*, highlighting the ethical lifestyle God demands. Third, they acknowledged that Jesus was not concerned with *what anyone thinks*. While Jesus was interested in people, He did not alter His message for them. Finally, they noted that He did not *show partiality* or favoritism.

These opponents moved on to their question: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* Every adult Jew paid this poll tax (*tributum capitis*), including women and slaves. However, Roman citizens were exempt, emphasizing Israel’s subjugation. If Jesus said “yes,” He would lose favor with the crowd. If He said “no,” the Herodians would accuse Him of insurrection.

(v. 18) Jesus perceived *their malicious intent*. He knew they were *testing* Him (see also 9:4). *Testing* is used of tempting people in hopes that they will fail. Jesus called them *hypocrites* for hiding their true motives.

(vv. 19-21) The *coin* Jesus requested was a *denarius*. The Jews hated this coin and the accompanying tax because of its *image and inscription*. Minted by Rome, it carried Caesar’s likeness, which Jews considered idolatrous. Further, the Latin inscription on the coin referred to the emperor as “Son of the Divine” and “High Priest” of the state religion. While Rome did allow Jews to mint imageless copper coins for other purposes, the poll tax required the denarius, equivalent to a day’s wages (20:2).

Since the coin carried Caesar’s image, it belonged to him. So Jesus stated, *Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*. The Greek word Jesus used (*apodote*) means to “return” or “restore” what rightfully belongs to Caesar. Then Jesus reminded them of their greater obligation—giving to *God the things that are God’s*.

They needed to give themselves fully to God since they bore His image (Gen. 1:27-28) and belonged to Him (Ps. 24:1). Caesar could claim their money, but God held a higher claim on their lives.

(v. 22) Jesus’s listeners *were amazed* at His words. For their part, Jesus’s opponents likely were taken aback because He successfully avoided their clever trap. They also may have recognized the profound theological insight He had provided. When all was said and done, they simply *left him and went away*.

Key Doctrine

The Christian and the Social Order

Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. (See Romans 13:1-2; 1 Timothy 2:1-2.)



APPLICATION POINT: We are called to submit to government officials and laws.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 22:15-22** aloud as the group considers the challenge Jesus faced and how He navigated the Herodians' question.

ASK:

What does it look like to honor our government in today's culture? (PSG, p. 93)

BIBLE SKILL:

Direct adults to work in groups of two or three to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 95). Point out that Jesus spoke about giving Caesar his due and giving God what He deserves. Instruct the adults to compare Matthew 22:17-21 to Acts 5:27-29; Romans 13:1-7; and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Encourage them to write a description of the Christian's responsibilities toward government based on these verses. Allow the groups to share their descriptions.

RECAP:

To summarize a Christian response to government, enlist a volunteer to read the Key Doctrine (PSG, p. 93). Highlight this content to provide more background:

Jesus recognized the legitimate responsibility of His followers to be obedient to the government, which includes paying lawful taxes. . . . [But] we must not forget the second part of Jesus's response: we are to give to God the things that are God's. While believers are to give the government taxes that are due, their ultimate duty is to honor God, the Creator and Giver of all things. (PSG, p. 93)

EXPLAIN:

Emphasize that Jesus saw through His opponents' trap and explained that His followers should be obedient to both government and God. His words here created a foundation on which believers continue to build their understanding of the relationship between our faith and the government.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Quarter

Invite all adults to look at a quarter. Explain that every quarter has some symbol of allegiance to the United States government, but quarters also carry the words "In God we trust." Challenge adults to let the quarter serve as a reminder that Jesus's people are called to honor God and honor our government.

God's Authority (Matt. 22:34-40)

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. **35** And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: **36** “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” **37** He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. **38** This is the greatest and most important command. **39** The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. **40** All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

(vv. 34-35) After the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus (vv. 15-22), He confronted the Sadducees over the doctrine of the resurrection, which they denied (vv. 23-32). That one, too, ended with the crowds being astonished at His teaching (v. 33). While the *expert in the law* here seems to ask a legitimate question, Matthew clearly intended his readers to see this as another test. *The Pharisees* took this action because they learned that Jesus *had silenced the Sadducees*. The Greek word suggests that He “muzzled” His opponents, leading the Pharisees to plan their next move.

Came together may indicate a formal or semi-formal conclave. During this meeting, the expert in the law may have been chosen as a delegate who could do a better job questioning Jesus than others had done. Regardless, Matthew clearly identified the purpose of his question—*to test him*.

(v. 36) As in the controversies of Matthew 22:16,24, the legal expert addressed Jesus as *Teacher*, using a generally respectful term by which Matthew indicates an outsider (see also 8:19; 12:38; 19:16). The question of *which command in the law is the greatest?* was hotly debated in rabbinic circles. Realizing some commands were more important than others, the rabbis divided them into categories. Within the weightier group, various rabbis proposed different commandments as the greatest. Perhaps this expert believed he knew the answer and was prepared to debate Jesus.

(vv. 37-38) The expert and the crowd probably expected Jesus to quote one of the Ten Commandments. However, He pointed to the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5). Every pious Jew repeated these words twice a day—morning and evening. They also posted them on their doorposts and placed copies of them in their phylacteries (6:8).

Jesus’s answer focused on *love for the Lord your God*. Such love is not mere sentimentality or emotion, but absolute devotion. Jesus named two of the three items of Deuteronomy 6:5—*all your heart . . . all your soul*—but added *all your mind* in place of “strength.” In biblical terms, the heart includes both the intellect and emotions, while the soul refers to one’s essential being. The mind is the seat of the will that defines action.

These terms alluded to the entire person. This is why *all* is repeated with each term. To be sure, the expert understood what *greatest* meant, but Jesus added *most important* to emphasize this command’s priority.

(vv. 39-40) Without being asked, Jesus offered *the second*. When Jesus said the second command *is like it*, He was focusing on priority, not just format. The command to *love your neighbor* well is just as important as loving God well because, taken together, these two commands cover both tablets of the Mosaic law.

The Jews understood *neighbor* as a fellow Jew. Jesus, however, clarified in the story of the Good Samaritan that a neighbor is any fellow human being (Luke 10:25-37). When Jesus added *as yourself*, He meant that believers’ love for their neighbor should be as great as the love they have for their own being. They should seek the benefit of others just as they would seek what’s best for themselves.

All the Law and the Prophets encompasses the whole of Scripture (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13). *Depend on* literally is “hang on,” as a door hangs on its hinges. In other words, *these two commandments* bear the whole weight of—the essence of—God’s expectations for His people as defined by the law of Moses. The expert had asked for one command, but Jesus emphasized the vertical and the horizontal aspects of genuine faith.



APPLICATION POINT: We are to honor God exclusively as the one true God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 22:34-40** aloud as the group considers the test presented by the lawyer.

ASK:

Why do you think Jesus gave the lawyer two commands instead of just one?

EXPLAIN:

Summarize the following content (PSG, pp. 94-95) to explain the significance of this question and Jesus’s response:

“His question was one of theology: *Which command in the law is the greatest?* This was an age-old debate among the rabbis. The rabbis taught that Moses had received 613 laws on Mount Sinai. Could they be boiled down to the most important ones? A scheme had been created that labeled some laws as ‘heavier,’ meaning they were a higher priority. . . . Jesus proclaimed that loving God wholeheartedly was the greatest and most important of all the commandments. However, Jesus wasn’t finished. The Mosaic law is symbolically represented by the ‘two tablets’ of the law—the first four commandments dealt with the vertical relationship with God, while the last six commandments related to horizontal relationships with others. Because of this, Jesus said, there was one more command that was essential. The second is like it, meaning a commandment that is equally important. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

ASK:

What’s at the heart of this command to love other people? What does this demonstrate? (PSG, p. 95)

SAY:

Jesus identified these two commands as the greatest and most important because all other laws spring from them. We can’t really love God fully without loving our neighbors, and we can’t love our neighbors fully without loving God. Every aspect of living a healthy Christian life that honors God can be traced to our ability to obey these two commands.

APPLY:

Direct adults to **Pack Item 6** (Poster: *Loving God, Loving Others*). Lead adults to identify ways they can love God with their entire being and love their neighbors as themselves. Encourage the group to find ways to demonstrate these actions as they step into the “real world” this week.



CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 96 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- We are called to submit to government officials and laws.
- We are to honor God exclusively as the one true God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

ASK:

Which is more difficult to honor in your own life: God or the government? Which love is most difficult to demonstrate: love for God or love for your neighbor?

DISCUSS:

Lead adults in a brief discussion of the first set of questions on page 96 of the PSG. Point back to **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Loving God, Loving Others*). Remind them that loving God includes loving our neighbors—and Jesus defined a neighbor as any other human we meet (Luke 10:25-37).

CHALLENGE:

Invite a volunteer to read the second set of questions on page 96 of the PSG aloud. Emphasize that God calls His people to honor Him in every aspect of their lives. Encourage them to spend time during the week talking with God about what areas they might be holding back and how they can surrender those areas to Him for His glory.

PRAY:

Encourage adults to pray in pairs. Instruct one adult in each pair to pray that God would empower both adults to honor Him in every aspect of life. Instruct the second adult to pray for government leaders. Close with a prayer for your group.

AFTER THE SESSION

This week, consider how you have seen the adults in your group honor God with their lives. Send a text or email to each individual, acknowledging how they have revealed what it means to honor God. Thank them for the example set for others. Send another text or email to the whole group, challenging them to continue looking for ways to apply what they listed on **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: Loving God, Loving Others*).

LEADER EXTRAS



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Alert

JESUS IS COMING BACK.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 24:36-51 Memory Verse: Matthew 24:44

Matthew 24–25 is known as the Olivet Discourse. It focuses on questions Jesus’s disciples asked as they left the temple complex on Tuesday evening, crossed the Kidron Valley, and made their way up the Mount of Olives. Jesus’s prophecy that the temple would be destroyed led His disciples to ask about the timing and the signs of that event.

They also then asked Jesus about His return. He told them even He did not know when He would return, so they needed to live in constant expectation. His return would happen suddenly and unexpectedly, producing catastrophic consequences for those not prepared. Jesus then supported His exhortation with examples and parables.

As you dig into this session from Matthew 24, examine your “preparation” for Jesus’s return. Reflect on how you are getting ready for Him, as well as asking Him to help you stay alert. You also can use this lesson to challenge adults to live in light of Jesus’s return. Underscore the urgency of staying alert and watchful each day and challenge them to consider how they occupy their time. Remind them of the importance of actually living in anticipation of Jesus’s return—both for themselves and for the world around them.



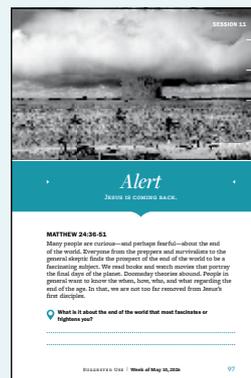
Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Many people are curious—and perhaps fearful—about the end of the world. Everyone from the preppers and survivalists to the general skeptic finds the prospect of the end of the world to be a fascinating subject. We read books and watch movies that portray the final days of the planet. Domsday theories abound. People in general want to know the when, how, who, and what regarding the end of the age. In that, we are not too far removed from Jesus's first disciples. (PSG, p. 97)

What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you?



Understand the Context (Matthew 24:1-51)

On Sunday of Passion Week, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem and received a welcome as the Messiah. On Monday He chased out those who sold livestock and those who exchanged money in the temple precincts. The observing crowd was amazed by Him (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:48).

The religious leaders, however, felt differently. They wanted to destroy Jesus. So on Tuesday, they tried at least five times to trap Him (Matt. 21:23–22:46). After Jesus successfully avoided each trap, He gave His last public discourse in which He warned the crowds and His disciples about the Pharisees.

In chapter 23, Jesus told His hearers they were to do what the Pharisees taught from the law of Moses but without following their example. He noted that the Pharisees did everything to be seen and praised by others. Jesus then pronounced a series of seven “woes” on the Pharisees, repeatedly calling them “hypocrites.”

He accused them of slamming the door of God's kingdom on the people and of traveling the world to make a convert who was worse than themselves. He pointed out their clever ways to evade their oaths and charged them with meticulously tithing while neglecting mercy and justice.

Jesus said they were so worried about the outside appearance of their “cup” that they let the internal matters slide. He even compared them to “whitewashed tombs” that looked nice on the outside but were full of death and decay.

Finally, He said they were just like their ancestors who had killed the prophets, all while building beautiful tombs for them. With that, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. He compared the city to a desolate house that would not see Him again until He returned in glory.

Matthew 24–25 (and the parallel passages in Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36) records the Olivet Discourse. As they were leaving the temple on Tuesday, Jesus's disciples pointed out the complex's beautiful stones. In response, Jesus said a day was coming when none of them would be left standing. As the little band crossed the Kidron Valley and ascended the Mount of Olives, Jesus began answering the disciples' questions about what He had said.

In the short term, Jesus's words were fulfilled when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But Jesus had much more to say about the long-term future, what many might call the end of the age. This session picks up Jesus's response to His followers' second question regarding His future return, which is also known as “the parousia.”

Read Matthew 24:36-51. Identify words and phrases that challenge us to be ready for Jesus's return. (PSG, p. 98)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28) and **Pack Item 5** (Poster: Parables of Jesus).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 97 of the PSG.

ASK:

What is it about the end of the world that most fascinates or frightens you? (PSG, p. 97)

DISCUSS:

Encourage the group to suggest movies, books, television shows, and other popular media that centers on the end of the world. Lead a brief discussion on how those feed our desire to know more about the end times. Affirm that it's human nature to want “inside information” on the last days.

CONTEXT:

Direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28). Point out that today's session comes from Matthew 24, which is Jesus's fifth discourse in Matthew. Share the following information from Understand the Context to provide more context for today's focal passage:

Chapter 24 begins with the disciples marveling over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus informed them that the temple would be destroyed. His disciples asked when this would happen and what signs would signal His return and the end of the age. Jesus's response prompted what is known as the Olivet Discourse, an extended teaching given on the Mount of Olives found in Matthew 24–25. (PSG, p. 98)

SHARE:

Point to **Pack Item 5** (Poster: Parables of Jesus). Note that Jesus's parable of the fig tree (Matt. 24:32-35) leads into today's focal passage.

SAY:

This parable challenges believers to remain vigilant for the return of Jesus. That will continue to be Jesus's theme in the verses we study today.



Group Activity Option

Music

Provide lyrics to “Lion and the Lamb” by Leeland. Play the song and encourage adults to mark phrases that relate to Jesus's return. Allow volunteers to share what they highlighted. Discuss the distinction between Jesus coming to earth as a sacrificial Lamb and His return as a roaring Lion. Share that as Jesus moved closer to making His sacrifice during Passion Week, He taught His disciples about His second coming in Matthew 24.

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

36 “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. **37** As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. **38** For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. **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. **40** Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. **41** Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.”

(v. 36) The words *now concerning* mark a transition to a different topic. In Matthew 24:4-35, Jesus had shared signs for recognizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the end time events (v. 3). But in verse 36, He told them something *no one knows*. This included both God’s *angels* and *the Son*. No one but the *Father alone* knows the *day and hour* when these things would come to pass. Jesus now spoke of that *day* in the singular, referring to “the day of the Lord.” *Hour* is also in the singular. He used the same expression in 24:50 and in 25:13.

Jesus now was clearly talking about His future return, sometimes called His *parousia* (after the Greek word for “coming”). The words must have shocked His disciples. Since no one knows when Jesus will return, it is impossible to set a date for it. As Jesus was about to point out, believers should devote their energy to preparing for His return rather than predicting it.

(vv. 37-39) Because the date and time of Jesus’s return cannot be known, it will catch people unaware, like the flood in *the days of Noah*. Jesus made the comparison twice (vv. 37,39). Leading up to the flood, people went about their normal business: *eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage*. The idea of *eating and drinking* covers both normal meals and banquets. It also could suggest a crudeness that marked sinful humanity in the pre-flood era. *Marrying and giving in marriage* are the common verbs used in relation to a wedding ceremony.

In this passage, Jesus’s emphasis was on a lack of preparation. Before the flood, people were oblivious to the danger until the waters *came and swept them all away*. Since Noah was a “preacher of righteousness,” they heard the warnings of judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). They simply gave no attention to God in their lives. As a result, they did not anticipate the coming judgment.

They rejected Noah’s calls to repent; and, eventually, it was too late. The sudden and unexpected event was catastrophic!

(vv. 40-41) Jesus then used two short examples drawn from the first century: *two men . . . in the field* and *two women . . . grinding grain*. Perhaps the two men were coworkers or a father and a son. Perhaps the two women were neighbors or a mother and daughter. Regardless, these were normal activities of life. In both cases Jesus said, *one will be taken and one left*. Again, the event will be sudden and unexpected.

Scholars, depending on their prophetic views, debate whether it is better to be taken or to be left behind in Jesus’s example. Some believe that *taken* refers to the rapture or the gathering of God’s elect. Thus, the person is taken to be with the Lord, and the other person is left for judgment.

Others point to the previous example from the days of Noah, where those swept away by the flood were taken away in judgment, while those left (Noah and his family) were saved. Either way, Jesus’s emphasis was on the unexpected nature of the event, leading into His command to be prepared when the time comes.

Key Doctrine

Last Things

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; Revelation 1:7.)



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 24:36-41 aloud as the group listens for details about Jesus’s second coming.

ASK:

What do we learn about God’s plans for Jesus’s return in these verses? (PSG, p. 100)

EXPLAIN:

Stress the primary teaching of this parable:

Implied in the disciples’ question about signs of Jesus’s coming was the question, “When?” The answer, according to Jesus was, no one knows—neither the angels nor He Himself knew God’s timetable. . . . Because no one knows the time of Christ’s return, any attempt to speculate and calculate it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, preparedness is the proper response to the fact that Jesus will return. (PSG, p. 99)

ASK:

How do the two illustrations given help us better understand the nature of Jesus’s return? (PSG, p. 100)

SHARE:

Noah tried to warn those around him, but they refused to listen. Before the flood came, they continued going about their normal routines. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late. Only Noah and his family were spared. Likewise, Jesus’s return will catch people off guard. Like men walking in the field or women working at a mill, many will ignore Jesus’s warnings and fail to prepare for His return. And they will suffer the consequences for their decision.

PRAY:

Encourage adults to take a few minutes for silent prayer, asking God to help them prepare for the return of Jesus. Urge them to find ways to live like Jesus is coming back each day.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Phone Notifications

Invite adults to take out their phones and consider any unaddressed notifications. Ask: **How much attention do you pay to the notifications on your phone? How quickly do you respond to them?** Point out that we might choose to ignore a notification—we know it has come and that more will follow. Explain that the same is true of Jesus’s return. Note that we don’t know when He will come back, but we can be sure that it’s going to happen.

Be Alert (Matt. 24:42-44)

42 “Therefore be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. **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. **44** This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

(v. 42) As pointed out, many will be caught by surprise by Jesus’s return because no one can know the time or date (vv. 36-41). **Therefore** Jesus told His disciples to be ready always—to **be alert**. We are called to maintain constant vigilance.

Jesus’s use of *therefore* indicates a conclusion of an idea or lesson point from His twin illustrations in verses 36-41. *Be alert* is written as a present tense active imperative. This means the phrase stresses both the authority of a command and the warning of an ongoing need for active watchfulness.

Again, the reason for vigilance on the part of Christ followers is **you don’t know what day your Lord is coming**. Again Jesus emphasized that *you don’t know*. If neither He nor the angels of God know the timing of His return, it is foolish for any human to speculate (v. 36). However, Jesus did note that it is “your Lord” who will come for His followers. The term does not illuminate any details about the second coming, but it does remind readers that Jesus has an intimate and personal relationship with His people.

Since the phrase also suggests a measure of ownership or belonging, it should remind us of our responsibility to live out our faith (and our belief in Jesus’s return) until He comes back. Because we do not know what day it will arrive, we must live with a consistent spiritual tension that produces constant readiness. We have to act like His return could happen at any time because that is the only way to be found faithful when He actually comes back.

(v. 43) To illustrate the need for constant vigilance until His return, Jesus shared a short parable about a **homeowner** and a **thief** (see also Luke 12:39). This image comparing Jesus’s return to a thief striking without warning was later repeated by Paul (1 Thess. 5:2-4), Peter (2 Pet. 3:10), and John (Rev. 3:3; 16:15) in their writings to first-century churches.

Of course, in proper context, the image does not suggest dishonesty or a lack of integrity on the part of Jesus. It is not implying that He shares those qualities with a common thief. Rather, it underscores the sudden and unexpected nature of the Lord’s return—and the catastrophic consequences for those who are not prepared. Again, the focus is on vigilance.

Jesus noted that if an owner knew **what time the thief was coming**, he would not be caught with his guard down. Given this information, **he would have stayed alert** and taken precautions. For example, he might have set guards to protect his property. But since he didn’t know, he slept.

What time literally is “which watch.” Both the Jews and the Romans divided the night into “watches.” The Jews recognized three watches, while the Romans observed four. Each watch lasted several hours.

Jesus’s description of the burglar’s action is based on the construction of the houses in the first century. Walls were made of sun-dried mud bricks, so a house literally was **broken into**. The verb means “to dig through.” Jesus used the same word in the Sermon on the Mount when He encouraged people not to treasure temporal things that could be destroyed or stolen by thieves breaking in (Matt. 6:19-20).

(v. 44) Jesus repeated His call to readiness but shifted the motivation. In addition to the uncertainty of the time, He added the certainty of the event. He noted that, date and hour aside, **the Son of Man is coming**. Jesus’s return is a sure thing, even though it is yet to take place.

You do not expect is emphatic and presses home each disciple’s personal responsibility to be ready for Jesus’s return. That Jesus compared His return to the coming of a thief emphasizes its unexpectedness, as well as its unpleasantness for those who are not prepared.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers should be ready for Christ's return.

SAY: We saw in verses 36-41 that we don't know when Jesus is coming back, but His return is guaranteed. In these verses, Jesus focused on what believers should do while they wait.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 24:42-44 aloud as adults underline the responsibilities of believers waiting for Jesus to come back.

DISCUSS:

Lead a brief discussion on what adults marked in the verses. Highlight the need for diligence. Affirm that it would be easy to discount Jesus's return since it has taken so long, but we are called to be alert as we serve Him here on earth.

ASK:

What does it mean to be ready for Jesus's return? Why is it important to be ready? (PSG, p. 102)

RECAP:

Review the illustration that Jesus used to make His point about vigilance in this passage:

Jesus used another illustration—the homeowner and a thief. The idea of Jesus's return being like a thief coming at an unknown time became a common metaphor for the early church as they anticipated Jesus's coming. . . . Verse 44 summarizes the entire warning to be ready. No one knows when Jesus will return. The day is not known (v. 42), no one knows during which "watch" He may come (v. 43), and no one knows the hour of His return. Constant watchfulness is essential because Jesus's return will be at an hour you do not expect. The command is not just to be alert or stay awake but to also be ready. (PSG, p. 101)

CONTRAST:

Draw a two-column chart on the board. In the left column, write *be alert*, *know*, and *be ready*. Encourage adults to suggest the opposite of these terms and record their responses in the right column. Discuss how each side of the chart could affect one's approach to the second coming.

SHARE:

Again, Jesus made two points here. First, we don't know when He is coming back. That's up to the Father. Second, we can be sure that He is coming back. And because that's a guarantee, we need to stay alert and keep serving Him well until the day of His return finally arrives.

Be Faithful (Matt. 24:45-51)

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? **46** Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. **47** Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. **48** But if that wicked servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delayed,’ **49** and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, **50** that servant’s master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. **51** He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(vv. 45-47) After illustrating the sudden nature of His return, Jesus told a series of parables stressing responsibility and accountability. The parable of the servants is similar to that in Luke 12:42-48. Bible students debate whether Jesus pictured two different servants—a **faithful and wise servant** (vv. 45-47) and a “wicked servant” (vv. 48-51)—or whether the same servant debated the consequences of two courses of action. In keeping with His reference to two men (v. 40) and two women (v. 41), it seems likely that Jesus referred to two servants.

Assuming Jesus was referring to two different servants, both were put into the same set of circumstances. In language reminiscent of Joseph being appointed over Potiphar’s house (Gen. 39:4) and all of Egypt (41:39-41), this servant was **put in charge of** his master’s **household**. The word **master** literally is “lord” (*kyrios*) and recalls verse 42.

This is the only time this term for a *household* (*oiketeia*) is used in the New Testament. It refers to control over the master’s property, along with the supervision of his fellow servants. For example, he was responsible for getting them **food at the proper time**.

Jesus highlighted the trust this servant had earned. He also called the man *wise*, “prudent,” or “discerning.” It is the same word Jesus used for those who build their lives on the solid foundation of His teachings (Matt. 7:24).

For whatever reason, the master went away with no indication of when he would get back. But he expected to find the servant **doing his job** upon his return. If so, the servant would take responsibility for **all his possessions**. The servant would be **blessed**, indicating God’s favor.

(vv. 48-50) As noted, Jesus contrasted the faithful worker with one who was **wicked**. More emphasis falls on the wicked servant as his thoughts, actions, and punishment are given in more detail. The wicked servant’s internal conversation—**in his heart**—focused on his master being **delayed**. The word rendered *delayed* can refer to a failure to return in a timely manner. Confident the master wouldn’t return for a long time, the evil man began to **beat his fellow servants**. He also indulged himself and neglected his duties by carousing **with drunkards** (see also 1 Thess. 5:5-7).

Once again, Jesus used the singular words **day** and **hour** (see v. 36) to refer to what the servant did **not expect** or did not **know**. Obviously the master’s return pictures Jesus’s own return, as He explained in verses 36-44.

(v. 51) Verse 51 focuses on the punishment of the wicked servant. Jesus said the master would **assign him a place with the hypocrites**. In other words, he would suffer the same punishment as those Jesus condemned (see Matt. 23:13-29). In Luke’s parallel passage, these hypocrites are labeled “the unfaithful” (Luke 12:46).

The punishment will be severe: **He will cut him to pieces**. This terminology is only used elsewhere in Scripture for the dismemberment of sacrificial animals. Possibly then the wording means “cut off” (that is, being cast out or excommunicated); but, given the context, it likely refers to literal torture and suffering.

Further, the place of confinement would involve **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. In Matthew 8:12, Jesus identified this place of anguish and suffering as the eternal destination of the wicked. It seems reasonable to assume that the evil servant’s suffering on earth provides a hint to the intensity of eternal suffering for those who reject Christ.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.

READ:

Invite the group to read silently Matthew 24:45-51, underlining the question in verse 45 and considering how the rest of the passage answers that question.

RECAP:

Briefly discuss adults' responses to the verses they read. Summarize the following content (PSG, pp. 102-104) to provide more context to Jesus's contrast of the two servants:

"In the first scenario, the master considered him to be trustworthy and sensible. Because of this, he left him in charge of his household. The implication based on the second half of the parable is that the master was away for an extended period. This servant was given authority over the household and the responsibility to administer the household. . . . Next came the contrast. . . . Just like the thief who comes at an hour when he is not expected, so the servant's master will come when least expected. Again, Jesus spoke of both an unexpected day and an unexpected hour. This sudden return applies, of course, to both the faithful and wise servant, as well as the wicked servant. One was ready for his return, the other was not. The consequences on the wicked servant for being unprepared were devastating."

ASK:

How are you preparing yourself for Jesus's return?
(PSG, p. 104)

REFLECT:

Remind adults that the servants represent two responses to Jesus and that the blessing and punishment represent real eternal consequences. Provide a few minutes for silent prayer so adults can consider where they stand with God right now.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

In Matthew 24:51, Jesus used the expression "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Examine these other passages where Jesus used the phrase: Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30; and Luke 13:28. Observe the context and setting of these passages. Write a summary of what the expression refers to and why it should be a warning to all.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 105 of the *Personal Study Guide* as adults consider their own level of commitment to each item:

- *We can be certain that Jesus will one day return.*
- *Believers should be ready for Christ's return.*
- *Believers are to remain faithful while we await Christ's return, stewarding well the resources God has given us.*

CHALLENGE:

Challenge the group to consider their feelings about Christ's return and to use those as reminders to live for Him, seek Him, and share Him with people who do not believe.

DISCUSS:

Enlist a volunteer to read aloud the first set of questions from page 105 of the PSG. Discuss responses and encourage adults to find ways to hold one another accountable to staying alert. Remind adults that this is what Jesus expects of His people as they wait for His return.

REFLECT:

Encourage adults to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 105 of the PSG during the week. Urge them to identify ways they can keep Jesus's second coming at the front of their minds and to remain faithful as they wait.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to bring this passage to life this week as each adult seeks to know God, live for Christ, and be filled with the Spirit.

AFTER THE SESSION

Keep the conversation going this week through your group text or email communication. Encourage the group to share how they are keeping Christ's return in mind as they go about their everyday tasks and life. Encourage adults to point to Jesus as they live among people who need to hear the truth.

ADULT COMMENTARY



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Active Faith

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 25:31-46 Memory Verse: Matthew 25:40

To conclude the Olivet Discourse, Jesus prophesied a coming judgment of “sheep” and “goats.” The sheep, called righteous and blessed, will be invited into God’s kingdom. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, or era, God’s sheep will be gathered under the authority and blessing of the ultimate Shepherd. On the other hand, the goats will be cursed and sent into an eternal punishment from which there will be no escape.

In both cases, individuals will be judged by what they did or didn’t do for Jesus’s followers. For sheep, deeds of kindness and charity for God’s people is the same as doing them for Jesus Himself. In contrast, goats who reject His people are rejecting Him at the same time. So, while the focus of the story was on believers’ treatment, the primary point is that everyone will be judged by how they respond to Christ.

As you prepare to lead this session on living an active faith, think about how you respond to those who are suffering and oppressed. What do your actions and attitudes toward “the least of these” say about your relationship with the Messiah? Also, seek to remind adults that everything we do as Christians carries eternal significance.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Annual performance reviews can create both anticipation and anxiety. Many employees experience this year after year. In most cases, managers have a metric or checklist by which they evaluate your work performance. In some unfortunate cases, an employee has no clue what the criterion will be for the review. It is helpful to know the benchmarks we are striving for as we carry out our daily responsibilities. (PSG, p. 106)

What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated?

What are the disadvantages of not knowing?



Understand the Context (Matthew 25:1-46)

Matthew 25 concludes Jesus's Olivet Discourse, which He began in chapter 24 in response to His disciples' questions about the end of the age (24:3). Only Matthew recorded all of chapter 25.

Jesus affirmed that one day everyone would see Him return in the clouds with great glory and power (24:30). Then, He told a series of parables to illustrate how His return will occur: the parable of the fig tree (24:32-35), the parable of the servants (24:45-51), the parable of the virgins (25:1-13), and the parable of the talents (25:14-30). With these stories, Jesus stressed the unexpectedness of His return and our need to be prepared for it.

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus likened the future judgment to a shepherd separating sheep from goats. Some scholars see this as another parable; however, it is better to interpret the passage as a straightforward prophecy. Jesus's primary emphasis focuses on a coming judgment and the impact His return should have on our lives.

The identity of "the least of these" has prompted discussion over time. Some think Jesus was referring to every brother and sister in the faith. This approach focuses on the universal responsibility believers have toward other disciples. Others believe He was singling out His followers who were suffering or struggling in life. This might include the sacrificial lives of servants like missionaries or itinerant preachers, though some apply it more generally to all needy people.

The word rendered "least" is the superlative form of the word rendered "little ones" (see 10:42; 18:6,10,14) and always refers to Jesus's true disciples. Also, Matthew consistently uses the word brothers for believers (5:21-24,47; 7:3-5; 12:48-50; 18:15,21,35; 23:8; 28:10) or, in some cases, literal siblings. So, it seems Jesus's words specifically refer to His followers who were experiencing trying circumstances.

The repetition of key ideas—hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment—places great emphasis on situations in which Jesus's followers should take action. However, we also should recognize that the list is representative, not exhaustive. It serves as a reminder that our broken world offers many opportunities to serve the Lord's people and meet their human needs in simple ways—and honor Christ at the same time.

Jesus's followers perform such deeds out of kindness and concern for those who are hurting, not as a way to earn salvation or secure God's favor. They don't seek rewards or recognition. They are merely trying to do what's right by following the example set by Jesus.

Read Matthew 25:31-46 in your Bible. Summarize the difference between the faithful and the unfaithful. (PSG, p. 107)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 7** (Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40). Make copies of **Pack Item 8** (Handout: Matthew Time Line).

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 106 of the PSG.

ASK: **What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated? What are the disadvantages of not knowing?** (PSG, p. 106)

DISCUSS: Encourage adults to share how they feel about performance reviews at work. Lead a brief discussion on measurements and standards used in various professions for such reviews.

CONTEXT: Review this content from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 107) to explain Jesus’s message in the earlier parables:

Beginning in Matthew 24:45, Jesus told three parables about preparedness. The first contrasted the actions of a wise, sensible servant with the actions of a wicked servant while the master was away (24:45-51). The second parable (25:1-13) concerned ten virgins who were part of a wedding celebration. . . . The prepared virgins accompanied the bridegroom to the feast. The unprepared ones failed to be ready and lacked enough oil to light the bridegroom’s way to the marriage feast. . . . The third parable in the Olivet Discourse tells of a master and servants (vv. 14-30). . . . The bottom line is that we are to be prepared and faithfully carrying out the work given to us by our Master.

SHARE: Note that while Jesus used parables in Matthew 24–25 to explain an eternal “performance review,” this passage should be interpreted as a direct prophecy from Him regarding judgment in the last days.

SAY: *As we dig deeper into this eternal “performance review,” reflect on what your life says about Christ each day.*



MATTHEW TIME LINE		
<p>24:45-51 The wise and foolish servants</p> <p>25:1-13 The parable of the ten virgins</p> <p>25:14-30 The parable of the talents</p>	<p>24:45-51 The wise and foolish servants</p> <p>25:1-13 The parable of the ten virgins</p> <p>25:14-30 The parable of the talents</p>	<p>24:45-51 The wise and foolish servants</p> <p>25:1-13 The parable of the ten virgins</p> <p>25:14-30 The parable of the talents</p>

Group Activity Option

Music

Provide copies of “They’ll Know we are Christians” (*Baptist Hymnal* 2008, No. 385). Sing the song together. Lead a brief discussion about how the world gains a clearer understanding of Jesus when His people live out their faith each day.

The Judge (Matt. 25:31-33)

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **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. **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

(v. 31) Jesus’s explanation of this future judgment is largely drawn from Daniel 7:13-14 and Zechariah 14:5. While all of Matthew 25 is unique to Matthew’s Gospel, he also recorded hints of Jesus’s glorious appearing earlier in 13:41,49-50; 16:27; 19:28; and 24:30-31. This prophecy follows a series of parables Jesus told to explain what will happen during the last days.

Previous passages highlighted the need for people to be ready. For example, the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13) challenges people to be ready when the time comes. Likewise, the parable of the talents (25:14-30) reminds readers that He will reward those who serve Him well in the waiting. The imagery of sheep and goats here focuses on the reality of judgment—and the standard that determines who spends eternity with Christ and who will be separated from Him forever.

Jesus emphasized that **the Son of Man** will be the One returning to earth. In the incarnation, Jesus’s entire life—from His birth in a stable to His entrance into Jerusalem riding a donkey—was marked by humility. While He maintained His deity, He also took on human flesh and lived among His creation (see John 1:10-14; Phil. 2:5-8). However, His return will reveal **his glory**.

The word Matthew used here (*doxa*) refers to the splendor, majesty, power, and authority of Jesus. His second coming will be totally different from His first advent. Along with returning in glory, Jesus **will sit on his glorious throne** (see Matt. 19:28), indicating His position of royalty.

Finally, He will not return alone. Jesus will be accompanied by **all the angels**. Later, Paul affirmed Christ’s return would be marked by the voice of the archangel (1 Thess. 4:16) and the presence of “powerful angels” (2 Thess. 1:7). Jude also noted that He would come with “tens of thousands of his holy ones,” referring to angels (Jude 14).

(v. 32) Bible scholars debate whether **all the nations** refers just to the Gentile nations or whether it is a comprehensive term for the whole

human race, including the Jews. **Will be gathered** is a divine passive, meaning God will gather the nations together for judgment (see Isa. 66:18; Joel 3:2,11-12; Zeph. 3:8; Zech. 12:3; 14:2). Once the nations are gathered, the Son of Man is going to **separate them one from another**. In Greek, the word *nations* is neuter, but *them* is masculine. This suggests that Jesus will separate individuals within the nations. Countries and ethnicities will not matter. He will focus on each person.

Using a common pastoral image, this separation will be **as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats**. In that society, these domesticated animals often were pastured together and may have looked similar from a distance. But sheep were valued more. When evening came, the shepherd would place the goats with thinner hair in a warmer place, while the sheep with heavier wool stayed in the open. Shepherds also separated the goats from sheep for milking and for slaughter. Given the context of judgment, this might fit the setting better.

Key Doctrine

Last Things

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8.)

(v. 33) Jesus said the **sheep**, symbolizing His followers, would be put **on his right**. (See Matt. 10:16; John 10:1-18; Acts 20:29.) In Scripture, the *right* hand of a king represents the place of honor (Matt. 22:44; 26:64; see also 1 Kings 2:19; Pss. 45:9; 110:1). Meanwhile, **the goats** will be placed **on the left**, which suggests the position of disfavor or disgrace.



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 25:31-33 aloud as the group listens for the terms describing Jesus. Direct attention to **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Matthew Time Line*). Note that these events would have taken place in the days leading up to Jesus’s trials and crucifixion in AD 33.

ASK:

What do these verses teach about Jesus’s role in the final judgment? (PSG, p. 109)

SHARE:

Jesus referred to Himself as the “Son of Man” (v. 31). While He came humbly to Bethlehem, His return will be marked by glory and majesty. As He judges, He will separate individuals. Things like ethnicity, social status, and birthplace won’t matter. Jesus will judge each person, not countries or nations.

EXPLAIN:

Identify the two groups Jesus mentioned:

Two distinct groups will be formed. Jesus used a metaphor to picture the two groups, sheep and goats. The sheep Jesus put on his right and the goats on the left. Often in the fields of first-century Israel, sheep and goats grazed together. While sheep tend to be obedient, goats can be troublemakers. Because of this, shepherds sometimes separated the sheep and goats. In the same way, a separation will occur at the judgment. (PSG, pp. 108-109)

ASK:

What is the significance of the right hand and the left hand?

TRANSITION:

The right hand refers to a place of honor, while the left hand suggests disgrace. As Creator and King, Jesus has the right to separate the nations, but He also has a standard to determine who goes where.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Crown

Invite two or three volunteers to draw a crown on the board or a large sheet of paper. Compare the crowns they drew. Affirm that whatever a crown looks like, it usually implies royalty and authority. Remind adults that Jesus came as a humble servant in the Gospels, but He will rule and judge everyone when He returns in His glory. Say: *The world didn’t accept Him as King the first time, but they won’t have a choice at His return.*

The Righteous (Matt. 25:34-40)

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. **35** 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; **36** I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.’ **37** Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? **39** When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’ **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.’”

(v. 34) The one identified as the Son of Man and sitting on a throne (v. 31) is now directly called **the King**. Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes the kingdom of God, but the Son of Man reigns. John 5:27 explains that the Father has given His Son the authority to judge, and here He demonstrated the power to exercise that right.

The sheep, the true believers **on his right**, are invited to **come** since they stand **blessed by my Father**. The word *blessed* denotes those who enjoy God’s favor (Ps. 118:26; Matt. 21:9; 23:39). The sheep will **inherit the kingdom** because it was **prepared for you**. The Greek wording is in the perfect tense, meaning it always has been prepared and continues to be prepared for them. This has been true since **the foundation of the world**. That is, God’s people inheriting God’s kingdom has always been part of God’s plan of salvation (Matt. 13:35; see also Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20).

(vv. 35-36) Jesus then proceeded to name six needs these blessed ones saw and moved to meet. The repetition of **me** in each case indicates an act of kindness toward His people is an act of kindness toward Him.

To the **hungry**, they offered **something to eat**. To the **thirsty**, they gave **something to drink**. When they encountered a **stranger**, they **took me in**. For the **naked**, they provided clothing; and they extended **care** for those who were **sick**. Those **in prison** received similar mercy.

These actions didn’t earn salvation for anyone. The sheep performed these good works simply because their compassion reflected their righteous character. They wanted to do the right thing, especially toward fellow believers who were suffering. And, as Jesus would point out more clearly, their actions really were directed toward Him—even if they didn’t realize it at the time.

(vv. 37-40) With more than a hint of confusion, **the righteous** repeated each of the six items. They wondered aloud, **Lord, when did we see you** in those conditions? They did not deny doing such things for others, but they did not remember showing such mercy and compassion to Jesus. However, using His often repeated “Amen” formula (**Truly I tell you**), He informed the sheep that what they had done **for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me**.

Bible students debate what Jesus meant by *the least of these*. The Greek word used (*adelphon*) technically refers only to male siblings, but it often was used to include both male and female believers. Matthew elsewhere used it to refer to Jesus’s disciples (12:48-49; 28:10). Thus, some understand Jesus’s words to refer to the way believers reacted to the condition of some of Jesus’s followers. Alternately some interpret Jesus’s saying as referring to Christian missionaries and itinerant evangelists who went forth to proclaim the good news and suffered for it. Still others take what Jesus said as referring to anyone in need and distress, stressing the social aspect of the gospel.

The second option is too narrow for the context, while the third misses Jesus’s reference to those in need being His brothers and sisters. Thus the first option, highlighting both male and female believers, is best.

Jesus taught that many would have considered people in such needy circumstances of no great importance and not worth bothering with. But the emphasis on *you did for me* stresses His identification with His suffering followers. He also emphasized this principle in Matthew 10:40-42 and 18:5.

EXPLORE Matthew 25:34-40



APPLICATION POINT: We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 25:34-40 silently, underlining every word that describes the struggles people were having and how those needs were met.

ASK:

What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person? (PSG, p. 110)

EXPLAIN:

Lead a brief discussion based on the group's responses to the question. Highlight that once Jesus (the King) separated the sheep and goats, He began to explain His criteria:

The rewards were based on their actions of ministering to the King. In each case, the King was the recipient of the care they had given. A note of caution and clarification is necessary at this point. Although these righteous ones were applauded for their acts of compassion, these acts did not earn them the reward of the kingdom. This account is not teaching salvation by works. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that no one can merit or earn God's gracious gift of salvation. That comes by the grace of God through Christ's achievement on the cross. These actions of compassion by the righteous ones were the outflow and evidence of a right relationship with God (see Eph. 2:8-10). (PSG, pp. 109-110)

ASK:

What obstacles prevent us from ministering to the needs of others? (PSG, p. 110)

EXAMINE:

Encourage adults to work together in teams of three or four. Direct each team to read the passage again and to focus on the ways the sheep ministered to others. Urge each group to identify practical ways believers can provide similar ministry to others today. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what they discussed. Record their responses on the board.

CHALLENGE:

Show adults **Pack Item 7** (Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40). Explain that this is the memory verse for this session. Lead the group in reading the verse two or three times aloud. Emphasize that Jesus calls us to be His hands and feet in the world, especially toward other believers. Urge adults to reflect on the list they created and to identify ways they can fulfill one of these ideas in the coming days.



The Faithless (Matt. 25:41-46)

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! **42** For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; **43** 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.’ **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?’ **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.’ **46** And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(v. 41) *Then* introduces the next movement in the prophecy. It is similar to verses 34-40, but focuses on the goats who stood *on the left*. While this scene may appear repetitive, the contrasts stand out. For the sheep, the invitation was to “come,” while the goats were told to *depart from me*. The sheep were “blessed,” and the goats were *cursed*. The sheep inherited the kingdom, but the goats were sent *into the eternal fire*.

In the Bible, *fire* is a common image for judgment, especially God’s ultimate judgment (Matt. 3:10,12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40,42,50; 18:8-9). Hell is not a metaphor. It is real place of torment that will serve as the eternal destination of those whose names are not found in the book of life (Rev. 20:15; 21:8).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had used *depart* in regard to future judgment (Matt. 7:23). In Greek, the word rendered *cursed* appears in perfect tense, suggesting the goats were living under a curse. Neither Jesus nor Matthew specifically identified who placed the curse on them. Obviously, God placed the curse on them, but the wording also highlights their personal responsibility. They had brought the curse on themselves by rejecting God and His Son.

Jesus also emphasized the difference between God’s mercy and this judgment. On one hand, the sheep learned that God had been preparing a place for them since the world’s foundation. His presence would be their primary experience for eternity. On the other hand, the goats learned that their eternal destination was originally created for *the devil and his angels*. This was literally a matter of spiritual life and death.

(vv. 42-45) Jesus repeated the same six situations found in verses 35-40, except this time in the negative. While the sheep were diligent to

meet the needs of those around them, the goats willfully ignored these opportunities: *you gave me nothing to eat . . . you gave me nothing to drink . . . you didn’t take me in . . . you didn’t clothe me . . . you didn’t take care of me*.

Like the righteous sheep, the goats responded in disbelief. Addressing King Jesus as *Lord*, they wondered aloud *when did we see you . . . and not help you?* The goats condensed the conditions into a single response rather than mentioning each corresponding act of kindness and care. This could be another indication of their ambivalence and apathy toward the suffering of others.

And, as before, Jesus called attention to His announcement with the solemn “Amen” formula of *truly I tell you*. His reply to the wicked is the same as to the righteous, but in the negative: *Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me*.

The goats failed to perceive that neglecting Jesus’s followers was a rejection of Jesus Himself. Their unrighteous character was revealed by their sins of omission. They were shown to be unrighteous not by committing some horrific or terrible sin but by what they neglected to do.

(v. 46) Verse 46 is a summary of how the two eternal destinies of the sheep and the goats will diverge. The separation was not just for the purposes of judgment in the moment. It determined judgment for eternity. The lost *will go away into eternal punishment*, while God’s people will experience *eternal life* in His presence.

This punishment is a divine act. Entering the kingdom (v. 34) equals eternal life and is only available to those declared righteous by God. Both of these eternal states are never-ending, and there will be no second chances at redemption.



APPLICATION POINT: We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 25:41-46 aloud as the group considers the similarities and differences between these verses and Matthew 25:34-40.

ASK:

What are the contrasts between these two sets of verses?

SHARE:

Allow adults to share their observations about verses 34-40 and verses 41-46. Contrast the situations faced by the two groups:

The words of this condemnation mirror the words spoken to those on the right. However, instead of “come,” the King said “depart from me.” Instead of blessed, they were cursed. Instead of a kingdom prepared there was eternal fire prepared. . . . The King read the indictment against these wicked ones for their indifference to the “least of these.” As before, the hearts of those gathered before the throne were weighed by their compassionate care for others. In this case, this group lacked the compassion for others, which came about as a result of rejection of the message of Jesus. (PSG, p. 111)

SAY:

Jesus made it clear that eternal punishment in a place of torment is real. Hell is not a metaphor or philosophical idea. As believers, we should recognize that those who reject Jesus will spend eternity in hell—and we should do all we can to convince them to turn to Christ before it’s too late.

ASK:

What prevents some people in our culture from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life? (PSG, p. 112)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Encourage adults to read Matthew 13:40-43,49-50; 18:7-9; and 25:41,46 and to record their thoughts about the eternal destiny of the lost. ***What is their prospect? How is it described? How long will it last? Is there any reprieve? How should knowing the destiny of the lost impel believers to share the gospel with others?*** Urge them to spend time praying about their personal level of concern for the lost and how they can see unbelievers as Jesus sees them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 113 of the *Personal Study Guide*, considering how these truths should shape our relationships and our ministries:

- *We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.*
- *We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.*
- *We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.*

DISCUSS:

Direct a volunteer to read the first set of questions on page 113 of the PSG. Allow the group to suggest ways they have shown compassion in the past and how they could again in the future. Stress that the root of today's focal passage reminds us that Christ looks at the heart. Draw attention to **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40*). Encourage the group to read the verse again and commit to looking for ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus this week.

PRAY:

Lead adults to reflect silently on the second set of questions on page 113 of the PSG. Urge them to identify ways they can demonstrate the love of Christ and encourage others to move toward Him. Allow them to spend a few minutes in silent prayer, talking to God about how He wants to work in their lives. Close in prayer, asking God to give each adult a clear vision for showing mercy to other believers and showing grace to the world.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send a group email or text to the adults in your Bible study, reminding them of Matthew 25:40. Encourage anyone who has had a chance to minister to the “least of these” to share their stories. Challenge adults to consider writing out their testimony as a way to share their faith journey with someone who needs to hear it this week.

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Our Atonement

JESUS CAME TO DIE ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SINS.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 26:17-30 Memory Verse: Matthew 26:28

This lesson from Matthew 26:17-30 is set around the final Passover meal Jesus ate with His disciples just before His death. The first part (vv. 17-25) focuses on Jesus's announcement of His betrayal. This revelation left the Twelve—or at least eleven of them—in shock, wondering which of them was the betrayer.

In the second part (vv. 26-30) Jesus used the bread and wine to introduce a new symbolism into the ceremony that originally commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The new element Jesus introduced has become known as “the Lord's Supper.” Jesus explained that His body would be broken and His blood would be poured out not only for these disciples but also for all who would become His followers in the future—the “many.” All of this would be “for the forgiveness of sins” and to establish the New Covenant.

As you study this passage describing the night before Jesus's crucifixion, write a brief summary of your salvation experience. Include a prayer of gratitude to Jesus for His sacrifice. During the session, help the group gain a better understanding of what the Lord's Supper is and what makes it so important for believers.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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None of us knows the precise time and date of our death. We do know, however, that death is a certainty for all. Consider this scenario: you know the exact day of your impending death, but no one else knows. You throw a dinner party for your family and friends, knowing this will be the last meal you will have with them. What emotions do you think you would experience if this scenario played out in reality? (PSG, p. 114)

How does death sometimes sharpen our focus on the things that really matter in life?



Understand the Context (Matthew 26:1-75)

On Tuesday afternoon of Holy Week Jesus left Jerusalem with His disciples and rested on the Mount of Olives. In response to His disciples' questions in Matthew 24:3, in chapters 24–25 Jesus explained the coming destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and His future return. That night, Mary anointed Jesus with an expensive, fragrant oil. Those present at the dinner were shocked by what they considered a waste (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8).

On Wednesday, Judas completed a bargain with the religious leaders to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; Luke 22:3-6). On Thursday, Jesus sent two of His disciples into Jerusalem to complete the arrangements for the Passover celebration. That evening, Jesus and the disciples entered a large upper room to share their last meal together before His death (Matt. 26:20). This Passover meal was important to Jesus. In his Gospel, Luke wrote that Jesus “ferverently desired” to share this meal with His followers (Luke 22:15).

The Feast of Passover commemorated Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as the death angel passed over the homes that were marked by the blood of a lamb. It was observed on the fourteenth day of Nisan, which is late March or early April on our calendars. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which recalled the urgency of the exodus, immediately followed and lasted for seven days. These festivals were back-to-back celebrations of God’s deliverance.

By the first century, Passover and The Feast of Unleavened Bread had merged into a single, eight-day celebration (Ezra 6:19-22; Luke 22:1). These festivals occurred at the beginning of the barley harvest in the spring (Lev. 23:10-14) and were among the three pilgrim festivals (along with Pentecost and The Feast of Tabernacles, Ex. 23:14-17; Deut. 16:16) when all Jewish males living in proximity to Jerusalem were required to travel to the temple and present their offerings.

Jesus and His disciples had been staying in Bethany on the far side of the Mount of Olives (Matt. 21:17; 26:6). Jewish law required that the Passover meal be celebrated within Jerusalem’s city limits, so Jesus identified a place in the city where they could gather for this special celebration. They met in “a large, furnished room upstairs” (Luke 22:11-12).

Such spaces would have been difficult to find in the city because it was flooded with thousands of pilgrims, all looking for places to eat the Passover with their families or households. But, as always, Jesus was able to provide exactly what was needed at exactly the right time.

Read Matthew 26:17-30 in your Bible. What emotions do you think the disciples felt at this “final meal” with Jesus, especially considering the statement about betrayal? (PSG, p. 115)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*).

ASK:

How does death sometimes sharpen our focus on the things that really matter in life? (PSG, p. 114)

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 114 of the PSG.

DISCUSS:

Encourage the group to consider the “final dinner party” scenario. Encourage a few volunteers to share whom they might invite and what they might say to those gathered.

CONTEXT:

Draw attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Point out that this session examines the last supper, which is part of Jesus’s trial and crucifixion. Summarize this information from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 115) to give an overview of Matthew 26.

“Passover began on Thursday evening at sundown. . . . Also on that day, or perhaps a day earlier, the chief priests met to initiate Jesus’s arrest (26:3-5). Sometime that afternoon, while Jesus spoke of end times under the olive trees on the Mount of Olives, Judas the betrayer sold Him out (vv. 14-16). Sometime on Thursday, Jesus sent John and Peter to prepare for the Passover celebration (see Luke 22:8). Following the Passover meal, Jesus returned to the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, where He spent an agonizing time in prayer as He faced the coming event of the crucifixion (vv. 36-46).”

TRANSITION:

Today’s session focuses on Jesus’s Passover meal—His “last supper”—with His disciples. Through Jesus’s words around that meal, we’ll get a clear view of our own sins and what Jesus’s death means for our sinfulness.



Group Activity Option

Music

Provide lyrics for the song “No Greater Love” by Chris Tomlin (Sparrow Records, 2025). Play a recording of the song, inviting adults to listen prayerfully to the lyrics. Provide a few minutes for them to pray, focusing on a word, phrase, or idea drawn from the song. Open the session with prayer, asking God to give every person a clear understanding of Christ’s death and what it means for us.

Coming Betrayal (Matt. 26:17-25)

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?” **18** “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.’” **19** So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. **20** When evening came, he was reclining at the table with the Twelve. **21** While they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” **22** Deeply distressed, each one began to say to him, “Surely not I, Lord?” **23** He replied, “The one who dipped his hand with me in the bowl—he will betray me. **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.” **25** Judas, his betrayer, replied, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” “You have said it,” he told him.

(vv. 17-19) *Where do you want us to make preparations for . . . the Passover* implies that Jesus already knew where they would celebrate the festival. Luke 22:8 named Peter and John as the disciples Jesus sent *into the city* to get things ready. Jesus told them to locate *a certain man* and to tell him that the Teacher’s *time is near*. This referred to Jesus’s impending death and seems to indicate that Jesus had shared what lay ahead for Him with this unnamed man.

Prepared the Passover involved arrangement of the room and the food for the meal. It also could have included sacrificing the lamb at the temple and transporting it to the site where it would be roasted and eaten. Other parts of the meal included greens, bitter herbs mixed with stewed fruit, wine, and unleavened bread.

Key Doctrine

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming. (See 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-29.)

(v. 20) That *evening*, Thursday night, Jesus and *the Twelve* were *reclining at the table* in the upper room in Jerusalem. The Jews adopted the Roman arrangement called *triclinium* for their formal feasts. This involved couches arranged in a U-shaped pattern with a low table in the center. Each guest reclined on his left elbow and took food with his right hand.

(vv. 21-22) During the meal, Jesus made a startling announcement: *One of you will betray me*. Even though Jesus previously had referred to His coming betrayal (Matt. 17:22; 20:18; Mark 9:31; 10:33; Luke 9:44), this time He suggested a member of His inner circle would be involved.

The disciples were *deeply distressed*, especially since this revelation came during a meal that symbolized close relationship.

Four items are noteworthy in the shared response: *“Surely not I, Lord?”* First, the Greek structure expects a “no” from Jesus. Second, eleven of the disciples acknowledged Jesus as *Lord*. Third, Judas spoke up last, probably to avoid attention. Fourth, when Judas did speak, he called Jesus “Rabbi,” rather than Lord (v. 25).

(vv. 23-24) *Dipped his hand with me* probably does not mean their hands would be in a bowl at the same time. Instead, the betrayer was present at the meal. This hint was ambiguous since Jesus referred only to *the one* and because all the disciples had shared the dinner bowl with Jesus.

Using His favorite term, *Son of Man*, Jesus tied His betrayal to both Scripture and human responsibility. This betrayal was *written about him*. However, He added a *woe* to the betrayer (see Matt. 11:21-22; 18:7; 23:13-29). Jesus said it would be better if the betrayer *had not been born* than to face God’s wrath for this duplicity.

(v. 25) Finally speaking up, Judas used the same construction as the others, expecting a negative reply. As noted, he called Jesus his *Rabbi*, rather than “Lord.” He would address Jesus the same way in Gethsemane (26:49). Jesus’s reply, *You have said it*, let Judas know that Jesus was aware of his disloyalty.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers must recognize their own capacity to betray Jesus.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 26:17-25 aloud as the group highlights the setting and significance of the event.

EXPLAIN:

Briefly summarize verses 17-20. Use information from verses 17-19 on page 136 of the Leader Guide to explain the background. Note that the secrecy about the location would keep Jesus and His disciples hidden from the Jewish leaders.

ASK:

How did the disciples respond to Jesus’s announcement of betrayal? How do you think He felt in that moment?

RECAP:

Allow adults to discuss their responses. Point out that Judas spoke last and that he called Jesus “Rabbi,” while the others called Him “Lord.” Explain the meaning of verse 24:

While the impending death of Jesus was the fulfillment of both prophecy and the plan of God, the actions of Judas arose from his own willful choice. There is no conflict between God’s sovereign will and Judas’s free will. Jesus was not a victim of some political process but the center of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. Judas was not merely a pawn in God’s plan but someone who acted out of his own decisions and perhaps flawed thinking. Because of this, Judas would suffer the consequences for his decision. (PSG, p. 117)

SHARE:

Emphasize that Jesus knew exactly what was going on. Point out that His response showed that He understood how Judas had given himself over to sin.

ASK:

What can we do to resist becoming immune to the dangers of sin? (PSG, p. 118)

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Bread

Bring an unsliced loaf of bread to the session and allow each adult to pinch off a small piece. Say: **Jesus explained that the one who would betray Him had dipped bread in the bowl just as Jesus had done.** Point out that while Judas was the betrayer, each disciples’ sin would send Jesus to the cross. Emphasize that our sins played a role in Jesus’s betrayal and crucifixion as well. Challenge adults to examine their lives for sins that might be hindering a fuller relationship with Jesus.

Coming Atonement (Matt. 26:26-30)

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.” **27** Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, “Drink from it, all of you. **28** For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **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.” **30** After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

(v. 26) In verses 26-28, Jesus explained the theological reason for His death. As **Jesus took bread** and **broke it**, He prayed a blessing over it. In giving it to His disciples to eat, Jesus also introduced a new meaning to this ancient ritual.

Jesus’s command to **take and eat it** allowed each disciple to be an active participant in His **body**, which the broken bread represented. By this simple act Jesus transformed the Passover memorial into “the Lord’s Supper.” To be clear, Jesus’s words were symbolic.

(vv. 27-28) The lamb’s blood was a major feature in the Passover ritual (Ex. 12:7,13,22-23). But now Jesus focused on His own **blood**, represented by the wine in **a cup**. Four cups were used during the Passover meal. Taking this one, possibly the third, Jesus gave **thanks** and urged His disciples to **drink from it**. That Jesus had them drink from a common cup symbolized their unity.

Poured out indicates a violent death and reflected Old Testament sacrificial language for atonement (see Ex. 29:12). The promises of God to Moses were central to Judaism and the Passover, but Jesus was initiating a new **covenant** based on His sacrifice (see Jer. 31:31-34).

For many points to the substitutionary nature of Jesus’s death. It also emphasizes that the redeemed community would be larger than just those followers of Jesus in the room at that moment. Meanwhile, **for the forgiveness of sins** goes to the heart of Jesus’s death (see Matt. 1:21; 20:28). Ultimately, that is why He came.

(v. 29) **But I tell you** again called for hearers to pay close attention. Then using a strong double negative, Jesus emphasized that this was the last Passover—but not the last meal—He would share with them. He simply would abstain from the **fruit of the vine** (either diluted wine or grape juice) until His return. On that day, He would **drink it new with you in my Father’s**

kingdom. Jesus’s emphasis was not on His abstinence but on the coming of the kingdom. *With you* reassured the disciples they would be present.

(v. 30) The Passover meal was required to end before midnight. To conclude the celebration, the host would lead the guests in **singing a hymn**. Normally, Psalms 115-118 (called “Hallel” psalms”) were used.

From the upper room, Jesus and His disciples left the city and walked east to the **Mount of Olives** and Gethsemane. Sometime later, Judas arrived, and Jesus was arrested (v. 47).

Praying Scripture

Matthew 26:28

Spend time praying Scripture using Matthew 26:28. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in this verse?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Thank Jesus for the sacrifice of His body and His blood. Ask Him to remind you of His sacrifice each time you take the Lord’s Supper.

During the session, invite adults to pray this Scripture as well. You and the adults in your group can also take advantage of the Explore the Bible Prayer Guide. This QR code also appears on page 71 of the *Personal Study Guide*.



Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter’s Bible passages.



APPLICATION POINT: We find forgiveness by accepting Jesus’s death as the payment for our sins.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 26:26-30 silently, underlining the meanings of the bread and the cup.

ASK:

What was the significance of the Passover meal? How did that meal connect to Jesus’s mission?

CONNECT:

Summarize this content from pages 118-119 of the PSG to highlight how Jesus redefined the Passover in light of His sacrifice:

“At this point in history, the Passover had been celebrated for over 1,500 years. Now Jesus was going to change everything. . . . The Passover meal included prayers, blessings, and sharing a variety of dishes with different meanings. One of those dishes was the *matzah* bread, a flat, unleavened piece of bread that represented the bread eaten in haste in Egypt as the Israelites prepared to flee. Jesus broke and gave this bread to each disciple with the instructions to take and eat. With this action, Jesus changed the meaning of this bread. The breaking of the bread pointed to His death. No longer was this a reminder of the exodus event; now it would serve as a reminder of Christ’s atoning death. Four cups of wine were used in the Passover ceremony. The sharing of each cup was accompanied by prayers and blessing. . . . Jesus called this cup ‘my blood of the covenant.’ A covenant is a binding agreement or an oath-bound promise between two parties. God’s covenants in the Old Testament were ratified through blood sacrifices. In the death of Jesus, a new covenant was instituted through His blood, giving a new pathway to a right relationship with God.”

ASK:

Why is it important for believers to remember Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross? (PSG, p. 120)

PRAY:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) and invite adults to pray this session’s memory verse, Matthew 26:28, back to God as noted on page 138 of the Leader Guide.



CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 121 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *Believers must recognize their own capacity to betray Jesus.*
- *We find forgiveness by accepting Jesus's death as the payment for our sins.*

CHALLENGE:

As a group, consider why it is important for all believers to regularly remember Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. Remind adults that regularly celebrating Jesus's death through the Lord's Supper should challenge them to reflect on their sin and His atonement.

DISCUSS:

Direct adults to the first set of questions on page 121 of the PSG. Guide the group to consider how they personally prepare for the Lord's Supper and how they might encourage one another the next time the ordinance is observed. Point out the second set of questions on page 121 of the PSG during the week. Urge adults to reflect on these questions and to ask for God's help in eliminating false steps that could lead them to deny or betray Jesus.

PRAY:

Encourage adults to continue using **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) to pray Scripture back to God during the week ahead. Close the session in prayer, thanking Christ Jesus for offering His body and blood so we can find forgiveness and avoid the wrath we deserve.

AFTER THE SESSION

Text or email your group this week with a phrase, verse, or thought from this week's lesson. Challenge them to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 120 of the PSG. Enlist a few volunteers to be ready to share what they learned when you gather for Bible study next week. Remind adults that the coming session will be the last in the study of Matthew's Gospel.

LEADER BLOG



Discover helpful tips for using and getting the most from your Adult Explore the Bible resources at goExploreTheBible.com/blog.

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.



Our Savior

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

Scripture Passage: Matthew 27:27-31,45-54 Memory Verse: Matthew 27:50-51

Jesus was arrested and tried by both the Jewish Sanhedrin (the nation's governing council) and Roman authorities (namely, Pilate and Herod Antipas). Then, He was handed over to the governor's guard for crucifixion. This military cohort used the occasion to mock Jesus. They put a scarlet robe on Him, placed a crown of thorns on His head, gave Him an imitation scepter, and then hailed Him as they would Caesar.

After they had their fun, the soldiers led Jesus to the place of crucifixion. Hanging on a cross as the sacrifice for human sin, He felt abandoned by His Father. The darkness over the land reflected the darkness Jesus felt. When Jesus died, more supernatural events occurred: the temple curtain was torn, an earthquake split boulders, and tombs were broken open. All this led the centurion in charge to confess Jesus as the Son of God.

As you prepare for this final session from Matthew, spend time quietly reflecting on the agony Jesus experienced for humanity. Ask Him to help you avoid taking His finished work on the cross for granted. And identify ways you can lead adults to understand that Jesus endured everything on the cross so that we could have access to God.



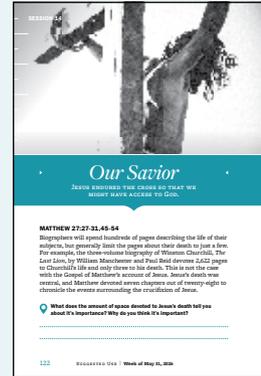
Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week's study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



Biographers will spend hundreds of pages describing the life of their subjects, but generally limit the pages about their death to just a few. For example, the three-volume biography of Winston Churchill, *The Last Lion*, by William Manchester and Paul Reid devotes 2,622 pages to Churchill's life and only three to his death. This is not the case with the Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus. Jesus's death was central, and Matthew devoted seven chapters out of twenty-eight to chronicle the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. (PSG, p. 122)

What does the amount of space devoted to Jesus's death tell you about its importance? Why do you think it's important?



Understand the Context (Matthew 27:1-66)

After Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He talked with His disciples about His departure, their need to stay connected to Him, and the coming Holy Spirit. Part of this "farewell discourse" took place in the upper room, and part occurred as they walked to Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. Jesus concluded by offering a prayer for Himself, for His disciples, and for future believers (John 14-17).

When they arrived at Gethsemane, Jesus prayed while His exhausted disciples dozed. Soon, Judas arrived with an armed mob sent by the religious leaders (Matt. 26:47). After arresting Jesus, they took Him to Annas, the former high priest. He also was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was the current high priest (John 18:12-14,19-23). Even though Annas had been deposed in AD 15, he still wielded considerable power since five of his sons, as well as Caiaphas, had served as high priests.

While still night, Jesus stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, where witnesses made false accusations against Him (Matt. 26:57-68). Meanwhile, Peter, who had entered the high priest's courtyard, denied knowing Jesus when confronted by others (vv. 69-75).

In first-century Israel, trials were considered legal only if held during the day. Since Jesus's initial appearance had been at night, the Sanhedrin reconvened after daylight to convict Him of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah and

the Son of God (Luke 22:66-71). While the Sanhedrin could convict Him, they did not have the power to execute. So they quickly brought Jesus to the Roman governor's headquarters. There the Jewish leaders switched accusations from blasphemy—a capital offense for the Jews—to sedition—a capital offense for the Romans—because Jesus claimed to be a king (John 18:28-38).

Pilate, the Roman procurator, could find no grounds for charging Jesus (18:38). But when he learned that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent Him to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee who was in Jerusalem for Passover. Antipas, the man who had executed John the Baptist, sent Jesus back to Pilate after treating Him with contempt (Luke 23:6-12).

Attempting to release Jesus, Pilate offered to free either Barabbas, a convicted murderer, or Jesus. Sure that the crowd would pick Jesus, Pilate was shocked when they chose Barabbas and called for Jesus's death (Matt. 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15).

Pilate made one final attempt to release Jesus, thinking that scourging Jesus would satisfy the Jews (Luke 23:22; John 19:12). Eventually, though, Pilate washed his hands of the whole affair and turned Jesus over to his soldiers for crucifixion (Matt. 27:24-26).

Read Matthew 27:27-31,45-54 in your Bible to gain an understanding of all Jesus went through. (PSG, p. 123)

Mocked (Matt. 27:27-31)

27 Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the governor’s residence and gathered the whole company around him. **28** They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe. **29** 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!” **30** Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head. **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.

(v. 27) Pilate, the Roman governor, condemned Jesus. His **soldiers** were not legionnaires, but auxiliary troops recruited from the surrounding area. **The governor’s residence** usually referred to Pilate’s official praetorium in Caesarea Maritima. It is not clear where he stayed in Jerusalem. Some scholars assume he took up residence in a luxurious palace formerly belonging to Herod the Great or at the Tower of Antonia, a Roman fortress at the northwest corner of the temple complex.

Whole company literally can be rendered “whole cohort.” A Roman cohort was a tenth of a legion and numbered about six hundred men. Whether the term is exact or not, it suggests a large number of soldiers around Pilate.

(vv. 28-30) Since Jesus had been found guilty of claiming royalty, the soldiers mocked Him as such. **They stripped him**, a shameful thing for a Jew. Then, they dressed Him in **a scarlet robe**. The word *robe* specifically referred to a military cloak worn by officers. Since every king needed a crown, the soldiers **twisted together a crown of thorns** and **put it on his head**.

Scholars are uncertain as to which thorns were used, but the attempt to mimic a royal diadem is clear. Many works of art portray the thorns as part of Jesus’s physical torture. However, this was humiliation as well. Some speculate that the thorns would have pointed out representing the sun as in Caesar’s image on coins.

Every king also needed a scepter, so they **placed a staff in his right hand**. The improvised rod was either a flimsy stalk (see Matt. 11:7; 12:20) or, more likely, a substantial measuring stick (Rev. 11:1; 21:15). Only Matthew mentioned this item. Perhaps it was the bamboo cane used for flogging.

Matthew also was the only Gospel writer to mention that **they knelt down before him**. To mock Him further, they shouted, **Hail, king of the Jews!** *Hail* parodies the formal address of

greeting for royalty. For example, the Romans greeted the emperor with, “Hail, Caesar!” Pilate had asked Jesus if He were the King of the Jews (Matt. 27:11), and that charge was posted above Jesus’s head at the cross (Matt. 27:37). Little did these soldiers know that their mockery contained profound truths about Jesus.

Eventually, the Romans dropped all pretense and focused on abusing and humiliating Jesus. **They spat on him**, showing great contempt in a culture where honor was valued highly. They also **kept hitting him on the head** with the “scepter.” The imperfect tense of the verb shows the repeated nature of this action. Any thorns pointing inward were driven deeper into Jesus’s head. The spitting and repeated blows fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 50:6 and recalls the treatment of Jesus by the Sanhedrin in Matthew 26:67-68. All of this fulfilled Jesus’s prediction in Matthew 20:19 and Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 53:7-8.

(v. 31) Completing their ridicule, the Romans **stripped** Jesus of the robe and **put his own clothes on him**. Then the execution squad, usually four soldiers and a centurion, **led him away**. As a final shaming, criminals usually were left naked when led to their execution site. That they put Jesus’s clothes back on Him may have been a concession to Jewish scruples—especially at Passover. Verse 35 records that Jesus’s clothes were again removed at the cross, as the soldiers gambled for them.



Passion Week

Learn more about Jesus’s final week on earth—the events that led Him to the cross and the hope that followed.



APPLICATION POINT: Jesus's willingness to endure the shame and humiliation of crucifixion leads us to humble surrender and praise.

BACKGROUND:

Highlight again the trials Jesus endured. Point out the last few items on **Pack Item 3** (Poster: *Peter in Matthew's Gospel*). Note that, along with the trials and humiliation, Jesus endured the betrayal of Judas, the denial by Peter, and the scattering of His other followers.

SAY:

But all of these just set the stage for the deeper suffering He was going to experience.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 27:27-31 aloud as adults underline examples of how the soldiers treated Him.

RECAP:

Emphasize the cruelty of the Roman soldiers, as portrayed in this passage:

The soldiers mocked Jesus. They picked up on the charge against Him that He claimed to be the King of the Jews. Using that, they mocked Jesus as a king by stripping Him of His clothing and putting a scarlet robe on Him. This robe was an outer garment a soldier used to keep warm as he stood guard. Adding to the mockery of the robe, the soldiers fashioned a crown out of a thorn bush. The design was a copy of the wreath worn by the Caesar on special occasions. Pictures of this wreath are engraved on Roman coins. This fake crown was then pressed into Jesus's head. (PSG, p. 124)

DISCUSS:

Encourage adults to read Matthew 27:27-31 again and to identify other ways the Roman soldiers mocked and humiliated Jesus. Allow a few volunteers to share what resonates with them about these verses.

ASK:

What emotions does this passage evoke in you? (PSG, p. 125)

SHARE:

Remind adults that this intense suffering was not without a purpose. Note that while we might see it as a tragedy, Jesus had predicted all of this and understood that it was a necessary part of God's plan of salvation.

PRAY:

Give adults a few moments for quiet reflection and prayer. Urge them to thank Jesus for the things He experienced on our behalf that day.



Forsaken (Matt. 27:45-49)

45 From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land. **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?” **47** When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling for Elijah.” **48** Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink. **49** But the rest said, “Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

(v. 45) Supernatural events accompanied Jesus’s crucifixion. For example, ***darkness came over the whole land*** during the brightest hours of the day. ***From noon until three in the afternoon***, the region went dark. *The whole land* probably refers to Jerusalem and Judea, or perhaps to all of Israel. Some skeptics have suggested the darkness was the result of an eclipse. However, Pass-over always involves a full moon, and an eclipse can occur only during a new moon.

The darkness recalls the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:21-29), along with other Old Testament prophecies that describe God’s judgment (see Amos 8:9). Significantly, the Egyptian plague lasted three days, while this darkness lasted three hours. Still, both were associated with Passover, and both occurred over a limited area (Ex. 10:21-23).

(v. 46) But the darkness had deeper meaning. During this time, God dealt with human sin and the atoning sacrifice for it. Figuratively speaking, God, who is too holy to look on sin (Hab. 1:13), turned His back on the sin-bearer (Isa. 53:5,10).

Jesus’s cry of ***Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni*** represents the first words of Jesus recorded by Matthew since His reply to Pilate in 27:11. Significantly, Jesus uttered this prayer ***about three in the afternoon***, the exact time for the afternoon Jewish prayers (Acts 3:1; 10:3).

The words come directly from Psalm 22:1; and, as recorded by Matthew, are partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic. Matthew provided the translation, ***My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*** The Psalm goes on to answer why this abandonment was necessary: “You are holy” (Ps. 22:3). That ***Jesus cried out with a loud voice*** indicates that He meant His words to be heard. Since this is the only one of Jesus’s seven cries from the cross that he recorded, we can assume it was significant to Matthew as well.

(vv. 47-48) In its original language, Jesus’s loud cry sounds like the name ***Elijah***, the prophet who was taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11) and was predicted to return before the end of time (Mal. 4:5-6). Many also believed that Elijah would come to the aid of those who were suffering if they called to him.

We don’t know if ***heard this*** referred to Jewish bystanders or the Gentile soldiers. Likewise, we don’t know who filled the sponge ***with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink***. A sponge was a standard part of a soldier’s supply kit, and even the common people carried *sour wine* because it was a reliable, inexpensive thirst quencher.

Immediately . . . ran shows this unnamed man quickly responded to Jesus. But Matthew did not explain the man’s motives. On one hand, he may have been acting out of kindness and sympathy. On the other hand, he may have seen this as another way to torture Jesus and prolong His pain by extending His life (see Ps. 69:21). ***Offered him a drink*** is written in an imperfect tense, which could indicate that the person was “playing with” Jesus (as a mocking gesture) or that it took him repeated attempts to hit his mark. The ***stick*** indicates Jesus was hung at some height above the ground.

(v. 49) And because we don’t know the identity of the man, we also don’t know if ***the rest*** refers to the other soldiers or to onlookers. Their wording around Elijah coming ***to save him*** includes an admonition for the man to stop because the speakers did not approve of his actions. ***Comes*** is present tense and further emphasizes their mocking. It implies that if Elijah was going to come, he had better do it soon. Mark 15:36 clarifies their meaning of ***to save him*** was “to take him down.”



APPLICATION POINT: We can be confident in knowing that Jesus's death was part of God's redemptive plan.

OVERVIEW:

Briefly summarize the events of Matthew 27:32-44. Note that being hung with criminals (Isa. 53:12) and having soldiers gamble for His clothes (Ps. 22:18) fulfilled messianic prophecy.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 27:45-49 aloud as the group listens for the supernatural events related to Jesus's death.

DISCUSS:

Encourage adults to discuss the source of the darkness. Summarize the following information from page 126 of the PSG to provide additional insights:

“Around noon the sky became unnaturally dark. This was the first of four supernatural events surrounding Jesus's death. The other three are the temple curtain being torn, the earthquake, and the dead raised (vv. 51-52). Matthew's inference is that the darkness was a sign of God's displeasure. It was reminiscent of the darkness in Egypt during the first deliverance of God's people (Ex. 10:22-23). . . . God is holy and cannot look on sin. He turned away from Jesus bearing the sin of all the world and of all time on the cross. This is a deep look at the extreme seriousness of sin and its ultimate results.”

ASK:

How does Jesus's cry on the cross point to the greatness of our sin? (PSG, p. 127)

SHARE:

Briefly discuss the crowd's response and why they would have mentioned Elijah. Emphasize that through the entire experience, Jesus remained in complete control of His life and, ultimately, His death.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Darkness

Make your room as dark as possible. Share a time when you were in the dark and longing for some light. Allow a few volunteers to share their experiences. Ask: ***How does darkness add intensity to a situation? What do you think the people in Jerusalem imagined was causing the darkness? What does this darkness reveal about how God views sin and death?***

Son of God (Matt. 27:50-54)

50 But Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit. **51** Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split. **52** The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. **53** And they came out of the tombs after his resurrection, entered the holy city, and appeared to many. **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!”

(v. 50) This time, Matthew did not record Jesus’s words, only that He **cried out again with a loud voice**. The statement that Jesus **gave up his spirit** points to the fact that He voluntarily gave His life.

(vv. 51-53) While darkness occurred as Jesus was dying, the other supernatural signs took place at His death. Scholars debate which **curtain** in the temple **was torn in two**: the large outer curtain that everyone could see (Ex. 26:36-37; 38:18-19; Num. 3:26) or the curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies, which was visible only to priests (2 Chron. 3:14). Either way, the curtain tearing from **top to bottom** shows this was God’s doing. Also, since the curtain was torn before the earthquake, it did not cause the tearing.

If this curtain was separating the holy of holies, the symbolism indicated that everyone now had access to God’s presence (Heb. 6:19; 9:12-13; 10:19-20). If Matthew was referring to the outer curtain, the symbolism pointed to the coming destruction of the temple.

The earth quaked, probably causing rocks to **split**. At the same time, **tombs were also opened** and **saints . . . were raised**. An earthquake is a common biblical symbol for God’s activity. A large earthquake would cause the rocks, massive boulders, to split. Many tombs were hewn into the rock, so they also could be opened in earthquake-prone areas.

Fallen asleep is a common euphemism for death. The **saints**, the “holy ones,” refers to God’s faithful people (Dan. 7:18,21-22; Zech. 14:5). Matthew did not indicate which saints or how many were raised. And he did not share when they had lived.

Scholars question why these saints raised on Friday would not enter the city until after Jesus’s resurrection on Sunday (v. 53). One way to resolve this is to put a period after *opened* in

verse 52. With that, the tombs were opened at Jesus’s death, while the appearance in verse 53 could have happened after the resurrection.

Many other questions about these saints have been raised, including if they died again or were transported to heaven. For his part, Matthew did not try to satisfy our curiosity. He merely testified to the power of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Key Doctrine

Salvation

Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior. (See John 1:12-13; Titus 2:14.)

(v. 54) In this verse, Matthew returned to what happened at the cross. The **centurion**, mentioned here for the first time, and the execution squad **saw the earthquake** as well as the other supernatural events that took place during the crucifixion. They likely associated these events with Jesus’s loud cries from the cross. Regardless, they were **terrified** by it all.

What these soldiers meant by, **Truly this man was the Son of God**, has also raised questions when compared with Luke 23:47. *Truly* emphasized certainty, and Romans would use *Son of God* exclusively as a title for the emperor. Even if these words did not have the full meaning of later Christian confessions, making the same confession as the disciples (Matt. 14:33) and Peter (16:16) was significant to Matthew. He intended his readers (including us) to interpret these words in their highest and truest sense.



APPLICATION POINT: The crucifixion of Jesus calls for the response of faith.

READ:

Instruct the group to read Matthew 27:50-54 carefully, paying attention to all the details of Jesus's death.

ASK:

What evidence from the day's events might be used to help others recognize that Jesus was the Son of God? (PSG, p. 129)

EXAMINE:

Highlight the supernatural events around Jesus's death:

The curtain in Herod's temple was reportedly almost twenty-one inches thick. For such a curtain to be split from top to bottom could only be an act of God. Symbolically, the barrier between Holy God and unholy humanity was removed by the death of Jesus. The way was now open for all to approach God (Heb. 4:16). Coinciding with the curtain being torn in two was a violent earthquake. This earthquake evidently was the force behind another supernatural occurrence at the time of Jesus's death, the opening of the graves of a select group of people. (PSG, p. 128)

ASK:

How would you respond if you had witnessed these events?

DISCUSS:

Lead a brief discussion about the centurion's response. Affirm that he and those with him were eyewitnesses to all that had happened, and it led to a confession of Jesus's deity. Share this comment from page 148 of the Leader Guide: *Even if these words did not have the full meaning of later Christian confessions, making the same confession as the disciples (Matt. 14:33) and Peter (16:16) was significant to Matthew. He intended his readers (including us) to interpret these words in their highest and truest sense.* Note that as Christ followers, we need to live out this confession and encourage others to respond to Jesus in faith.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Of Jesus's seven cries from the cross, the only one Matthew recorded was Jesus's quote from Psalm 22:1. Psalm 22 is a messianic psalm that predicted much of what Jesus suffered on the cross. Read and reflect on Psalm 22. ***Why are these messianic prophecies so important today?*** Use what you learned from Psalm 22 as a cross reference for deeper study into Matthew 27:33-50; Mark 15:22-37; Luke 23:33-48; and John 19:17-37.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 130 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *Jesus's willingness to endure the shame and humiliation of crucifixion leads us to humble surrender and praise.*
- *We can be confident in knowing that Jesus's death was part of God's redemptive plan.*
- *The crucifixion of Jesus calls for the response of faith.*

REFLECT:

Remind adults that Jesus's death requires a response from each person. Challenge them to take a few minutes to examine their own hearts and to decide if they have made that response to Jesus. If so, encourage them to identify someone who still needs to accept Him and to start praying for them.

DISCUSS:

Invite adults to read the second set of questions on page 130 of the PSG silently. Urge the group to keep these questions in mind this week as they recall this study of Christ's crucifixion. Encourage them to invite the Holy Spirit to guide them into deeper understanding of the gospel and a willingness to share it.

PRAY:

Invite adults to bow their heads as you read Matthew 27:50-51 aloud. Invite them to respond aloud as God reveals the impact of today's passage on their hearts. Close with prayer, thanking Jesus for His death, which provided access to God.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send adults a group text or email during the week, directing them to read and respond to the first set of questions on page 130 of the PSG. Encourage them to journal their responses and to consider sharing them when you gather for your next Bible study. Remind them that this was the final session in Matthew's Gospel. Share that the group will be starting a new study in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

LEADER EXTRAS



For free bonus introduction and application ideas that connect to a current news event, go to goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras.

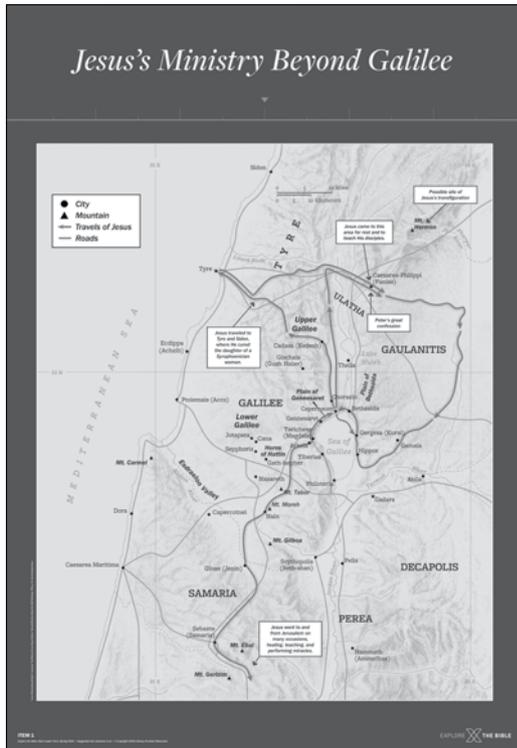
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LEADER PACK IDEAS

Pack Item 1

Map: Jesus's Ministry Beyond Galilee
Sessions 1-14

Locate a map that highlights the key places where Jesus traveled and ministered outside of Galilee in Matthew 14–28.



Pack Item 2

Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28
Sessions 1-14

Refer to page 8 of the PSG to create a poster that outlines Matthew 14–28.

Pack Item 3

Poster: Peter in Matthew's Gospel
Sessions 1, 3-5

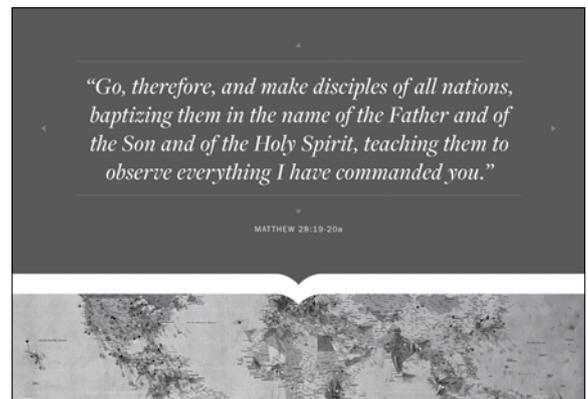
Create a chart that highlights Peter's role in Matthew's Gospel. Include locations, references, and descriptions of each experience.

Pack Item 4

Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 28:19-20a
Session 6

Create a poster with the text of Matthew 28:19-20a:

“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.”



Examples from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*.
The Pack is available for purchase at goExploreTheBible.com.

Pack Item 5

Poster: Parables of Jesus
Sessions 8, 9, 11

Create a chart that identifies and explains the key parables of Jesus found in Matthew 14–28. Include the name of the parable, where it is found in Matthew’s Gospel, and its teaching emphasis.

Pack Item 6

Poster: Loving God, Loving Others
Session 10

Create a four column poster with these headings: Heart, Soul, Mind, Neighbors. This will be used in application to help adults identify how they can love God and others better.

The poster has a dark header with the title "Loving God, Loving Others" in white. Below the header, there is a paragraph of text: "As we reflect on Jesus's 'Great Commandments,' list ways believers can demonstrate their love for God with their hearts, souls, and minds. Consider practical ways we can love our neighbors as we love ourselves." Below this text is a table with four columns labeled "HEART", "SOUL", "MIND", and "NEIGHBORS". Each column is a vertical line extending down the page, intended for handwritten notes. At the bottom left, there is a small "© 2015" logo, and at the bottom right, there is a logo for "THE BIBLE" with a cross symbol.

Pack Item 7

Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40
Session 12

Create a poster with the text of Matthew 25:40:

“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.””

Pack Item 8

Handout: Matthew Time Line
Sessions 1-14

Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events related to the Gospel of Matthew. Include both biblical and non-biblical historical references for context.

Pack Item 9

Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel
Sessions 1-14

Create a handout to help adults pray through key Scriptures in the Gospel of Matthew. Provide the following prompts:

- Session/Verse
- General thoughts from the passage
- What does this passage teach you about God and His character?
- How is God leading you to respond to what He is showing you about Himself?
- Written prayer based on the passage

Pack Item 10

Handout: Traditions of the Elders
Session 2

Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or other resource, create a brief article that describes the traditions of the elders mentioned in Matthew 15.

Pack Item 11

Handout: Why Caesarea Philippi?
Session 3

Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or other resource, create a brief article that describes the history and significance of the areas where Peter made His great confession of Jesus as the Messiah.

Pack Item 12

Handout: The Mount of Transfiguration
Session 4

Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or other resource, create a brief article that considers the possible locations of the mountain where Jesus was transfigured.

Pack Item 13

Handout: Interpreting Parables
Sessions 5, 8, 9

Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or other resource, create a chart that explains key principles for interpreting the parables Jesus shared in Matthew's Gospel.

Pack Item 14

Handout: Greatness in the Kingdom
Session 7

Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or other resource, create a brief article that considers how greatness was measured in the ancient world and how Jesus redefined the idea through His teachings.

GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM

“Some are born great; some achieve greatness; and others have greatness thrust upon them.” These words of Shakespeare are well known. But what is greatness? How did the Greek-Roman world, including first-century Jews, view greatness? And how did Jesus define it? Explore the New Testament, especially the Gospels, in the best place to find answers to both questions. Sometimes answers come as only hints, at other times they come explicitly.

IN EARTHLY KINGDOMS
The secular word of Jesus’s day sometimes measured greatness by pedigree. Having distinguished ancestors in one’s family tree could reveal a person’s nobility. Tracing Jesus’s heritage back through David to Abraham (Matt. 1:1-17) was a key to their ancestry, although the Gospel’s genealogies primarily identified Him as Messiah. “Such Jewish leaders claimed, ‘Our father is Abraham,’ believing that relationship made them greater than Jesus (John 8:39). Their lineage was ‘impeccable,’ and their beliefs held by his disciples (v. 41). Their claims led to the parable, however, did not make them great men.”

Another measure of greatness was wealth. Generally the first century Jews believed wealth indicated God’s blessing. “Middle class” as a marker of greatness, as it turned out, however, that first century “prosperity gospel” was wrong (Matt. 19:23-24; Luke 16:13-15). Great possessions do not make a man great in God’s eyes. Authority also indicated greatness. In offering authority over earth’s kingdoms, Satan tempted Jesus to leave the idea of greatness (Matt. 4:8-9). And the Lord himself spoke of how human claims diminish their subjects (20:25-28; Luke 22:26-28). Fame indicated of his greatness (John 5:19-20). Jesus’s reply? Fame would have no authority at all unless God gave it to him (v. 41).

Perhaps the most important measure of greatness in Jesus’s day was honor. People seek a “great” man was the one held in honor at a banquet, not the one serving (Luke 22:27). Jewish leaders sought to receive honor, as indicated by their being robes and sash (v. 29) and the knowledge of the Law. The scribes loved to be greeted and take the first seats in the synagogues. As a banquet, people begged for places nearest the foot of the head of the table. Honor was the issue.

Even Jesus’s disciples debated about who was greatest (Mark 9:33-34, 10:37). All of them thought great honor made great men, but Jesus had a different take.

IN GOD’S KINGDOM
Jesus turned conventional thinking about greatness on its head. His teaching about greatness made use of two main images.

Little Children: Jesus’s own followers were concerned with the question of greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1). In reply, Jesus called a little child to Himself and said that that child’s faith and humility led to greatness in God’s kingdom (18:2-4). It is easy to romanticize the image of innocence and dependence. But, in reality, children had little value in that ancient society. The ruler of the kingdom assumed the role of a person who felt no one at all. Jesus also counted servitude to a little child as service done to Him and said to the Father who sent Him (18:5-6; Mark 9:37).

Humble Servants: The pagan world considered humility a weakness, but Jesus redefined it as a prime virtue. Actually, He redefined humility as much as He redefined greatness (Luke 14:28). Few of the parables about humility. In one, Jesus counted people against being the first seats at a banquet, and they set aside for a lower place (Luke 14:7-11). Instead, He recommended taking the lowest place so that the host could move them to a more honored spot, His main point was humility. In another, a Pharisee prided himself on being such a great person, while a tax collector beat his chest and begged for God’s mercy. The tax collector went home right with God, but the Pharisee managed only to go home (18:9-14). Humility made the difference.

Humility Jesus, however, with the what made for greatness in God’s kingdom? It was humble service. Specifically, Jesus commanded those who humbly served the needy (Matt. 23:23-26). By “the least of these,” Jesus probably meant blind “transgressors.” Regardless, the point of humble service remains the same.

Over and over, greatness in God’s kingdom comes not only through to greatness in the kingdom of earth, it rests on humbling oneself as a little child and serving others in Jesus’s name.

1. “Some are born great; some achieve greatness; and others have greatness thrust upon them.” William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, Act II, Scene 1.
2. “Such Jewish leaders claimed, ‘Our father is Abraham,’ believing that relationship made them greater than Jesus (John 8:39). Their lineage was ‘impeccable,’ and their beliefs held by his disciples (v. 41). Their claims led to the parable, however, did not make them great men.”
3. “Middle class” as a marker of greatness, as it turned out, however, that first century “prosperity gospel” was wrong (Matt. 19:23-24; Luke 16:13-15). Great possessions do not make a man great in God’s eyes. Authority also indicated greatness. In offering authority over earth’s kingdoms, Satan tempted Jesus to leave the idea of greatness (Matt. 4:8-9). And the Lord himself spoke of how human claims diminish their subjects (20:25-28; Luke 22:26-28). Fame indicated of his greatness (John 5:19-20). Jesus’s reply? Fame would have no authority at all unless God gave it to him (v. 41).
4. “Perhaps the most important measure of greatness in Jesus’s day was honor. People seek a ‘great’ man was the one held in honor at a banquet, not the one serving (Luke 22:27). Jewish leaders sought to receive honor, as indicated by their being robes and sash (v. 29) and the knowledge of the Law. The scribes loved to be greeted and take the first seats in the synagogues. As a banquet, people begged for places nearest the foot of the head of the table. Honor was the issue.
5. Even Jesus’s disciples debated about who was greatest (Mark 9:33-34, 10:37). All of them thought great honor made great men, but Jesus had a different take.”
6. “Jesus turned conventional thinking about greatness on its head. His teaching about greatness made use of two main images.”
7. “Little Children: Jesus’s own followers were concerned with the question of greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1). In reply, Jesus called a little child to Himself and said that that child’s faith and humility led to greatness in God’s kingdom (18:2-4). It is easy to romanticize the image of innocence and dependence. But, in reality, children had little value in that ancient society. The ruler of the kingdom assumed the role of a person who felt no one at all. Jesus also counted servitude to a little child as service done to Him and said to the Father who sent Him (18:5-6; Mark 9:37).
8. “Humble Servants: The pagan world considered humility a weakness, but Jesus redefined it as a prime virtue. Actually, He redefined humility as much as He redefined greatness (Luke 14:28). Few of the parables about humility. In one, Jesus counted people against being the first seats at a banquet, and they set aside for a lower place (Luke 14:7-11). Instead, He recommended taking the lowest place so that the host could move them to a more honored spot, His main point was humility. In another, a Pharisee prided himself on being such a great person, while a tax collector beat his chest and begged for God’s mercy. The tax collector went home right with God, but the Pharisee managed only to go home (18:9-14). Humility made the difference.
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10. Over and over, greatness in God’s kingdom comes not only through to greatness in the kingdom of earth, it rests on humbling oneself as a little child and serving others in Jesus’s name.”

ITEM 14
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COMING **NEXT QUARTER**



JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH

Session 1: **Strong and Courageous** (Joshua 1:1-11,16-18)

Session 2: **Amazing Grace** (Joshua 2:4-21)

Session 3: **Remembering God's Works** (Joshua 3:14-4:9)

Session 4: **Winning Strategy** (Joshua 6:12-25)

Session 5: **Sin Revealed** (Joshua 7:10-23)

Session 6: **Unwavering Determination** (Joshua 14:1-15)

Session 7: **Vital Decision** (Joshua 24:14-24)

Session 8: **Consequences** (Judges 2:11-23)

Session 9: **Called** (Judges 6:1-4,7-16)

Session 10: **Trust** (Judges 7:1-8,19-23)

Session 11: **Compromise** (Judges 16:16-31)

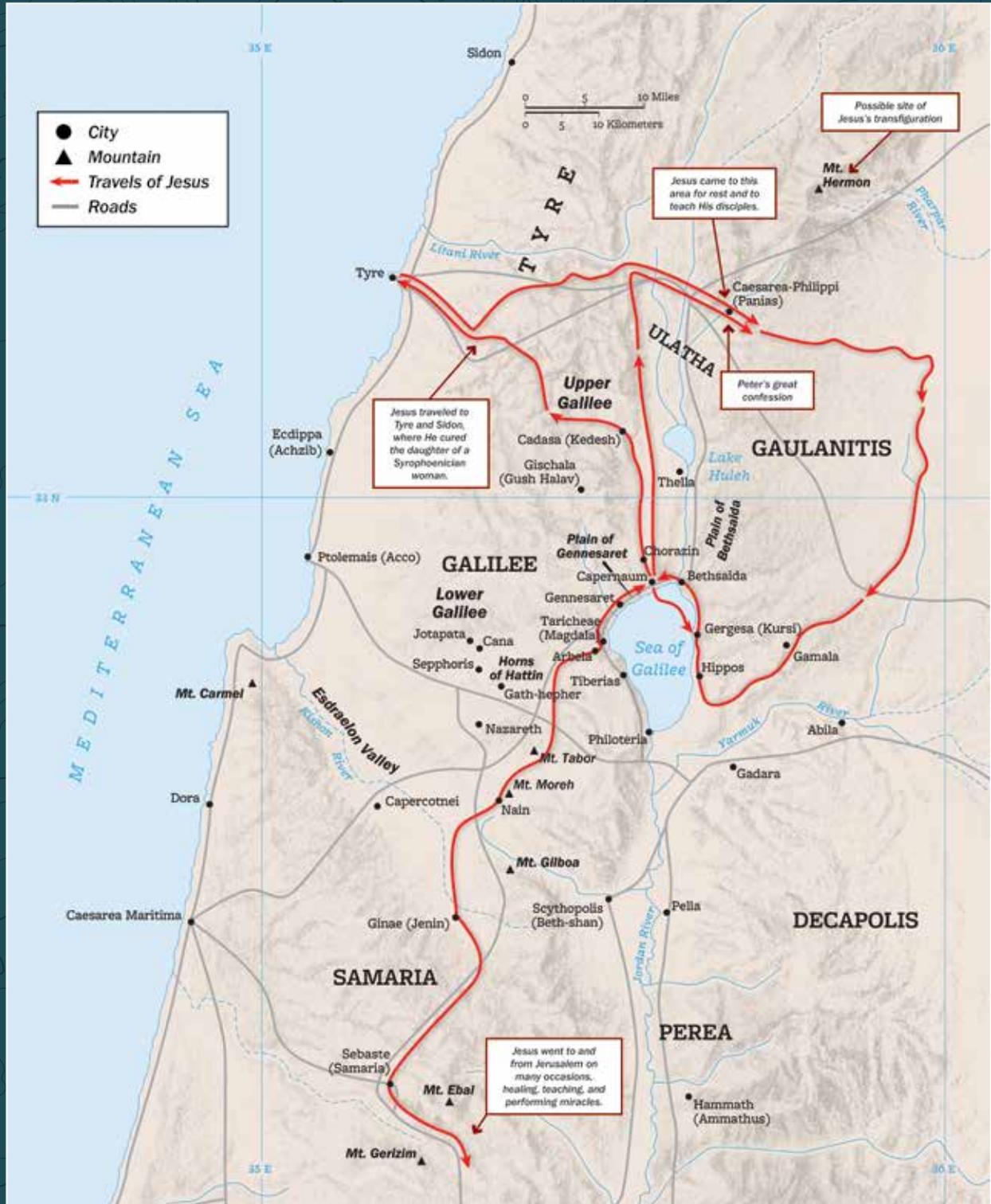
Session 12: **Faithfulness** (Ruth 1:11-18; 2:5-12)

Session 13: **Redemption** (Ruth 3:8-13; 4:13-17)

Explore

“You will seek me and find me when you search for me
with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:13

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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