



VOLUME 1
READINGS, DEVOTIONS, POEMS

Fishers United Methodist Church

Introduction

Over the previous three years, we have taken a sweeping overview of the entire Bible with studies on the four Gospels (“Be with Jesus”), the rest of the New Testament (“Be on Mission”), and the Old Testament (“Be God’s Light”).

Now we slow down and go deeper. Our focus in 2025 will be on the New Testament books that focus on Jewish people who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Throughout the Bible, the Hebrew people are considered children of God, that is, His family. Through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, believers in Him are grafted in. Hence, this year’s study: “Be God’s Family.”

First, we look at the Gospel of Matthew, written for a Jewish audience who had become Christian. It draws on many Old Testament and Jewish traditions, texts, concepts, customs, and more. Matthew clearly points to Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah for the Jews and the entire world.

Second, we will spend several weeks exploring the book of Hebrews, which by its title alone is very Hebrew. This New Testament book examines the person and work of Jesus through the lens of numerous Old Testament people, practices, sacrifices, holy days, and more.

Finally, we will close out the ten-month study by examining two shorter New Testament books: Galatians and James. In Galatians, Paul addresses whether Jewish circumcision and the law of Moses are prerequisites to faith in Jesus Christ. In James, the brother of Jesus discusses whether works or faith are most essential to Christian living.

One of the great bonuses this year is that a number of people from our church are joining me in writing the devotionals for this study. They will bring fresh insights and perspectives to our devotion time. Each of them is engaged in training by me, a small cohort with one another, and personal prayer as they produce what you will read and reflect on. Make sure to thank them throughout the year as you are impacted by their words.

There are several components to this year-long exploration:

1. **Daily Scripture Readings** – Actually, they are five days a week. Consider reading each weekday to anchor your day in Scripture.
2. **Daily Devotions** – These are written by others and me, and correlate with the daily Scripture to help you think more deeply about what you are reading.
3. **Daily Poems** – These are written by my sister-in-law, Rev. Dr. Martha FrizLanger. They will help you imagine the Scripture through poetry. This year, the poems will be based on a portion of a Psalm or other literature from the Old Testament that connects with the theme of that day’s New Testament reading.
4. **Weekly Studies** – These studies, written by my colleague Rev. Dr. Ben Greenbaum, are great tools for small groups and classes.
5. **Weekly Sermons** – If you cannot attend worship with us in person, you can always watch them online, visit fishersumc.org/begodsfamily for easy access, or view them in the Fishers UMC app.
6. **Weekly Podcasts** – Ben and I and some special guests will spend some time each week dialoguing about that week’s readings, visit fishersumc.org/begodsfamily for easy access or your favorite podcast platform.

The hope is that we are all drawn to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this study as One who is Holy, yet approachable through His kindness and salvation. All Scripture references are NIV unless otherwise noted.

It is my prayer that you will be motivated to embrace the fact that you are a child of God, called by Him to “Be God’s Family” in the world.

Enjoy the journey!
Rev. Mark A. Ellcessor
Senior Pastor, Fishers United Methodist Church



12/30/2024 - WEEK 1 DAY 1

The Ancestry Of Jesus

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 1:1-17

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

This past year, we took a deep dive into the Old Testament. Here, the very first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew ties together the Old and New Testaments. Jesus didn't just appear out of nowhere. His genealogy is given in detail, and Matthew gives Him three titles: Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Buried inside of this 23andMe report are some skeletons in Christ's closet.

Abraham lied to the Egyptian king, passing off his wife as his sister.

Jacob got to the top of the heap by deceiving his brother and father.

Judah went to a prostitute for a little tryst, not knowing she was really his daughter-in-law Tamar in disguise.

Rahab actually was a prostitute.

Ruth was a foreigner.

David had an affair with Bathsheba, then had her husband Uriah killed to cover up his failure.

Solomon's penchant for hundreds of women led to the downfall of Israel as a united nation.

Jehoram, Ahaz, Manasseh, and Amon were all kings of Judah who did more evil than good.

Have you ever wondered if your family heritage disqualifies you for greatness in God's kingdom? The Bible reminds us, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That includes everybody on your family tree, all the people in your family pics, everyone staring back at you in your bathroom mirror.

The theme for this year is "Be God's Family." We will look at some of the New Testament books written to Christians with a Hebrew heritage. As we do so, we will discover that all of us who have received Jesus have been grafted into the tree of the people of God, the family of God, the children of God.

That includes you.

No perfect people required.

Poem

Reflecting On The Past
Matthew 1:1-17, Psalm 44

"We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago...It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them."
Psalm 44:1, 3

*When we reflect upon the past
The way You saved Your people
To full accomplish Your will's task
Through weak and sinful people
It gives us hope to trust You, Lord
Your right hand, arm delivered
The light of Your face shining forth
To birth our Promised Savior*

*Through glory, trials,
Your presence true
This bloodline did continue
Sustained by grace, and grace alone
Your promise forefront view
You led them out,
You brought them low
Forgave their every sinning
You shored them up,
You brought them through
Their confidence thus winning*

*We honor now our parents, too
As they through deserts wandered
As heaven's grace
sustained them true
And sought them when
they wandered
O, may we join their hymns of trust
Hope's songs spur on our journey
Acknowledging your ways are just
Upon this pilgrim journey*



12/31/2024 - WEEK 1 DAY 2

The Strength of What We Believe

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 1:18-25

Devotional By: Dave Rizk

Joseph learned that his fiancé Mary was pregnant before they moved in together or consummated their marriage.

According to the Jewish custom, marriage happened in three steps.

1. The two families agree to the marriage.
2. Public announcements of marriage are similar to engagements in modern times, except marriages can only be broken by divorce or death. During this time, the couple live separately, and they are not permitted to have sexual relationships yet.
3. The couple moves in together, and the marital relationship is consummated.

Before moving in together, the whole village/community knows about the impending nuptial, and, of course, the couple is expected to be faithful to each other. If one partner cheats, the cheating partner is punished by stoning.

When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he would have been subject to a lot of shame, too. The whole community would know that either she didn't like the arranged marriage and had stepped out on him, or they had not been able to wait for marriage. Joseph had two options: divorcing Mary quietly or stoning her.

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, reassuring him that Mary's conception was from the Holy Spirit and asking him to a third option: ask Mary to move in with him and absorb the shame of the baby's early arrival.

Joseph followed the Lord's command and took Mary as his wife, but out of respect, he did not consummate the marriage until the birth of the Lord.

Lessons from Joseph's story:
Joseph trusted God and followed the Lord's command despite cultural norms. He showed tremendous integrity and trust in the Lord by opting not to take the face-saving easy way out.

Are you willing to trust in God, follow God's will with conviction, and maintain integrity? Reflect on a situation in your life when you were faced with a tough decision between doing the right thing and risking the disapproval of your peers. How did you respond?

Poem

There Is A Love

Matthew 1:18-25, Psalm 91, Isaiah 7:14, 8:8, 10

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" Psalm 91:1-2
"Love roofs over and covers, bears all things..." 1 Corinthians 13:7

*There is a Love which shelters us
A place where we can dwell
A cleft in rock
A deep pierced side
A shadowed sanctuary*

*There is a Love which grace provides
A shield from condemnation
A breastplate strong
A strong arm guard
A righteousness replacement*

*There is a Love which we can give
A covering of shaming
A righteous work
A set aside
A blanket warm and hiding*

*There is a Love, a refuge friend
Who walks beside our calling
An arm around
A tear catcher
A heart of comprehending*

*There is a Love which comes to us
A great Emmanu'el dwelling
An incarnation
A presence true
A Love beyond all telling*



1/1/2025 - WEEK 1 DAY 3

Mary, Joseph and Jesus Flee to Egypt

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 2:1-18

Devotional By: Kim Arnott

Just as there was “no room in the inn” at Jesus’ birth, we learn from this passage that, now, there was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem. Herod was furious and felt threatened by the message the Magi brought of a new King and now Jesus was in danger. Herod had ordered the deaths of all children under the age of two. But God warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt.

This could be seen as a test of faith for Mary and Joseph. Would they obey God’s command to leave? It was a long journey – about 75 miles just to reach the Egyptian border. And it was unknown, dangerous territory. And how would they, as a poor family, pay for this unexpected journey? But Mary and Joseph both knew the power and importance of dreams and were faithful to God’s call. And so, Joseph packed up his wife and son IMMEDIATELY, that very night, with no hesitation whatsoever. They became refugees and began the long journey to Egypt.

Egypt – a foreign country with a reputation for cruelty, idolatry and where Mary and Joseph’s ancestors had been oppressed for hundreds of years. Were they going from one danger to another? In the 1st century, there was a Jewish presence there. Some estimate there were around 1 million Jews in Egypt. The population of Alexandria alone was approximately 1/3 Jewish. And being outside Herod’s authority, the family would be able to find safe harbor there and “blend in”. Some would even say that the gifts of the Magi – gold, frankincense and myrrh – could have been used to finance their long journey. God DOES provide.

For Matthew’s Jewish audience, the connection to Egypt would have been strong. They would recall Joseph – who, having been sold by his brothers as a slave, rose to power in Egypt. They would recall Jacob and his entire family – who, through Joseph’s actions, were saved from death by famine and settled in Egypt. And they would certainly recall Moses – who was saved from death in Egypt by Pharaoh’s daughter after Pharaoh demanded the killing of the infants, just as Herod had demanded.

Joseph, Jacob, Moses. Their stories would all set the stage for the Exodus. “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hosea 11:1) The old prophecy is now given new meaning. Jesus is now being called out of Egypt. And just as Moses led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, Jesus would lead ALL people to freedom and usher in the Kingdom of God. Moses was the Lawgiver - Jesus is the Lifegiver. God truly DOES provide!

What do you think you learn from this passage about faith, obedience and listening to God?

Poem

O Heav’n, My Counsel
Matthew 2:1-18, Psalm 19, Micah 5:2

*“The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his
hands. Day after day they pour forth
speech; night after night they reveal
knowledge. They have no speech, they
use no words; no sound is heard from
them. Yet their voice goes out into all
the earth, their words to the ends of the
world.”*

Psalm 19:1-4a

*O Heav’n, my counsel, shing bright
Displaying glory through the night
Declaring wonders yet to come
Hidden from most revealed to some
You speak without an uttered word
You speak, and yet, your silence, heard
By those who gaze into your night
Thus guided by your prophets’ light*

*O Heav’n, my counsel wondrous view
May Beth’lem star lead straight to you
Where Word of Love descends to land
Where I may kneel with gift in hand
Where King of all His gift to me
From wooden manger, cross planked
tree*

*My Bridegroom coming faithfully
May this my meditation be*



1/2/2025 - WEEK 1 DAY 4

God's Family Direction

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 2:19-23

Devotional By: Wilbur Sutton

There are times God will direct us outside of our comfort zone. Some of those times he will prepare us with a message directed toward us. When I was a teenager, we were at my uncle's house and I had several cousins there. One of them was a non-verbal autistic boy who liked to do two things. One was to spin plates & lids and hear the sounds they would make when they would wind down spinning. The other was to go to their piano and play a note. When he played a second note, if it was in harmony he was happy. If it was off-key he would groan and try again.

I saw him being ignored so I sat down next to him and started spinning a lid, like he was doing. He ignored me and continued doing his own spinning. My aunt came over and told me "Wilbur, God gives special children to special people. He wants them to be loved. Do you think you could ever be one of his special people?" I will never forget that message. I think it was from God and was preparing Marsha and I for a special child. He showed us how to love her. She showed us how not to discriminate and how to love everyone. She has that special gift.

Many times God directs us to do things outside of our comfort zone. He prepares us and guides us through those times, just as he guided Mary & Joseph to eventually end up in Nazareth. By the way, living in Nazareth also fulfilled Scripture prophecies.

I ask us to pray for God's discernment in our daily life decisions and listen to his guidance.

Poem

It Matters Much

Matthew 2:19-23, Psalm 1

*It matters much the path I step
Where I do stand
The seat I set
The company which I do keep
The dreams I dream
The voice which speaks
My quick response to Spirit prod
Obedience
To Word from God*

*It matters much my planting, thus
By running stream
Or desert dust
For when great danger comes my way
Will foolishness
Then claim the day?
Or will my roots sink deep and strong
Full bearing fruit
Despite drought's wrong*

*Dear Father, may I righteous be
As you discern
The path for me
Allow your wisdom in me grow
That I may leave
All that I know
If you do call to foreign place
Away from fool's voice--
Life disgraced--
To shelter hidden glory's prize
To do what's faithful
In your eyes*



1/3/2025 - WEEK 1 DAY 5

John the Baptist

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 3:1-17

Devotional By: Lynette Hart

In the Old Testament, God made many references to the coming Savior. The Old Testament also made three references to the one that will “prepare the way” for the Lord. He could have used fanfare and trumpets to announce Jesus’ arrival. But he chose to do it as he does many things - with an unlikely person.

He used John the Baptist. John lived in the wild. He ate locusts and wild honey.

Isaiah 40:3-5 says that through this one “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

Malachi 3:1 says that this messenger will prepare the way before Me and the Lord will suddenly come to His temple.

People came from all over to confess their sins and be baptized by John. John tells them to repent. In Greek at this time, repent meant “to change one’s heart and mind”. John is asking them to open their hearts. John baptizes with water. But he tells of One who comes after him who is more powerful than him. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Jesus then asked to be baptized by John. John doesn’t want to baptize him as it is John that wants to be baptized by Jesus. Why must Jesus be baptized? “To fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus is confirming that John is the Messenger. John is the prophet sent to prepare the way mentioned in the Old Testament. Jesus is the Savior that they have been waiting for.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, the Heavens were opened. God spoke and declared “This is my Son, whom I love.” The work of John the Baptist was revealed and proven to be true. The prophecy is coming true. It is time for the world to receive Jesus in the flesh.

We spend the Advent season getting ready for the birth of Jesus. It’s important we also prepare ourselves for the teachings of Jesus through John the Baptist.

Poem

A Prayer

Matthew 3:1-17, Psalm 51

*“Have mercy on me, O
God, according to your unfailing
love; according to your great
compassion blot out my
transgressions. Wash away all my
iniquity and cleanse me from my sin...
Then I will teach transgressors your
ways, so that sinners will turn back
to you.”*

Psalm 51:1-2,13

*Have mercy! Have mercy!
I call on Your name
Forgiveness I beg you
Though nothing I claim
Your graciousness seeking
Though you seek me first
As deer to the river
I come with my thirst
There’s no hiding place from
Your all-knowing eye
So search me and know me
To You do I cry
Wash me in Your Jordan
Immerse me in love
Baptize now and claim me
A child of Your blood
Fill me with Your Spirit
Anoint and full reign
That I might then follow
Proclaiming Your name
As Your kingdom bursts forth
Love’s river does swell
As tongue is now loosened
Your good news I’ll tell*



1/6/2025 - WEEK 2 DAY 1

Victory Over Evil

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 4:1-11

Devotional By: Peggy Cooke

Have you ever been tempted? Of course you have, we all have! Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert when Satan tempted Jesus 3 times in hopes of luring Jesus into abusing His power. Satan's first temptation was for Jesus to turn the stones into bread. Jesus was more concerned with spiritual food than material things. With Satan's second temptation he challenged Jesus to throw himself off the highest point of the temple. However, Jesus affirmed His trust in God by quoting more scriptures. The third temptation was to give him land if Jesus would just bow down and worship him. Jesus was devoted to God and only interested in putting God first. Jesus remained sinless and was victorious over Satan because he was steadfast in His faithfulness to God.

God does not tempt us to sin---that's Satan's specialty. Jesus' victory over temptation was crucial to the success of his divine mission. In the midst of the struggle, Jesus demonstrated His unwavering commitment to God's plan and His word. Similarly, God may allow our faith to be tested on the path to spiritual success. As we rely on God's help to win battles over temptation, we'll become more prepared to fulfill the purpose God has given us. (*Quest Bible pg. 1388*)

According to James 1:13, God never tempts anyone to sin. However, God will lead believers through tough times to strengthen their faith. One of our rough times has been Mike's cancer journey. We both can tell you how we choose to lean on Jesus and how He has strengthened our faith.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Jesus took all our sins to the cross with him. This was necessary so the ministry of reconciliation could take place. If Jesus had not taken on our sin, the wrongs we have done could not have been forgiven. Unfortunately, as humans, we are always going to be tempted. Thank God that we will always be forgiven.

Hebrews 4:14-16 says Jesus is at the right hand of God. Jesus can sympathize with us. He knows what it is like to face temptations and trials. He knows what we are walking through and can identify with us. Remember to lean on Jesus when temptations and trials come your way.

Jesus wants us to see God as the one who delivers us, not the one who tempts us. In our prayers, we should look to the one true God as the source of victory over the evil one. God tests us, not that we might fall into sin, but that we might experience victory. (*Quest Bible pg. 1388*)

Poem

Guarded

Matthew 4:1-11, Psalm 141
(The challenges failed by the Israelites in the wilderness recorded in Deuteronomy are all corrected by the faithfulness of Jesus in his own wilderness experience)

*"Set a guard over my mouth,
Lord; keep watch over the door of
my lips. Do not let my heart be
drawn to what is evil so that I take
part in wicked deeds along with
those who are evildoers; do not let
me eat their delicacies."
Psalm 141:3-4*

*My little temple—guard it, Lord
Build high its walls, strong gated
A watchman high to overlook
Against all evil raided*

*Your angel guards and Spirit's sword
Be posted at my gate
My door's lips covered with Your
blood
As I upon you wait*

*And when the Tempter comes to me
When I am weak and hungry
Allow me feast upon Your Word
Its treasures to sustain me*

*When evildoers test Your care
May I resist their madness
Lest I be foolish and drawn in
All bring naught but sadness*

*When power is the baited hook
Give me the strength to say
"Be gone, you Tempter, leave me be
Yes, you be on your way!"*

*Then with my eyes fixed all on You
Send angels to attend me
And open lip gates of my mouth
Declaring how you saved me*



1/7/2025 - WEEK 2 DAY 2

The Outcome of the Call

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 4:12-25

Devotional By: Lisa Ellcessor

When Jesus called Simon Peter as a disciple, his life changed immediately from a family generational fisherman to a rabbi follower of the Messiah. Was saying "yes" to follow Jesus an impulsive whim? Was it a way to get out of the daily rut of boats and stinky fish? A transition to adulthood? An opportunity to leave Dad and Mom behind? No! It was a significant call on Peter's life by God Almighty! Simon Peter did not know in advance he would become the key leader of the early church, the rock and the chief apostle to the Jews.

Peter answered the call to follow Jesus. Because he said "yes" to Jesus, his life was impacted with new outcomes. Here are just a few taken from the 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) along with events in the book of Acts. Reflect on these. Can you recall the events that match these outcomes?

- Rhythm and routine rerouted for the Rabbi
- Goodbye to the boat of security, hello to eternity
- Now casting nets to fish for people
- A pity party exchanged for enthusiasm!
- Holy Spirit's fire, oil and healings coming from heaven-to-earth
- Telling everyone about Jesus everywhere
- Feet washed by Jesus- a total humility bath!
- Dinner with outcasts and elites
- Faith enough to walk on water
- God's voice heard on mountain tops
- "Rooster" reminders of failures (3 times)
- The gift of correction and blessing by Jesus
- Persecution for following Christ, assurance to praise
- Concealed mysteries disclosed and made known
- Awareness coworkers are "sinners" just like you
- Extravagant giving and prayer in secret
- The Aha! of Jesus' death and resurrection
- Reminder "Do not be afraid!" and goodbye to worry
- Salvation for yourself and others

Which 3 outcomes caught your attention the most?
What would be the outcome of the call of Jesus in your life if you left your current "boat" and gave a solid "yes" to Jesus' call? Which outcomes would you like to experience in your pursuit of God's call?

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, today I read how you used a common fisherman like Peter to step up to Your call for his life. Please call and use me, starting right here and right now. Amen.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So, they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. Luke 5:10b-11

Poem

My Portion

Matthew 4:12-25, Psalm 119:57-64, Isaiah 9:1-2

"You are my portion, Lord; I have promised to obey your words... Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law." Psalm 119:57, 61

*The lot is divided
Which portion is mine?
The juiciest, largest,
The fattest, the prime?
What's that which I grab for?
All comfort or truth?
The palace or desert?
Which portion I choose?
O, Grace, give me wisdom
Set me on Your path
From birth mold me, make me
Give faith which will last
Despite great temptation
Despite wicked crowns
In plenty or prison
In freedom or bound
Let You be my portion
Your Comfort, my guide
Always in Your presence
My soul may abide*



1/8/2025 - WEEK 2 DAY 3

Jesus Teaches the Beatitudes

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:1-16

Devotional By: Susan Pressler

There are three themes in Matthew 5:1-16: (1) Jesus as teacher; (2) blessings to live by; and (3) shining our inner light to glorify God. Jesus taught the Beatitudes to His disciples as part of the Sermon on the Mount. The word Beatitude comes from the Greek word makarios which means “blessed (receiving God’s favor), fortunate, good, happy” (Bible Gateway NIV). Each of the Beatitudes begins with “Blessed are” followed by the groups blessed and the ways they are blessed. These teachings were words for Jesus’ disciples to live by. They are words for us to live by, too, for a more holy life. They are blessings for all of us because we are people in need of comfort, care, and love.

Four similar blessings are found in the Book of Luke as part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-22). Here, Jesus taught that:
“20...Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
22 Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.”

Later in Matthew, Jesus told His disciples that they were the light of the world and they needed to let their light shine for others to see their good deeds that glorified the heavenly Father. Jesus said to followers “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Questions for reflection

Read the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-16) again.
Why do you think the Beatitudes were important to teach the disciples?
How are the Beatitudes relevant to your life today?
Are you letting your inner light shine?
Is your inner light reflecting God’s teachings?
Choose 1 Beatitude, pray about its meaning for you, and teach it to a family member or friend.

Poem

The Good Life
Matthew 5:1-16, Psalm 43

*The good life, the blessing,
is often disguised
In costumes of poverty,
hid from our eyes
The sackcloth of mourning,
the forgiving friend
The one who stays faithful,
despite martyr’s end
For God will deliver
the final just prize
And vindicate all
who were seen as despised
With comfort and mercy,
with bounty and love
He’ll give to the downcast
great hope from above
So let God’s light lead you
to high holy places
Let faithful care ease
all of this world’s disgraces
With praise on your lips
cast your sorrow aside
With beauty of attitude
may you arise*



1/9/2025 - WEEK 2 DAY 4

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law and the Prophets

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:17-20

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

This year our theme is “Be God’s Family.” We are exploring how non-Jewish followers of Jesus have been grafted into the family tree of God’s chosen people. The New Testament does not eliminate the need for the Old Testament. Rather, the New is the fulfillment of the Old.

Jesus said He didn’t come to abolish the Law (the first five books of the O.T.) or the Prophets (the last seventeen), but to fulfill them. After His resurrection, He proclaimed, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The entire Old Testament points to and is fulfilled by Jesus!

Think about it. Jesus is God and was with the Father at the creation of the universe. When Adam and Eve were deceived by Satan, Jesus knew that He would one day defeat that Serpent by His death on the cross. When God showed Abraham the vision of the blood path, Jesus was saying that He alone could walk the Via Dolorosa. When the Lord gave Moses the Law, Jesus understood that He would come to earth and be the only person to ever completely obey it, making Him the perfect sacrifice for our own failure to do so. When God spoke through Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets, Jesus proclaimed that He would actually do what they were trying to get others to do.

Here is a little exercise. What is one of your favorite passages from the Old Testament? Take a moment to retell it in your own words. Then, try to figure out how Jesus is the fulfillment of that story.

What does all this say about the identity of Jesus and the identity of followers of Jesus?

Poem

O, How I Love Your Law!
Matthew 5:17-20, Psalm 119:97-104

O, how I love Your law!

*How sweet to me its precepts!
Day and night It feeds my
meditations!
It salts my faith with steadfastness!
It lights my every cell!
Its constancy fulfilling every promise!
Each letter, word, enduring!
Its offering—great wisdom!*

O, how I love Your law!

*Make me Your testimony!
Make me Your witness sweet!
Write steadfastness upon my heart!
Salt each word with Your truth!
May I shine brightly on Your hill
Because Your Light’s in me!
May many see and feast on You!*

O, how I love Your law!



1/10/2025 - WEEK 2 DAY 5

Jesus Teaches about Purity
SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:21-37

Devotional By: Mark Elcessor

The Old Testament Law has some clear regulations about things like committing murder, pursuing adultery, getting divorced, and breaking oaths. These were all clearly observable actions for which someone could be punished.

In today's passages, Jesus takes those outward behaviors and challenges His followers to look deeper within.

Don't commit murder? Try not being angry with another believer.

Don't pursue adultery? How about not even looking at someone with lustful thoughts?

Don't get divorced without proper procedures? Just be committed to your marriage.

Don't break your oaths? Don't swear at all.

All these point to inner purity, matters of the heart, which are much more important than constructing our own set of legalistic rules then finding ways to justify ourselves when we step outside of them.

In Matthew 22:37, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." What does this mean when it comes to inner purity? How is the Lord challenging you?

Poem

Purity
Matthew 5:21-37, Psalm 119:9-16

Purity

*A soul scrubbed clean
A thought rinsed white
A heart bleached in the Son
An attitude full pressed
A word stored in the place of
forgiveness*

All because of

*Seeking
Hiding
Treasuring
Learning
Recounting
Meditating on
Considering
Rejoicing in
And not neglecting*

Your cleansing Word

Purity



1/13/2025 - WEEK 3 DAY 1

A Challenge for Every Day

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:38-48

Devotional By: Elyce Meador

These 10 verses contain so much in such a short space: there is a reference to the Old Testament (“an eye for an eye...”) and there is a challenge for those who are of the New Testament (“turn your cheek”). This evolution between the Old and New Testaments asks us to likewise learn to accept insult without seeking retaliation, even if we feel we would be justified in doing so.

Many years ago, my father was ill and in treating this illness, the doctor created a new problem that caused a lifelong disability for him. In the midst of all this, I asked him why he didn’t sue the doctor. His response: “What good would it do?” He had forgiven the doctor, did not carry any resentment, and had no need to retaliate. He kept this doctor in his prayers and thought only about the good. This is what we are being asked to do.

We are also asked to love our enemy. Does this sound impossible to you? Proverbs 25:21-22 says, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.” When we do good to those we don’t care for, to those who mistreat us, we are acting in the most Christian of ways. We are being “god-like,” according to William Barclay’s Study Bible Series.

The second part of this passage asks us to be benevolent—to want only the good for others. Just as God sends the rain on the good and the bad, so we should send good wishes to any and all that we come in contact with, even those who mistreat us. (Think about those pesky drivers you meet!)

Jesus finishes by charging us, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” Again, this seems impossible until we realize that Jesus is asking us to fulfil the purpose to which we have been called: the purpose to be God’s people, here and now, to everyone and anyone we meet.

I find this a challenge every day—do you? Who is God asking you to pray for? To show kindness to? You will find that you can no longer hate if you are praying for someone. I challenge you to try this and see.

Poem

Vengeance

Matthew 5:38-48, Psalm 59

*I've been unjustly mangled
I've been betrayed, denied
My friend now enemy becomes
Against me all have lied
I'm lava, hot and molten
My anger burning flows
I sit before you mourning
With ashes and torn clothes
I want to gouge their eyes out
I want my pound of flesh
Yet You call me to hide in You
Forgiving all the rest
To kneeling prayer You call me
Perfection is Your rule
Vengeance is not mine to dole out
Let me not be the fool
Instead, I wait upon Your will
Your timing will I trust
You are my strength, I sing Your
praise
My God, my true fortress*



1/14/2025 - WEEK 3 DAY 2

Jesus Teaches About Giving, Praying, Fasting

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 6:1-18

Devotional By: Judith Gibson

After teaching about giving to the poor, fasting, and loving your enemies in His “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus gives us a model prayer to use when we pray to God. He reminds us that God is not impressed with vain, repetitive words that are spoken “for the glory of men” (1-4), but rather, He tells us to enter our closets, shut the door, and pray to Him in secret and with sincerity (6).

“Our Father, Hallowed be thy name” begins the prayer, acknowledging He is Holy, and yet we have an intimate relationship with our loving God.

“Thy Kingdom come” reminds us of His second coming and a future in Heaven with Him. Praying for His “will to be done,” we surrender to Him and as C.H. Spurgeon writes, we “align our will with His.”

“Give us this day our daily bread” reminds us of our dependence upon God. When we trust Him day by day, we acknowledge that He is faithful and gracious to give us our needs according to His will.

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” may be a challenging part of this prayer for us. We are all sinners. Daily we need to confess our sins, repent of them, and turn from them. But we also need to forgive others “as God has forgiven us.” If we want God to forgive our sins, we need to forgive those who have wronged us.

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” reminds us of our frailty and weakness. Sometimes God allows temptations to test us. In his *Letters to Malcom*, C.S. Lewis writes that this petition is to “make straight our paths. Spare us, where possible, from all crises, whether of temptation or affliction.” During good or troublesome times, we need to thank God for his goodness and pray for His help and strength to overcome those tests. Praise God that He loves us enough to forgive us, leads us in the right ways, and delivers us from evil!

“For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever” concludes Jesus’ model for us. He is the Great I AM. Hallelujah! Such a thoughtful prayer encourages us to hold fast to God, seek His forgiveness, ask His help to avoid temptation, and gain protection from evil. The Lord’s Prayer models for us how we can converse with God and seek His wisdom and guidance daily.

Why do you think Jesus uses the plural pronouns throughout this prayer model and not the singular? What part of the prayer is challenging for you? Why?

Poem

Integrity

Matthew 6:1-18, Psalm 37:21-40

*It's said that one is measured
By what in secret's done
Where no one else can notice--
There is the victory won*

*A hand which doles out righteously
A generous supply
While other hand is blessing
The stranger passing by*

*A parent in their closet
A-praying for their child
To be a mighty blessing
Yet secret all the while*

*The one who turns from evil
When tempting comes their way
This is the one who God preserves
When trials are at bay*

*God's kingdom they'll inherit
As they, God's glory share
With tongues full laced with
righteousness
They'll flee the Tempter's snare*

*Consider well the blameless
Consider the upright
Their treasures are in heaven
Their futures filled with light*

*It's said that one is measured
By what in secret's done
Where no one else can notice--
There is the victory won*



1/15/2025 - WEEK 3 DAY 3

Jesus Teaches About God, Money & Worry

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 6:19-34

Devotional By: Doug Bromm

When we first moved to Fishers, our yard was not much to look at. The newly built home had sod in front and that "green painted grass seed" out back. One day, as I was driving past one of the many empty fields on Olio Road that are all paved over now, I pulled into one and dug up a few wild tiger lilies. They were pretty and I knew that they had to be hardy, so I transplanted them into a back corner where the grass seed had already washed away. I remember taking pictures of them the following Spring as they had spread and bloomed a beautiful symphony of red, orange and gold.

Many Bible versions like the NKJV, RSV and ESV translate verse 28 as, "Consider the lilies" and, whenever I read that, I always think of the pictures of those lilies decorating our powder bathroom.

Our verses today about treasure in heaven and worry really speak to our focus and priority. We wouldn't strive so hard for the treasures of the earth if our focus was on Jesus. And we wouldn't worry so much, as if everything depended on us, if our priority was dependence upon Him.

As a young couple in a new house, expecting a second baby and making what felt like monumental mortgage payments, we had a lot to worry about. Thankfully, we made the decision to come to Fishers UMC and surround ourselves with our church family.

The lawn has grown in and that second baby is now a Senior in college. Twenty-three years of raises have made the mortgage payments a lot more manageable. It's funny how our worries may have changed, but the God we follow has not. Listen as He whispers to us through Matthew the timely wisdom and calming knowledge that the things that we strive after and are anxious for today will fade like they did for that young couple.

How will you trust in Jesus today and let tomorrow be anxious for itself?

Poem

Worry

Matthew 6:19-34, Psalm 25

Worry

When it comes knocking

I will not respond

Instead

I will attend to the tasks

Of my temple

I'll set the table of Trust

I'll feast on the Promises of God

I'll drink the sweet nectar of Hope

Worry

When it gets louder

I will not respond

Instead

I will turn up the volume

Of my praising

I'll recount the Goodness of God

I'll dance in the Praises of

Thanksgiving

I'll call out my Petitions at the throne

Worry

When it breaks through my door

I will not respond

Instead

I will plant my feet at the threshold

Of my household

I'll declare that my doorposts are

bloodstained

I'll name the Lord of my home

I'll let my Husband protect me

Worry

When it runs from my mind

I will respond

With deliverance

I will kneel at the feet

Of my Savior

I'll weep tears of joy

I'll anoint with oil His pierced feet

I have chosen the better portion



1/16/2025 - WEEK 3 DAY 4

Go to the Mirror!

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 7:1-14

Devotional By: Dan Henke

Every year, the 3rd grade elementary classes from all the HSE elementary schools take a field trip to the City Municipal Complex to learn about city government, and I make a quick presentation on the role of the City Court. It's interesting what questions I get from 3rd graders. One Friday, each group asked, "How old are you?" However, the following Friday, each group had a much more challenging question: "What happens if you get in trouble?" Good question.

We are all inherently judgmental of others. We criticize others for their shortcomings and ignore our own. I believe this stems from our desire to be pleasing to God, but we are conflicted by the knowledge that we fall short of His Glory. So, we seek justification; we will always find someone "worse" than us and use that as rationalization for why we continue to accept sin in our lives. People like to say, "Jesus is Love," and indeed He does love us. But if there is one thing He despises, it is spiritual hypocrisy.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told the parable of the two men in prayer; one a sinner who repented his sins, the other the Pharisee who basically said, "I'm glad I'm not a sinner like that guy." Or the story of the adulterous woman in John 8:7, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." We have been commanded to help each other grow in Christ, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:29; "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." But in doing that, we need to be mindful of our own shortcomings.

My contact lenses often get dust or debris which can be uncomfortable and irritating. Sometimes it feels like a plank in my eye. But I can't take my contacts out and clean them unless I have a mirror. It's the same with the spiritual planks in our own eyes. If you want to remove them, go to the mirror, and take a good look at what you need to remove.

Poem

Fully Blameless And Pure
Matthew 7:1-14, Psalm 119:1-8

*Fully blameless and pure may I be
before You
Logs removed, specks washed out
of my eyes
Seeking first who You are and
what's precious to You
Knowing truth, flee from what is
despised
May Your precepts my pearls be,
Your ways be obeyed
A child, Yours, requesting true
food
Your generous gifting—A heart
filled with praise
A loving pure soul which is good*



1/17/2025 - WEEK 3 DAY 5

The Real You

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 7:15-29

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

Be authentic.

Bear good fruit.

Do God's will.

Put Christ's words into practice.

A life lived in submission and obedience to the Lord is like a tree with deep roots, like a house with a good foundation. It will stand the test of time into eternity.

When I was growing up, our family lived on three acres of land, a property that was just over 130 feet wide, but 1000 feet deep. Along the entire 1000 feet on the south side of the property was a row of Osage orange trees, otherwise known as hedge apple trees. But don't be fooled. They are neither oranges nor apples. Rather, the trees produce sticky, milky, bumpy green fruits that are good for nothing except my dad telling me to pick them up and throw them into the fence row so they don't damage the lawn mower. I tossed thousands of them out of our yard every year, using the trees themselves for improving my accuracy in throwing a baseball from third to first base. I hated those trees.

A wolf in sheep's clothing.

A tree bearing bad fruit.

A church performer who doesn't even know Jesus.

A house built on a foundation of sand.

Are there any inauthentic parts of your Christian life? What needs to be completely overhauled to bring you into alignment with Jesus?

Poem

A Home On The Hillside
Matthew 7:15-29, Psalm 128

*A home on the hillside
Full set in the sun
An orchard well planted
With olive fruit hung
Its pillars full planted
In bedrock for strength
Its table full laden
Its doorway well planked
Its rooms filled with laughter
All arms filled with love
With love as its cover
Its roofing above
When rains come, its fire
Continues to warm
Its residents, comfort,
All knowing no harm
For righteousness lives there
And sits by each bed
This home always blessed
With Christ as its head*



1/20/2025 - WEEK 4 DAY 1

Peeling Back the Layers

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 8:1-13

Devotional By: Dan Henke

Reading (and rereading) the Bible I am reminded of the movie Shrek, where Shrek tries to explain the complexity of ogres.

“Layers! Onions have layers. Ogres have layers! Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers.”

The Bible is not an ogre, but it certainly does have layers. Every time I read a passage I see another layer. Let’s look at the Faith of the Centurion.

At face value, a Centurion came to Jesus asking for a miracle, the healing of his valued servant. The Centurion didn’t need to have Jesus come to his house to perform the miracle. Instead, as the Centurion knew he had authority and his orders would be obeyed, he also knew Jesus has authority and His word will be done. Jesus praised him and it’s a great story of faith.

But is there more? Let’s look a little closer at this Centurion. A Centurion was the commander of 100 men in the Roman Army, roughly equivalent to a Captain. The Roman Army was his career and his life. Yes, he had the authority to command and knew that his commands would be carried out, but that authority, and morale, was always being tested. He could not show weakness to his men or poor judgment to his superiors.

And where or what was his “home” where his servant would be? It was the army barracks. To bring Jesus, a Jew subject to Roman rule, to the barracks to heal his servant would be seen by his men and his superiors. The Centurion of faith took a bold and risky step to publicly ask Jesus for a miracle. But taking Jesus to the barracks was a bridge too far.

And yet, Jesus revealed His true nature by His response. He could have rebuked the Centurion, as he did the rich young man in Matthew 19, but he didn’t. He knew what the Centurion had already risked. So instead of a rebuke, Jesus used it as an object lesson in faith, love and compassion. Jesus knew what this Centurion needed, and He provided it.

Jesus knows what we need too.

Poem

Your Power
Matthew 8:1-13, Psalm 62

*All power belongs to You, O God
And Your power is Your love for me
Though my frame is all weak
Leaning, crumbling to earth
Your power is Your love for me
When attacked from without
Or attacked from within
Your power is Your love for me
I can stand firmly planted
With nary a doubt
For Your power is Your love for me*

*So I run to you now
Though my leprous sin
Shouts a hopeless future
Far way from all kin
I can fall at Your feet
I can call on Your name
Your authority, pow’r
I can fully now claim
For Your power is Your love for me
O yes!
Your power is Your love for me*

*All power belongs to You, O God
And Your power is Your love for me
Though my frame is all weak
Leaning, crumbling to earth
Your power is Your love for me
When attacked from without
Or attacked from within
Your power is Your love for me
I can stand firmly planted
With nary a doubt
For Your power is Your love for me*



1/21/2025 - WEEK 4 DAY 2

No Strangers in God's Kingdom

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 8:14-17

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

At the end of the Gospel of John are two sentences about the three years of Jesus' ministry on earth:

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book" (John 20:30).

"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

In today's reading we find an example of this, with Jesus driving out demonic spirits and healing the sick bodies of many who were brought to him. The vast majority of these were unnamed and unknown strangers to the disciples. But be assured of this - Jesus knew them, just as certainly as Peter knew his wife's mother who was healed.

Here's the truth: none of us are unnamed or unknown to God. Psalm 139:1 says, "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me." With God, there is no duck and cover, no hide and seek, no out of sight, out of mind. We are never beyond the ears, eyes or touch of Jesus.

Are you in need of a word from Jesus? Sit and listen.

Do you desire a touch from the Lord? Reach out to Him.

Are you longing for God to hear your voice? Speak with confidence.

Psalm 145:18 says it all, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."

Poem

Thoughts Upon A Sickbed
Matthew 8:14-17, Psalm 41

*"The Lord sustains them on their sickbed and restores them from their bed of illness."
Psalm 41:3*

*I lie here
Feverish
Chilled
Coughing
Weak
Aching
Sleepless
Idle*

*And I wonder
Where is my mother?
Will this ever end?
Is there a cure?
How long will this last?
What is my worth?
Will I ever work again?
Will I ever recover?*

*And I feel
Tired
Worthless
Pathetic
Stinky
Hopeless
Exhausted
Abandoned*

*Can you come
To bring me a drink?
To be present, yet silent?
To hold me in prayer?
To lift up my head?
To sing to my soul?
To cool my brow?
To bear the stench?*

*So I pray
Please, an end to this soon
Please, somebody come
Please, healthy strong days ahead
Please, revive me
Please, a breath of fresh Spirit
Please, have mercy on me LORD*



1/22/2025 - WEEK 4 DAY 3

Jesus Teaches about the Cost of Following Him

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 8:18-22

Devotional By: Patti Napier

In the earlier verses of Matthew, chapter 8, Jesus had just performed many miraculous healings...a man with leprosy, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, and many who were demon-possessed. Following these mountaintop experiences of healings, two men approached Jesus about being His followers. The responses from Jesus were that it was so much easier to SAY they were disciples than to BE His disciples.

The first man in verses 18-20 was from a scribe who dedicated his life to knowing and writing the Scriptures. The scribe told Jesus he would go anywhere with Him. Jesus responded with "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." A decision to follow Jesus could not be made on a whim without the costs it demanded. Consider reading Luke 14:28-30. Jesus knew that being a fully devoted disciple was costly and not the easiest way of life. If you are looking for the easy way, it is not the Jesus way. Really consider your decision.

And then the second man in verses 21-22 needed to understand that being a follower of Jesus meant immediate obedience without excuses or other priorities. The second man stumbled using the excuse to bury his father before following Jesus.

This man thought devotion to family was a valid excuse and priority. Jesus responded to allow others to tend to his father and to follow Him immediately. This moment was not about loving family. We certainly know Jesus was dedicated to his mother, Mary. When He hung on the cross, in extreme agony, He put his mother into the care of John when He was gone. He did not neglect nor forget His mother.

The issue for this man was following Jesus. Yes, loving family and others is important, but not more important than loving and following Jesus. Delayed obedience was disobedience.

Do you have other priorities before your relationship with Jesus (your work, your hobbies, your spouse, your children/grandchildren, your house)? Are you SAYING you are a disciple of Jesus or are you BEING a disciple of Jesus?

Poem

Lists

Matthew 8:23-34, Psalm 142

*Trouble, fatigue
Traps, snares
Loneliness, exposure
Despair, weakness
Imprisonment, hate
Persecution*

*Not a great recommendation, LORD
Not a wooing call
Except for the priceless treasure,
LORD
When You are our all in all*

*Access, mercy
Protection, guidance
Concern, strength
Life, freedom
Goodness, righteousness
Relationship*



1/23/2025 - WEEK 4 DAY 4

Jesus Calms the Storm

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 8:23-27

Devotional By: Doug Bromm

I grew up in northern Ohio on Lake Erie and, when I was a boy, it was just as natural for me to crew sailboat races as it is for any Indiana boy to join a pickup basketball game. They raced a different class of sailboat every day of the week and my favorite job was setting the spinnaker (the big brightly colored sail) as we began a downwind run.

If the boy crewing sailboats had read this passage, I think that I would have simply concluded that "Jesus is my 911 call" for whenever I get into any bad situation or a storm of sorts. That is not a bad conclusion in that it keeps the plain thing the main thing: You do want Jesus onboard with you when you face a storm.

Nowadays, I try to picture myself in that scene as one of the disciples on the boat with Jesus. Questions occur to me like, "why are they on the boat in the first place?", "didn't they check their weather app?" and "who had to be the poor guy to wake Him up?"

Then I realized that they were on the boat because they obeyed Jesus in the first place and that He had deliberately led them into that storm! And only He could calm that storm with a rebuke.

Now I have more questions like, "I don't like storms. Why would I want to follow Jesus into them?" I would much rather have a God who keeps me safe and comfortable!

But you rarely grow stronger in safety and comfort. Jesus knew that his crew had a monumental job ahead of them. This rag tag group with no power, no money and no influence would go on to turn the world upside down shortly after He left. This was training for that mission.

What storms are you facing today: a job loss, a dreaded diagnosis, children or grandchildren making poor choices? How can you rely on Jesus to get you through?

What have you weathered in your past that might equip you to be the hands and feet of Jesus to others who are going through their own storm?

Poem

Lord, Creator Of It All
Matthew 8:23-37, Psalm 93

"The seas have lifted up, Lord, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea— the Lord on high is mighty." Psalm 93: 3-4

*Chaos, flooding all around
Waves surmounting, crashing
Galing winds push mighty down
Thunder, lightning slashing*

*LORD, creator of it all
LORD, sustainer when I fall
You can calm the stormy seas
You can calm the storms in me*

*Fear, anxiety abound
Guilt and shame all crashing
Tempest winds of change push round
All my heart's peace slashing*

*LORD, You reign in majesty
LORD, from all eternity
You establish firm Your ways
You establish all our days*



1/24/2025 - WEEK 4 DAY 5

Jesus Heals Undesirables

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 8:28-34

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

To Jews in Jesus' day, there was nothing worse than a herd of pigs. When Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son, the listener knew the wayward boy had hit rock bottom when he took a job slopping pigs (Luke 15:15). When Jesus was teaching His disciples how to minister to others, he told them to not throw their pearls to pigs (Matthew 7:6).

Perhaps it was no surprise to the Jewish disciples that the proper place for a legion of demons is in a herd of pigs. They were in Gentile territory. Everything about this encounter would have seemed spiritually unclean to the Twelve.

But here's something worth noticing. The violent, demon-possessed, tomb-dwelling, Gentile men were of great value to Jesus. Their lives and well-being were worth more than a herd of pigs, a flock of sheep, or any other non-human thing in all of creation. Jesus didn't care that they weren't Jews. He wasn't bothered that they were homeless. He didn't back away because of their social impurities. He simply interceded for them. Their lives mattered.

That's the way it is for followers of Jesus, too. We are called to minister to others, regardless of how they look, smell, think, act, or speak. The Lord wants everyone to be free from their former way of life to live into a new future.

In Mark's account of this episode, one of these men was the focal point of the story. When the townspeople came to the scene, they found the violent, naked, crazy man restored by Jesus, "sitting there, dressed and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15). This freaked out the folks from the community. It's one thing when they could keep him at arm's length. It's another thing when Jesus told the guy, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

Angry that their pigs were now floating in the lake and afraid that cemetery dwellers were coming home, the people simply pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. They would rather have Jesus gone from them than Jesus healing their undesirables. How sad.

Poem

Cry

Matthew 8:28-34, Psalm 130

*Thrown in a pit of hopelessness
Where demons, fears, assail me
Out of these depths I cry to You
For You will never fail me*

*Among the dead, in sin I live
Bound, chained, despair my diet
I wait for You, all of me waits
May You my demons quiet*

*My mutilated flesh exposed
My life blood constant draining
My hope's in You, in You alone
Grant me Your love unailing*



1/27/2025 - WEEK 5 DAY 1

Jesus Forgives & Heals a Paralyzed Man

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:1-8

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

At the start of today's reading, Jesus had come to his own town. Mark's account of this story says he had come home, that is, to Capernaum (Mark 2:1). Jesus had been raised forty miles away in the remote village of Nazareth. But many of His disciples were from the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Capernaum was located as a strategic place to reach multitudes of people. So, Jesus made it his new home.

Have you ever moved to a different city, transferred to a different school, or started attending a different church? What was hard about it? What was good? How did it change you?

In Capernaum, Jesus was beginning to get a following. This disturbed the religious authorities. His message of the Kingdom of God didn't fit with their tightly constructed religious rules and regulations. When Jesus forgave the man's sins, they accused Him of blasphemy. When He healed his paralysis, they no doubt seethed with anger as the crowd praised God with overwhelming awe.

Think of it from the paralyzed man's perspective. His friends brought him to Jesus, lying on a mat. Hopeful for healing, Jesus' first words were, "your sins are forgiven." Do you think the guy was disappointed? Be honest. What would you rather have - forgiveness for your sins or healing for your terminal illness?

In 1871 Horatio Spafford lost all his fortune in the great Chicago fire. Then, after his four-year-old son died of scarlet fever, he sent his wife and four daughters to England, promising to join them soon. During the journey across the Atlantic, the ship sank. All four of his daughters died, but his wife survived. Spafford then boarded a ship for England to be with his wife. When he crossed the place where his daughters drowned, he penned these familiar words:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll—
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

How about you? Is it well with your soul? If Jesus gave you forgiveness when you were seeking healing, would you say it was well with your soul? When Jesus doesn't fit your tightly constructed religious rules and regulations, is all well with your soul? How is the Lord calling you to do an attitude check when it comes to the ways of Jesus?

Poem

Paralysis Lost
Matthew 9:1-8, Psalm 143

*My fall to ruin, evil bred
My weakened body, alone in bed
No feeling left
No movement here
By sin encased, all stiffened*

*Paralysis in spirit now
No one to cool my heated brow
My limbs afire
No movement here
By hopelessness, all ridden*

*My only hope, some sympathy
By those around, no apathy
But lift me up
And carry me
To only One can heal me*

*To move again, but more receive
Forgiveness here, full empathy
My foes defeat
My health restored
Full praise released and leaping*

*What gift of love I have received!
What gift beyond, I now perceive!
My hope too small
God gave me all!
Fully restored to Eden!*



1/28/2025 - WEEK 5 DAY 2

The Call of Matthew

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:9-17

Devotional By: Kim Arnott

Discipleship is sometimes unpredictable. Usually surprising. Always amazing. Who would expect that one of the most despised and hated persons in Capernaum would have been chosen by Jesus as a disciple?

In the passage, Matthew was sitting in his normal place – the tax collector's booth. This was probably on the outskirts of Capernaum where Matthew could collect tolls and custom fees from those traveling through the area, among other taxes assessed on the people. This was a profession that Matthew chose. Tax collectors, generally local men, collaborated with Rome who then gave them the privilege to collect taxes in the area.

The kicker was that anything they collected over and above the required amount could be pocketed by the tax collector, leading to all kinds of abuses – and additional wealth for the tax collector. For all these reasons, Matthew would have been despised and hated by his fellow Jewish citizens. He was considered a traitor and shunned by the community as well as his family. He was unable to attend synagogue and considered unclean. Matthew was not welcomed by anyone in Capernaum.

We can't tell from scripture if Matthew knew Jesus prior to this encounter. But I would like to imagine that Matthew had witnessed the miracles, teaching, healing, and exorcisms Jesus had been performing in and around Capernaum. It would have been hard for him not to have been aware of who Jesus was. And I would also like to imagine that he was moved by the message of love and forgiveness. Was he feeling guilty and remorseful for his life as a tax collector? But two simple words from Jesus were enough for Matthew to leave everything behind – “*Follow me*”.

Love and forgiveness. Love for every human being. And forgiveness for all who ask – no matter what they have done or who they might have harmed. This is exhibited by Jesus' next act – visiting Matthew's home and dining with “*tax collectors and sinners*”. The NIV Application Commentary says this: “(Jesus) breaks down barriers between social classes, overturns religious conceptions of well-being, and abolishes slavish adherence to religious cultural traditions.”

And we see the personal forgiveness of Matthew. One could say that Matthew had the most to lose of all the disciples by his decision to follow Jesus. He gave up a lucrative business that could have had him set for life. And he certainly could not go back to his position once he left. There was no turning back. But what did he gain? A new life in Jesus Christ. He gained love, acceptance and forgiveness for his past life. Jesus was offering Matthew a new beginning.

What might you have to lose to gain new life in Jesus?

Poem

Waiting And Waiting Matthew 9:9-17, Psalm 40

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
God's silence
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Impatience*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Mocked voices
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Wrong choices*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
God's deafness?
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Me, restless*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Downtrodden
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Forgotten?*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Wheel running
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Kin shunning*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Days burdened
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Heart hardened*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Call whispered
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Heart simpler*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Eyes piercing
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Soul hearing*

*Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
Now bawling
Waiting and waiting and waiting some more
New calling*



1/29/2025 - WEEK 5 DAY 3

The Diary of The Woman with Bleeding

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:18-26

Devotional **By: Lisa Ellcessor**

For six million, three hundred and seven thousand, two hundred minutes I have been “unclean!” Every minute is a moment lost in my life. Over 4,380 days I have suffered. My name is “unknown” and I have been 12 years unclean.

How did I get this way? My dark, hidden self is numb. I understand why no one includes me. The definition of blood flux is packed with fear, abandonment, isolation and whispers of “she won’t make it.” What does life hold for my older self? I can’t go on another minute.
I understand the Mosaic law on cleanliness.

Leviticus 15:25 “When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge...”

I seep, smell and attract flies.

Leviticus 15:26 “Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean... Anything she sits on will be unclean...”

Everything I sit or sleep upon is unclean. I’m conscientious to not stain things.

Leviticus 15:27 “Anyone who touches (her) will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.”

I am without friends. I cannot worship with others or socialize.

Leviticus 15:28-30 “When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean. On the eighth day, she must take two doves or two young pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The priest is to sacrifice one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. In this way he will make atonement for her before the LORD for the uncleanness of her discharge.”

I long for the day when my blood stops flowing and the blood on the altar is poured out as a sin offering for me. The substitute of death will be my new life!

I see this Jewish Jesus. Yes! From a distance, I’ve secretly listened and watched the Messiah preach and heal. Jesus’ Spirit is calling hope to me and powerfully tells me, “There is more to come.” The moment is now. I need the Gentle Healer to save me. I am desperate! This is the minute I’ve been waiting for. I will sneak into the crowd and touch His garment.

I think NOW, at six million, three hundred and seven thousand, two hundred and one minute, I shall be clean!”

Matthew 9:22 Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed at that moment.

Poem

You
Matthew 9:18-26, Psalm 30

*How can I live when life from me is draining?
How can I praise when breath in me is straining?
One touch from You can dam my endless bleeding
One breath from You fans life within completing*

*Unnoticed, scorned, by most who travel ‘round me
All lost, forlorn, my clipped wings they now ground me
But with one word You call me forth from hiding
And with one breath You set me sailing, flying*

*Who else but You attends to my soul reaching?
Who else but You hears wounded heart cries screeching?
To You alone, I lift up all my praises
‘Cause You alone, my soul from death now raises*



1/30/2025 - WEEK 5 DAY 4

Sight for the Physically & Spiritually Blind

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:27-34

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

The Pharisees were on high alert when it came to Jesus. In Matthew 9 alone, Jesus forgave and healed a paralyzed man, ate a meal with Roman-loving tax collectors and spiritually unclean sinners, healed a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, and raised the daughter of the synagogue leader from the dead. Now Jesus enabled two blind men to see and a mute man to talk.

The response of the Pharisees? “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.”

This goes to the heart of Jesus’ identity. In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis said, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

The Pharisees made their choice. They looked at the words and actions of Jesus and concluded that He was a demon. Others admitted that Jesus was a good guy, but definitely not God in the flesh. Still others stepped away from their tax collector’s booths, leaving their lucrative careers to follow Him to the ends of the earth.

Who do you say Jesus is?

Poem

Who

Matthew 9:27-34, Psalm 146

*Who is my only hope?
Who solely fully knows me?
Who cares with Father-love?
Who sacrificing shows me?
Who heals my spirit torn?
Who listens to my calling?
Who kisses back my tears?
Who catches me when falling?
Who paves and guides my way?
Who reins me in when failing?
Who searches me when lost?
Who guards against sin’s railing?
Who shares my joy, delights?
Who trains me up, full able?
Who opens wide my heart?
Who welcomes me at table?
Whose ways are always good?
Who fills my cup, refreshing?
Who changes orphan state?
Who gives me regal blessing?*



1/31/2025 - WEEK 5 DAY 5

Workers for the Harvest

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 9:35-10:15

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

When Taylor Swift came to Indianapolis last fall, everybody took notice. She packed out Lucas Oil Stadium for three consecutive shows. It just so happens that Lisa and I were flying home from Florida on one of those days. When we boarded the plane, the attendant said, "Welcome to the flight to Swift-City!" Half of the aircraft raised their arms and let out screams of excitement.

Jesus may not have sold out a football stadium, but he was packing out the synagogues in towns and villages all over Galilee. His teaching, preaching and healing ministry was drawing huge crowds. If He would have sold some WWJD bracelets, He could have made a killing. Rather than thinking about what He could sell them, He thought about what He could give them. Even He and His twelve disciples didn't have the capacity to meet all their physical, spiritual, economic, and emotional needs.

For that, they would need a team. Jesus gave His disciples three phases for meeting the needs of those around them.

First, Pray. He told His disciples to pray for workers to send out into God's harvest field.

Second, Go. He sent out the disciples to get first-hand experience in ministering without Him.

Third, Train. Jesus commissioned and sent out seventy-two others for a similar kind of ministry (Luke 10:1-20). I picture the twelve apostles each training half a dozen people, preparing them for this experience.

My life verse is 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul told his protégé, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."

Not even Jesus or Paul clutched onto ministry as if they were the only ones who could do it. They trusted others to come alongside them, even going beyond where they could physically go and be.

What is your ministry niche? How can you share that with others, so that the ministry of Christ can be extended beyond your imagination?

Poem

Mandate

Matthew 9:35-10:15, Psalm 65

*Frightened not by evil words
No threat from the fowler's sword
Fields are ripe, gloved harvest hands
Kingdom's bounty, our command
Get thee to it, tarry not
To the vineyard, reap the crop
Throw away what weighs you down
Work amid sun's shining crown
Evil boasters, give no mind
Shake the dust off, focus find
'Til the night falls, call to rest
Welcomed, by the Owner blessed*



2/3/2025 - WEEK 6 DAY 1

Jesus Warns His Disciples of Persecution

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 10:16-42

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

In the first part of this chapter, we see Jesus sending out His twelve disciples for ministry throughout Galilee. He gave them authority over spiritual and physical brokenness, saying, "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:7-8). They were not to take money or possessions, trusting that God would provide food, lodging, extra clothing, or other needs along the way. This had to be heady stuff for such a ragtag group of guys.

Then, in today's passage, Jesus let's them know it won't be all sunshine and rainbows. Along the way they could expect to be arrested, flogged, and persecuted in all manners of ways. Jesus climaxed his rally speech with this memorable one-liner: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Look at a few of the verses Jesus spoke in today's passage. What was Jesus saying to His disciples? What is He saying to you?

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

Poem

The Prayer Of The Persecuted

Matthew 10:16-42, Psalm 69:1-8, Micah 7:6

*Alone in the quicksand
with nary a friend
No sister to help me,
no brother to lend
A rope to hold onto
to pull from the pit
The more that I struggle,
the more I lose grip
Deep down in morass
I continue to slip*

*My father against me,
my mother, forlorn
My neighbors looks down on me,
eyes filled with scorn
My enemies number
far more than my hairs
I search for compassion,
but nobody cares
O, LORD, come and rescue,
'tis more I can bear*

*Though no one is for me,
with you by my side
Who can stand against me
with you as my guide
And where can I go without
you there to see
My struggle, my grief,
persecution's decree
And so, now sustain me,
my rescuer be*



2/4/2025 - WEEK 6 DAY 2

Jesus Describes the Identity of John the Baptist

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 11:1-19

Devotional By: Mark Elcessor

In the last book of the Old Testament, the Lord promised, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction” (Malachi 4:5-6). Four hundred years later, John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy.

Honestly, John wasn’t much to see. He wasn’t a well-dressed, well-rehearsed orator. His message caused quite a stir, including his own arrest and eventual execution. But John’s purpose was clear: to prepare the way for Jesus.

Sandwiched around this discussion about the identity of John the Baptist are snippets about the identity of Jesus. This passage begins with John wondering if Jesus is the “one who is to come.” Jesus tells John’s disciples to report all the ways people’s lives are being restored. The passage ends with Jesus reminding His own followers that the religious authorities discredited Him for how He lived and the company He kept.

Neither John nor Jesus lived up to the expectations of the religious leaders of their day. John was too reclusive. Jesus was too worldly. Both fulfilled what was spoken in “all the Prophets and the Law” (the entire Old Testament). But the scholars of those writings just couldn’t, or wouldn’t, see it.

From what you know, what is your summary of who John the Baptist was?

Poem

A King Who Will Reign
Matthew 11:1-19, Psalm 2

*They scream and they shout
They stir up great fear
The nations grab greedily
Land on this sphere
Each mocks loud the other
Each claims to have power
Their dominance, though,
Last only an hour
Determined by God
The true ruler above
Who sways forth His will
Who works only in love
His secrets, none know,
As presumptions are dashed
God raises a vanguard
All the nations to smash
A prophet, a priest,
And a king for all ages
Determined beforehand
And whispered to sages
Who hold this great weapon
In hearts’ prophecy
Which slowly unfolds
For the whole world to see
A true and new Adam
A king who will reign
Establishing Eden
True splendor regained*



2/5/2025 - WEEK 6 DAY 3

Unrepentant Hearts and Tired Souls

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 11:20-30

Devotional By: Mark Elcessor

A yoke is a wooden bar that was fixed around the necks of two oxen so they would pull together. The Bible uses it dozens of times metaphorically to describe the things we attach ourselves to as human beings. Here Jesus told His followers, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

This had to be good news for the twelve disciples. They had just been sent out on a mission where Jesus promised them all sorts of persecution. And they had just witnessed Jesus taking a second tour through the towns and villages where His popularity had soared due to miracles and healings. But this round Jesus denounced them, saying they were worse than the worst pagan cities of their day and the worst godless city of the Old Testament. All the places they and Jesus went were unrepentant and headed for judgment. Ugh.

Sensing their defeat, Jesus turned to all who would listen and said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." What a promise! What a blessing! Jesus is the source of true rest for our souls. When we yoke ourselves to Him, we always pull in the right direction. In fact, He does most of the pulling. After all, His yoke is easy. His burden is light.

In what ways does your load need lightened?

How does your soul need rest?

How is Jesus wooing you toward His gentle and humble heart?

How can you yoke yourself to Him?

What are some steps you can take?

Poem

For My Child

Matthew 11:20-30, Psalm 50

*Come, my child, and let me share
The miraculous ways of the Lord
Great works of love clear His path
As He speaks words only few will hear
Yes, He speaks, but wise and learned ones
Ignore the call to repentance
Though His glory shines upon the earth
Only the children see
Only the humble comprehend
Only they will come and lay their burden
down
To rest in the forgiveness grace extends*

Yes, God comes

*For some, a great advent of rejoicing!
For some, a great fire of judgment!
O child, learn from Tyre, Sidon and Sodom
Do not test the Lord's patience!
Know, my child, the Great Creator
Is not dependent upon your sacrificial life
For already He knows your heart
Already He owns all of creation
Already, everything there is to know—*

Yes, He knows

*So be ready, my child
For the whisper of God to
Fall upon your ear
For God is speaking*

*Be ready, my child
For the light of God to
Shine upon your way
For God is revealing*

*Be ready, my child
For God's visitation to
Call you into new life
For His glory will be seen in you*

*Be ready, my child
For God's judgment of the earth to
Re-create the Eden
For those who come to Him*

*Be ready, my child
For God's deliverance to
Give you deep rest
For a new yoke will be fashioned*

All for you, my child



2/6/2025 - WEEK 6 DAY 4

The Heart of the Matter

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 12:1-14

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

How could feeding some friends and healing a man cause the Pharisees to plot how they might kill Jesus? It was a matter of the heart.

Both the feeding and healing incidents took place on the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8-11 lays out the law in the Ten Commandments:

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

To this basic precept, the Pharisees added layers of rules for Sabbath-keeping.

You couldn't look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because it might tempt you to pluck a gray hair, which would be doing work.

You couldn't spit on the Sabbath, because it would land on the dirt and you would be plowing.

You couldn't swat a bug on the Sabbath, lest you be guilty of hunting.

If your house was burning down on the Sabbath, you couldn't carry out your clothes. However, you could dress in several layers of clothes, then walk out. Hmmm. This sounds like how my daughters fly home without suitcases.

In focusing on their 39 categories of ways to avoid Sabbath-breaking, the Pharisees missed the point. Keeping the Sabbath was about honoring God, the true heart of the matter.

How do you honor the Sabbath? How do you honor God? What changes do you need to make?

Poem

My Shepherd
Matthew 12:1-14, Psalm 23

*My shepherd
My shepherd is working
Providing for my every need
No matter the hour*

*My shepherd
My shepherd has gone before me
Clearing the path of snares
Finding oasis green pastures*

*My shepherd
My shepherd calls forth power
Healing me to the depths
Anointing me with the oil of joy*

*My shepherd
My shepherd is aware
Smelling the scent of danger
Before others can even comprehend the enemy*

*My shepherd
My shepherd wields might words
Silencing all that would come against me
Even when paths are dark and trials are steep*

*My shepherd
My shepherd holds me close to His heart
Quelling the trembling of my fear
To comfort me when I am distressed*

*My shepherd
My shepherd cares not for the mocking of demons
Bidding them “Be gone!”
Returning me to Sabbath's table*

*My shepherd
My shepherd has already fashioned my resting fold
Filling with bedding of goodness and mercy
Not just for a moment, but for all my days*



2/7/2025 - WEEK 6 DAY 5

Crowds from Everywhere Follow Jesus

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 12:15-37

Devotional By: Mary Martin

Why did Jesus instruct witnesses to not tell about the healings they received or observed? As His reputation grew, many people began to follow Jesus. Knowing human nature, it is likely that most were attending for the “show” and excitement of the visible miracles, so the advertisement of His next appearance would certainly have expanded the audience. It was great entertainment! However, others genuinely listened to His teachings. Jesus wanted His listeners truly to hear His words.

Words matter. In a verbal agreement, often accompanied by a handshake, a person may offer a pledge by saying “I give you my word.” In his essay, “The Death of Words,” C.S. Lewis notes that spoken words demonstrate a person’s set of beliefs and actions. He says, “May the words we use have meaning and truth, knowing what we know about the God we pray to and who is revealed through the Word became flesh, Jesus Christ.”

In this portion of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus reminds us that “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” James 3:10 tells us “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” We are to give account for every careless word, and by our words we are acquitted or condemned.

The most important Truth we can tell is that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The miracles, signs, healings and wonders Jesus performed during His brief physical time on earth were an outward manifestation of the inward, spiritual wholeness that Christ will speak into each person who accepts Him as Savior. Jesus still mends broken lives, and that is the story which is to be told.

You have His Word.

Questions:

Am I more impressed by a person’s words or actions?

How do my words demonstrate my beliefs?

Am I a man/woman of my word?

Poem

I Have Been...

Matthew 12:15-37, Psalm 119:17-24

*I have been searching
Wandering
Starving
For food*

*I have been longing
Craving
Thirsting
For truth*

*I have been robbed by
Arrogance
Contempt
For faithfulness*

*I have been praying
Constantly
Begging
For you*



2/10/2025 - WEEK 7 DAY 1

Jesus Speaks About the Sign of Jonah

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 12:38-45

Devotional By: Patti Napier

The Pharisees, scribes and other contemporaries of Jesus were witnesses to many miracles of Jesus, but many remained skeptical about who Jesus said He was. The skeptics asked Jesus to prove that He was sent from God. They demanded a sign from Jesus to help their unbelief, but in reality they wanted more ammunition to use against Him.

They demanded a “sign”. So Jesus gave them a “sign” which would point to the truth of who He was. Surely the Pharisees knew the story of Jonah so perhaps they could understand the parallel of Jonah in the belly of the fish and the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The sign of Jonah is a foreshadowing of how God would work. Jonah would spend 3 days in the heart of the “belly of the fish” leading to the Ninevites changing their hearts toward God. This is a metaphor for the future crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Again, the timing of three days. Day one on Friday, the crucifixion. Day two lying in the heart of the earth. Day three the resurrection with the purpose of repentance and belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The parallels of “belly of fish” with “heart of the earth” are intentional. When you read Jonah, there is a lot of “down” imagery—“down” to Joppa, “down” into the ship, “down” into the sea, “down” into the fish, “down” into the depths. Then Jonah repents and starts going “up” again. Jesus was buried “down” in the earth before going “up” again.

The people of Nineveh finally did understand and received the message from Jonah to repent and to turn their hearts back to God. Jesus hoped the same for the Pharisees and other non-believers. But unfortunately, even this “sign” would not be enough to make Jesus’ hard-hearted contemporaries believe. This evil generation had been left spiritually empty. It should have been spiritually filled with Jesus, but they rejected Him. Jesus had hoped that, as the people of Nineveh repented, the Pharisees would experience the same. Jesus still hopes this for us today.

Who explained to you the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus? Was this easy for you to believe and accept?

Poem

My Portion, My Cup, My Boundary
Matthew 12:38-45, Psalm 16

*Need I grab
Jealous
Greedy
For what I believe I am entitled?
No!
Lord,
Allow me to sit
Patient
Waiting
For my portion*

*Need I fill
Spend
Hoard
To quench the thirsting of my soul?
No!
Lord,
Allow me to trust
Patient
Waiting
For my cup*

*Need I fight
Defend
Arm
To maintain what I believe I own?
No!
Lord,
Allow me to open my hand
Patient
Waiting
For my boundary*



2/11/2025 - WEEK 7 DAY 2

The Parable of the Four Soils

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 13:1-23

Devotional By: Judith Gibson

In this selection from Matthew 13, Jesus teaches a parable about the “Sower and the seed.” He tells parables to the people, but He explains them only to the disciples. One would naturally wonder why. Later in the chapter, Jesus tells the disciples His reasoning. He explains, “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given...” (v. 11). “I speak to them in parables because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand” (v. 13). He teaches them that when the Word is sown, it falls upon four types of soil, representing the life and heart of each human being.

The first soil is a hardened path. When the “seed” falls upon this soil, Jesus teaches that it has little chance of penetrating into the ground. He compared this soil to people who have closed their hearts and minds to things of God.

The second type of soil is shallow and rocky. After hearing the Word, some may at first accept it, but lacking perseverance and depth, they “wither away” and return to their disobedience to God. In Psalm 95:8-10, God says, “Do not harden your hearts...do not be a people whose hearts go astray.” And in Hebrews 3:15 God proclaims, “Today, if you hear [God’s] voice, do not harden your hearts...”

The third type of soil is thorny. Jesus teaches that when the “seed” falls among thorns, it will not grow and produce fruit, but instead will be choked by worldly concerns. Seed sown in thorny soil is consumed more by the world and represents a heart too preoccupied and distracted by worldly matters to receive God and do His will.

The fourth type of soil is fertile. It is good ground where the “seed” can grow and produce abundant fruit. John Bunyan wrote in his *Pilgrim’s Progress* that “Hearing is but as the sowing of the seed” and “talking is not sufficient to prove that fruit is indeed in the heart and life. Fruit is the evidence of a new heart and a changed life. It is made evident in our obedience to God’s Word.”

C.S. Lewis suggests every one of us examine our hearts and test our own actions in these matters. “What can we do? Jesus said it with the first word of the Parable of the Sower— “Listen!”

How is your heart’s “soil” today? What areas of your life do you need to reexamine and prune?

Poem

Understanding

Matthew 13:1-23, Psalm 119:25-32

*Clay
Trampled and weary
Treaded upon and hard
Robbed
Barren*

*Dust
Blown and thin
Landing then scattered
Deceitful
Unfruitful*

*Soil
Open and undiscerning
Receiving both seed and tares
Overgrown
Choking*

*Loam
Balanced and tended
Watered and rich
Established
Faithful*



2/12/2025 - WEEK 7 DAY 3

Seeds and Weeds

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 13:24-43

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

Parables are stories that teach a moral, a truth contained in the story. The Parable of the Weeds is one of the few where Jesus tells the story, then gives a full explanation of what each aspect means.

In it, there are two basic outcomes for people. Either they are seeds of Jesus' kingdom headed for eternity in heaven, or they are weeds of Satan's domain destined for eternity in hell. There is no third alternative.

Many people prefer not to think about hell. Some theologians, pastors and church leaders teach that all humans will be saved and go to heaven. This is known as universalism. Over a decade ago, Rob Bell popularized this old notion with his book, "Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived." His conclusion is that God's love brings every person who ever lived into heaven.

However, this is not what the Bible teaches about eternity. Hebrews 9:27-28 says, "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

In the Gospel of Matthew alone Jesus referred to the eternity without God as "the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22), a place of "darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12), the "blazing furnace" (Matthew 13:42), "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41), and "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46).

In 1741 during the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In it he scared the hell out of people, literally, telling them that God was dangling them over the pit of hell like you might dangle a poisonous spider over a fire. Perhaps there is a middle ground between Jonathan Edwards and Rob Bell.

Here's what I know. Jesus came to earth, lived a sinless life, then died on the cross so that "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Two verses later the Lord proclaimed, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).

We must be about the business of tilling the soil to receive the good seed of Jesus! That is our call. That is the Great Commission!

Poem

Forever

Matthew 13:24-35, Psalm 92

Forever

*Let me praise You
With each morning's breath
With each nightfall's sigh*

Forever

*Let me exalt You
Despite choking stress
Despite growing evil*

Forever

*Let me remember You
To set my feet firm
To direct my path*

Forever

*Let me trust You
To defeat my enemies
To stop the wicked foes*

Forever

*Let me flourish
Strong standing, planted firmly
Strong lasting, all my days*



2/13/2025 - WEEK 7 DAY 4

Parables of the Treasures, Pearls & Nets

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 13:44-52

Devotional By: Judith Gibson

In this selection today, Jesus teaches about the “kingdom of God” and says the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables” (Luke 8:10, Mark 4:11-12). He tells us He has “prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19). The kingdom of God starts with Jesus and His salvation. It is about “eternal life, *and* that eternal life begins now...” (Peter DeHaan).

Jesus reveals three parables about the kingdom of God. In each parable something valuable is discovered. Then the discoverer sells everything he has in order to purchase the item of great value.

In the first parable of the hidden treasure, Jesus describes a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field. Excited and joyful about his find, he sells all he has, buys the field, and buries the treasure to keep others from stealing it. The treasure is “hidden;” it is not obvious to everyone. Jesus shows that the kingdom of God is for those who are willing to accept it and deem it so valuable that they willingly sacrifice all they have for it. God reminds us that it is worth the sacrifice.

Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a merchant who was looking for good pearls in the second parable. After finding one “pearl of great price,” he sells all he has and buys it. Jesus says the kingdom of God is “worth more than gold” and “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 19:9-10). He tells us in Proverbs 2 to “search for it as you would silver. Hunt for it like hidden treasure” (v 4). Nothing is more valuable than the kingdom of God.

When Jesus tells the third parable, He describes a net that fishermen use to catch fish. After casting their net into the sea and catching many types of fish, they head back to shore and begin dividing the “good fish from the bad” (vs 47-48). Jesus compares this division of the fish to “the end of the world” where angels will “sever the wicked from the just.” The wicked will be “cast into the furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (v 49).

All of these parables show that inclusion into the kingdom of God is worth any amount of sacrifice. Jesus tells us to seek His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). “We should listen and obey” (DeHaan).

As a follower of Christ, am I seeking God’s Kingdom first? How? If not, why?

Poem

Great

Matthew 13:44-52, Psalm 119:161-168

*Your promises
Great spoil!*

*Your word
Great pearl!*

*Your ways
Great treasure!*

*Your laws
Great bounty!*

*Your peace
Great rejoicing!*

*Your salvation
Great love!*



2/14/2025 - WEEK 7 DAY 5

Jesus is Rejected in His Hometown

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 13:53-58

Devotional By: Kim Arnott

Have you ever returned home to attend your high school reunion? No matter how successful, important or prosperous someone becomes, they are still only seen as the kid who was constantly in trouble or the class clown or the shy girl from math class. That's similar to what Jesus faced in today's passage.

He was traveling to a very familiar place - his hometown of Nazareth. What could have been a happy homecoming quickly turns into - well let's just say - not so happy. Jesus was in the synagogue, and he began to teach. Nazareth was a very small village so it's likely almost everyone in town was present. We get a little more detail from Luke who tells us that Jesus stood up to read from the scroll of Isaiah - the part that speaks of Jesus and what his mission on earth would be. The people were amazed and impressed until, Luke tells us, Jesus adds this little sentence, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Wait - what did he just say? Did he just claim to be a prophet and God's anointed? You can just feel the mood of the crowd changing.

They had just witnessed Jesus' teaching with authority but now began to question that authority. They began to say, "Wait! Who does he think he is? We know his family. He's just that little snotty-nosed kid who used to follow Joseph, the carpenter, around. He's just one of us. How can he come back now and make these claims?" The reaction of the people had gone from astonishment to questioning and was about to turn to anger, rejection and, ultimately per Luke, violence.

Jesus said to them, "*Prophets are honored by everyone, except the people of their hometown and their own family.*" (CEB) I'm sure Jesus was recalling this from Jeremiah 12:6 (CEB): "*Even your relatives, your very family, are planning to trap you. They are out to get you. So don't trust them, even if they appear to be on your side*".

The crowd was furious, and mob mentality set in. They drove Jesus out of Nazareth and attempted to hurl him off a cliff to his death! But, again, it was not Jesus' time, and he miraculously walked safely away. This is thought to be his last visit to Nazareth. And it seems to recall something that Jesus said to his disciples as he was giving them instructions before sending them off in ministry. "*If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.*" (Matthew 10:14).

Do you believe who Jesus claimed to be? Do you accept Jesus' authority?

Poem

Where Is My Homeland?
Matthew 13:53-58, Psalm 27

*Where is my homeland?
My place of shelter?
Where the lamplight burns
in the winter's night?
Where I am protected from all which
would come against me?
Where mercy and understanding
comfort me?
Where I am welcomed with robe and
sandals?
Where feasting abounds?
Where I am taught goodness and mercy?
Where I am not forsaken?*

*Settle me in the House of my Lord!
Where there is no fear
Where confidence in truth prevails
Where beauty and safety adorn
Where I am lifted high from my enemy
Where I am sheltered in sanctuary
Where I can sing and dance with joy
Where goodness is the norm
Where strength is guaranteed*



2/17/2025 - WEEK 8 DAY 1

Herod Wonders if Jesus is John Resurrected

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 14:1-12

Devotional By: Charlie Hart

In the days of Herod the Tetrarch (a son of Herod from the time of Jesus' birth), Jesus' ministry and reputation began to blossom within the region. Herod, always one to fear competition, kept tabs on this new "rival" to his supremacy. However, not knowing Jesus, he suspected that these miracles and messages might be coming from a follower of John the Baptist. Herod had imprisoned John for having the temerity to call out his sharing of his (Herod's) brother's wife, Herodias, as his own. John likely spoke to Herod referencing the passage from Hebrew law: "Do not have marital relations with your brother's wife; that would dishonor your brother." (Leviticus 18:16).

Even from prison, Herod knew John still had the ability to stir up crowds. John, while he was not Jesus, wanted to bring Herod to righteousness, even if it cost John his freedom, and ultimately his life.

During a birthday celebration, Herodias' daughter (Herod's niece) brought pleasure to Herod through provocative dance. To reward the performance, Herod promised her anything she wanted. Influenced by her mother, she wished for John's head on a platter. While Herod had no care for John's well-being, he feared that John's death could stir up the nation, start riots, and threaten his leadership. However, Herod was even more fearful of embarrassment by going back on his word in front of his family, friends, and court. He ordered John beheaded and had the head brought on a platter to Herodias' daughter to fulfill her wish. Even though John had tried to bring Herod to God, earthly pleasures interested Herod more.

I am frequently guilty of fearing the opinions of my friends and close connections rather than the condemnation of God. I sometimes ignore or reject the messenger who calls me out for falling short. I have often looked over my shoulder at people who threaten my status at work, on a team, in school, or with a group of friends.

Would you have the courage to call out someone who is falling short of God's expectations? Would you have the humility to listen to someone who was doing the same to you? What would that person have to say to you to get you to listen?

Poem

Shiggaion
Matthew 14:1-12, Psalm 7

*I'm singing you a song, Lord
It's pouring from my soul
Emotions round me swirling
A tempest in me boils
This, Lord, my one solution
To empty out my grief
I'm singing you a song, Lord
I pray for some relief*

*I'm ripped apart by lions
Sharp teeth of enemies
The ones who should embrace me
Have thrown me to my knees
In silence, I stand stricken
As accusations fly
False witnesses, bold, foolish
Integrity on trial*

*They sharpen swords against me
They birth bold evil lies
You, Lord, my only shelter
You, Lord, now stand, arise
O, search me, Lord, and know me
Upon you do I wait
Sit down upon your judgment throne
My soul, do vindicate*



2/18/2025 - WEEK 8 DAY 2

Feeding Five Thousand

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 14:13-21

Devotional By: Lynette Hart

Some people have the gift of hosting. My mother-in-law is a Hostess with the Mostess. She can serve a multiple course meal and you don't even realize she is putting it together. She prepares it all. There is plenty to eat. The dishes match. The serving dishes are "the good ones". I do not have the gift of hosting. One of my fears is serving dinner for a large crowd. I will agonize for weeks planning the menu, planning the dishes, making the grocery list, planning how to cook it all. After our BLESS series, I know how important it is to eat together. Therefore, I continue to try.

Jesus had a large crowd. Crowds get hungry. Hungry crowds get unruly. His disciples and I had the same fear. How will we serve this crowd? Crowds need food. Will there be enough food?!? Will it be good enough?

They had two fish and five loaves of bread. My family of four can eat more than that for dinner.

But Jesus knew that God would provide.

The fish and bread kept coming. As they continued to serve, the food continued to replenish. How can this be? How can two fish and five loaves feed 5000 people?

God provides. God uses everyone and everything. God can take away our worry.

This story is a wonder but a wonderful reminder that God will provide what we need. God is generous. We can leave the worry behind. Jesus is the Bread of Life. In the Kingdom of God, there is no hunger or want.

A few months ago, I had a house full of guests for a weekend. God took away my worry. He knew exactly what I needed. God provided. My guests provided and cooked all the food. It was the best dinner party I have ever had at my house.

Poem

Enduring Love

Matthew 14:13-21, Psalm 136

*Enduring Love, forever
My only God shall be
Your glory I will boldly sing
As You establish me*

*You govern all creation
By Your hand all are fed
You guard Your people safely
You place Truth as their head*

*Our low estate, You cover
You feed us with Your word
When enemies pursue us hot
Our rescue is assured*

*Enduring Love, forever
Our praise shall ever be
For You alone have mercy
Provision full and free*



2/19/2025 - WEEK 8 DAY 3

Jesus Walks on Water

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 14:22-36

Devotional By: Kim Arnott

Jesus has just dismissed the crowd and sent his disciples ahead across the lake. He needed time alone to rest and to pray. The road to the cross was in front of him and he needed strength for the journey. In the meantime, we find the disciples out in the middle of the lake, being battered by a storm. Haven't we seen this before? But this time, Jesus isn't with them. What were they going to do now?

Just before daybreak, they see something strange coming toward them. Was it a ghost? An evil spirit? Again, they're terrified. But it's Jesus - walking to them upon the water. He tells them, *"Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid."* These words alone should have been proof enough of who Jesus was (recall God's encounter with Moses - "I AM"). And they would have been familiar with the scriptures which clearly say that only God walks on the sea.

He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. (Job 9:8)

He who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters. (Isaiah 43:16)

But it was Peter, bless his heart, who reacts first. Bold, passionate, dramatic Peter. He seems to understand who Jesus is and addresses him as LORD. Upon Jesus' command to "come", Peter bolts out of the boat and begins to walk on water. But then reality sets in and he "saw the wind". Instead of keeping his eyes on Jesus, he becomes distracted. Fear overcomes him. He cries out to Jesus, who offers his hand to save him. Many condemn Peter for his doubt and lack of faith, but another way to look at it is that Peter was the only one to take action in faith. He was the only one with the courage to step into the water and confess his faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. He was the only one to get out of the boat. We should always remember that sinking does not equal failure. As disciples, we are not asked to always be successful. We are asked to always be faithful.

There was a book written back in 2014 by John Ortberg entitled [If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat](#). In the description of the book, we are given this encouragement and asked this very important question - "Deep within you lies the same faith and longing that sent Peter walking across the wind-swept Sea of Galilee toward Jesus. In what ways is the Lord telling you, as he did Peter, 'Come'?"

This week, think about that question and how you might answer Jesus' call to "Come."

Poem

Alamo - High Pitch
Matthew 14:22-36, Psalm 46

*Though high the pitch
Of ocean toss
Though mountains quake
Though all seems loss
Though hearts erupt
With sorrow, fear
Though night is dark
Still, You are near
You come to us
Across the storms
Though chaos swirls
You keep from harm
Your little ones
Who tremble, shake
You stay with them
'Til day does break
Then guide them through
Each trial sore
Until they reach
The harbored shore
Where all is peace
Where calm provides
Eternal rest
On heaven's side*



2/20/2025 - WEEK 8 DAY 4

Jesus Teaches on Outer vs. Inner Purity

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 15:1-20

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

I grew up with three brothers and a dad. That meant that my hands were dirty most of my childhood. I can still hear my mom declaring, "Wash your hands boys! Don't touch anything in the house until you clean up. No coming to the table before you use soap and water."

Who could blame her. We were either covered in mud from playing football in the yard, layered in asphalt from playing basketball on the blacktop driveway, smeared in grease from repairing a car in the garage, or coated in dirt from working in the garden. That's just a partial list. But I never thought Mom was saying we were spiritually unclean. She was just worried about her curtains.

Once again the Pharisees had rules for their rules. They turned hand washing into a Kumbayah experience. Jesus corrected them. What you eat and how you eat it are not what puts distance between you and God. Rather, what you do and what you say are the problem. Jesus isn't concerned about the stomach and digestive system. However, He does challenge us to be in alignment with Him in thought, word, and deed.

Real defiling dirt comes from evil hearts that concoct evil thoughts that become evil desires that pursue evil actions. James 1:14-15 says, "each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

Defilement works its way from the inside-out, not the other way around.

I'm still gonna make my grandchildren wash their hands before eating.

Poem

Sheminith - Eighth
Matthew 15:1-20, Psalm 12

*A list I set before you
Unfaithful eight they be
Impurity full on display
Express unloyalty*

*The first, a lying gossip
The second, flattery
The third, deceptive poisoned words
The fourth, tongue's bragging spree
The fifth, the haughtiness of pride
The sixth, plunder of poor
The seventh, slurring neighbor harsh
The eighth, vile things honored*

*These eight impure traits cast off
And with sincerity
Allow God's word to wash you clean
Reclothe in purity*



2/21/2025 - WEEK 8 DAY 5

Faithful Dogs

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 15:21-28

Devotional By: Doug Bromm

Today's story is one that I just did not understand for a long time. I would read it and think, "did Jesus just call this poor woman a dog?" That is so mean and way off-brand for the Jesus I know throughout the rest of the Gospels! This just does not sound like the Jesus who was so tender with the woman who touched the hem of his robe or the Jesus who met the woman at the well.

So, many times, I read this passage and passed it over startled and confused. Thankfully, a godly advisor explained to me that while Jesus' initial response, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," was indeed harsh, it was spoken for a really good reason.

Jesus was explaining the priorities of His ministry. At that time, His duty was to the people of Israel, not to the Gentiles who were often referred to as, you guessed it: dogs. If Jesus were to take His attention from Israel, in violation of His mission, it would be like a father taking food from his children in order to throw it to their pets.

I think that it is the woman's response that steals the show. She knew that Jesus wasn't speaking to her gender or her race; he was speaking to her unworthiness as a Gentile. She responds with a steadfast trust in his grace: "Yes, Lord ... yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" In other words, I have been listening to you and I know that the grace of God is so abundant that it flows off the table. Even those with no more worthiness than dogs can eat until they are full.

Many Jewish people at that time were following Jesus' "road show" for the miracles, for the pop culture novelty, or even hoping for a challenge to Roman authority. They didn't have "ears to hear" what Jesus was saying. But this woman did.

How can you lean into the generous grace of Christ today and make His priorities yours too?

Poem

The Performance
Matthew 15:21-28, Psalm 117

*The stage is set
The audience expectant
The curtain rises
A lone performer
Stands*

*His mouth opens
The audience gasps
The Con Amore rises
And fills each
Soul*

*His voice carries
The audience tranced
The hope rises
And healing
Spreads*

*His voice now silent
The audience erupts
The applauding rises
As grace
Settles*



2/24/2025 - WEEK 9 DAY 1

Why Did Jesus Do it Again? **SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 15:29-39**

Devotional **By: Elyce Meador**

Wait—didn't Jesus just feed 5000? Why is this story about another 4000 included? Isn't it a bit redundant? On first reading, it just seems like the first story of the 5000 told all over again. So what is the reason that Matthew & Mark felt the need to add this story, too? It takes a bit of research, but the answers reveal a profound truth about Jesus' mission.

There are small clues in each story that may not be apparent to a modern reader who is unfamiliar with the cultural signifiers of Jesus' time. The close sequence of these events in the scripture also suggests a short timeline between the 5000 and the 4000, but details in these stories and the surrounding passages reveal that about 6 months separate the two events, while Jesus was traveling north with his disciples. The feeding of the 5000 occurs in early spring, and the feeding of the 4000 in late summer.

The baskets used to collect the leftovers in each story are also different. In the story of the 5000, the baskets are called "Kophinol." This term refers to a smaller, flask-like basket that Jews carried with them so that they would not have to eat unclean food. In the story of the 4000, the baskets are called "suphrides," which are hamper-like baskets that could be big enough to carry a man. Suphrides were used more by the Gentiles.

Another important distinction is that the feeding of the 5000 takes place in Galilee, a highly Jewish area. In the first event, Jesus is speaking to a group of Jews who are familiar with God and the Old Testament. The feeding of the 4000 takes place in Decapolis, an area that consisted of 10 free Greek cities. In Decapolis, Jesus ministers to a more diverse group of Jews and Gentiles—perhaps even more Gentiles than Jews.

Why is all this important? Because through these two miracles we see that Jesus is including all people in his ministry. It wasn't just the Jews he came to save but everyone! This was part of the good news: Christ came for all of us. Matthew and Mark include both miracles to show Jesus at work in different communities and make this message clear. Jesus feeds and strengthens all for the journey ahead.

How does this make you feel? How is Jesus feeding you on your journey of life? Are you listening?

Poem

No Limits

Matthew 15:29-39, Psalm 145

*No limits, no bound'ries
No scarcity known
All welcomed, all fam'ly
Gathered in home
Thanksgiving, pure laughter
As table is spread
No limits, no bound'ries
In Christ, all are fed*



2/25/2025 - WEEK 9 DAY 2

Jesus and the Religious Leaders of His Day

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 16:1-12

Devotional By: Patti Napier

Jesus warned the disciples to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus was warning about how quickly anyone can become blinded to the truth by false teachings. Be careful to listen and learn with a discerning heart and mind.

At first the disciples thought when Jesus spoke of leaven that he was referring to physical bread or food. But in this situation, Jesus was using leaven as a metaphor for teaching. False teachings are powerful and can have a damaging effect. Leaven is only a small portion of the volume of bread dough, but has an outsized effect on its substance. In a similar way, the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees had an outsized effect. However, unlike leaven in bread dough, their leaven was harmful.

Because of their religious traditions, the Pharisees and Sadducees had rejected Jesus as Messiah. Worse yet, they denied the realm of the supernatural altogether. The Sadducees even denied a resurrection and the afterlife.

In addition to these beliefs, Jesus had concern for their tactics used for evil purposes and their self-seeking approach to life. They were skilled at framing arguments in such a way to arrive at the outcome they desired. They were not seeking what was true or beneficial to anyone but themselves.

Their legalism was their system to ensure their hold on power. Their rules were rigged to make them look good often at the expense of others. Their system produced self-righteousness and did not produce harmony with God and others. They were self-reliant and lived as if faith in God didn't matter in everyday life.

Jesus warned his disciples that the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees could contaminate their lives also if they were not careful. Jesus warned that even the smallest bit of leaven could invade and consume their hearts and minds. It does not take long for leaven to rise and consume a heart and a mind. Jesus is still warning us today of leaven that is all around us.

Can you think of a situation when institutional religion displaced the priority of God and His teachings?

Poem

Devastation

Matthew 16:1-12, Psalm 74

*I look around, Lord—
All is ruined
You have left us*

*Not a single house stands
Not a single road clear
All our cisterns are broken
Death's stench fills the air
Our bodies emaciate
No crumb can be found
Our treasures plundered
Our walls crumbled to dust
Our army defeated
Their blood sates the earth
Our leaders have cowered
Lawlessness reigns*

*I look around, Lord
All is ruined
You have left us*



2/26/2025 - WEEK 9 DAY 3

Peter Proclaims Jesus as the Christ

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 16:13-28

Devotional By: Susan Pressler

Jesus revealed surprising information to His disciples about the future in Matthew 16:13-28. Jesus told them that He was “I Am”, He would build His church through Simon Peter, and He would be killed and resurrected. Some believed that Jesus was John the Baptist or a prophet from the Old Testament. Jesus asked His disciples “who do you say I am?” and Simon replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus blessed Simon and gave him the new name Peter, which means rock in Greek. Jesus told Peter that “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18-19). What a tremendous shock it must have been for Peter to hear that he would be the one to build the Christian church! He felt weak and unworthy. What a change occurred in his life after he was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost! He did indeed become “The Rock” thereafter for the early Church.

Jesus told His disciples that He would suffer and be killed and resurrected three days later. His death and resurrection were part of the fulfillment of the hundreds of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. In an early prophecy about the Messiah, King David wrote, “10 because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. 11 You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:10-11).

Jesus warned His disciples that they would have to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). God would reward them because of their acts. Jesus asked, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26; KJV).

The Apostle Paul later told people there would be heavenly rewards for those who had changed their lives to follow Jesus. He praised the people who had turned from serving idols to serving the true God (1 Thes 1:8-10). He told them that if they were persistent in doing “good, seek glory, honor and immortality, He [God] will give eternal life” (Romans 2:7).

Questions for Reflection

How have you taken up the cross to follow Jesus?

How has the Holy Spirit strengthened you?

What are new ways you could “take up the cross” of Jesus?

Poem

You Are My Christ!
Matthew 16:13-28, Psalm 61

*You are my Christ!
I stand on Your rock
My house, a strong tower
My soul in you locked
Though hell's gates assail me
My confidence sure
For You shall sustain me
Life's storms to endure
For You are my fortress
You are my shield
You are my Christ!
By Spirit revealed*



2/27/2025 - WEEK 9 DAY 4

Listen to Him!

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 17:1-13

Devotional By: Mark Ellcessor

When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, God the Father spoke from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Mark and Luke have an even more personal form of this message given directly to Jesus: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

In today's reading, three of Jesus' closest disciples were with Him on the mountain when He was transfigured before Moses and Elijah from the Old Testament times. They heard similar words as at Jesus' baptism, with one additional command: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Yes, you caught it. Listen to Him!

In John 8:47, Jesus said, "Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." Are you listening?

In John 10:27, He said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Are you listening?

And in Revelation 3:20, the Lord says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." Are you listening?

Notice that the disciples weren't afraid when they saw Moses and Elijah. They even offered to construct some shelters for them. But why they heard the voice of God, they were terrified.

Jesus had already told them everything that had happened at His baptism. He was probably aided by Andrew, Peter's brother, who was a disciple of John the Baptist before he started following Jesus (John 1:40). They already knew that God was pleased with His beloved Son. Now they were hearing it for themselves, with an added command.

The question is, was it the voice of God or the words of God to listen to Jesus that shook them?

Are you listening?

Poem

In The Council Of The Holy Ones
Matthew 17:1-13, Psalm 89

*In the council of the Holy Ones
I see my God arise
He stands before me glorious
Once veiled in flesh, disguised
His righteousness now radiant
His judgments pure as light
O, who can stand before Him now?
No one, on earth, in skies!
I can but bow before Him
My hands shield tight my face
His radiance surrounds me
His radiance, His grace
O, let me never ever
From You my soul depart
Instead, forever ever
Reign solely in my heart*



2/28/2025 - WEEK 9 DAY 5

Jesus Teaches His Disciples

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 17:14-27

Devotional By: Nancy Foust

The disciples asked Jesus in Matthew 17:19 “...why couldn’t we do that?” How many times have you thought this in your own mind? Then Jesus responds Matthew 17:21 “...if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, ... you can move mountains...” Think about what a very small trust or belief could do for you.

Recently, I heard about a college student who had gone away from home to college. She was very frustrated as she was looking forward to being on her own and living away from Mom and Dad. However, with social media, her parents watched her non-stop, questioning her, if she was safe, going to classes and home by a certain time. No different than being at home. She turned off her location tracking and her parents became horrified that they couldn’t see what she was doing. She said to them. You trusted me to go away to school, now have faith, I will be safe and do as I should.

As parents, we do worry about our kids as they become adults. We must remember that a mustard seed size of trust can give them a whole new feeling as an adult. Yes, they will probably make some mistakes, but they will also learn from those problems and begin to fully believe they can be a self-sufficient adult. Parents showing a great example of trusting and having faith, just as Jesus told his disciples, is important to our kids.

Many times in life, we must accept what we think is impossible, and trust that God will be there for us with His guidance.

Today-what can you put that small amount of faith into?

Poem

The Fruit Of Your Truth
Matthew 17:14-27, Psalm 119:81-88

*The fruit of Your truth
Matured ripe on the Vine
Is harvested, ready
To make into wine
My heart, like new wineskins
Is ready—receive—
Pour Your teachings in me
Your laws I believe
Like wine brings to palate
Great feelings of joy
May You fill my cup
With Your will to employ*



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