

Announcing the Kingdom

The Gospel According to Matthew

Reflection Guide

Weeks 14-15

Announcing the Kingdom: The Gospel According to Matthew
Reading Guide: Week 14 (Matthew 21:27 – 22:40)

Matthew 21:23-27

The philosopher Voltaire remarked a person should be judged more by their questions than their answers. When addressing eternal questions, the basis of authority *should* be a big deal, right? Jesus, however, completely saw through the hypocrisy of this question and understood the underlying motive. Responding in rabbinical tradition, Jesus addressed their “gotcha” question with another question inviting a deeper conversation. How should the authority of Jesus affect our response to the Gospel message? Are we willing to place ourselves under the entire authority of Jesus, or just part way?

Matthew 21:28-32

In yesterday’s reading, Jesus boldly put the chief priests and elders on their heels with a hard question. As you might guess, it’s now “game on” for a showdown. In this charged setting, Matthew continues in his affinity for “three’s” by beginning the first of three parables. In the first of these, the impact of Jesus’ scandalous statement, “*tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you*” on the original audience cannot be overstated. How easy is it to judge the struggles of others, especially those whose choices and circumstances offend our preconceived moral sensibilities, while we ignore or rationalize our own brokenness and inaction before God?

Matthew 21:33-46

Making no new friends among the religious leaders in this second parable, Jesus confronts them with the question of the Messiah, whom He refers to as the “chief cornerstone” by quoting Psalm 118. How will they balance Jesus’ popularity with the risk of losing their own power and influence? How can they silence Jesus while avoiding an uprising which would bring unwanted intervention from the Roman authorities? Jesus’ parable is prophetic in the acknowledgment of what they’ll ultimately decide (Psalm 118:22). What is there to do with this Jesus who completely redefines what it means to be a part of God’s Kingdom? Knowing the ultimate outcome, why do you think Jesus continues to engage them?

Matthew 22:1-14

In this third parable, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of a wedding banquet. Note those who declined this invitation didn’t do so out of an inability, but rather a refusal to attend. Jesus’ parable didn’t focus on the exclusivity of the party, but instead pointed to the fact the king gladly and generously provided the required garments. How does this parable speak to the inadequacy of self-righteousness? The original audience would have been familiar with the Hebrew Scripture of Isaiah 61:10: “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*” Reminder: Dress for eternal success.

Matthew 22:15-22

Surely this clever question of the Pharisees will force Jesus into a self-incriminating response. If Jesus supports the payment of a tax to Caesar, He can be accused of ignoring the oppressiveness of the Roman occupation. If He opposes taxation, He is clearly inciting revolutionary sentiment against the ruling government. Again, before answering their staged question, Jesus first boldly confronts the hypocrisy of its premise. Does Jesus’ answer simply affirm an obligation to submit to earthly authority or does it establish the parameters of earthly rule in light of God’s all-encompassing power? What falls *within* the realm of Caesar? What falls *beyond* the realm of God?

Matthew 22:23-33

Largely comprised of the upper socio-economic class of the priesthood, the Sadducees denied belief in a bodily resurrection or afterlife. Their extreme hypothetical, premised on their unique interpretation and application of Jewish law, was intended to publicly humiliate Jesus by pointing out the ridiculousness of His theology. How does Jesus’ own Resurrection and the forward-looking promise of eternal life offered to us by His sacrifice inform our beliefs and actions?

Matthew 22:34-40

Like a lot of things, religion, spirituality, and theology can be a very personal, complex, and sometimes complicated struggle. The Apostle Paul expressed this in a letter to the church at Corinth, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly...” and “know only in part” (1 Cor 13:12). Here, Matthew records a clear view of that which is known in the here and now - what it looks like to be a member of God’s Kingdom. Whenever I feel overwhelmed, anxious, or indecisive on God’s will, I love all over again the clarity and simplicity of these words of Jesus. While doctrine, dogma, and tradition can reflect Godly wisdom, Jesus set the bar that no religious practice is above the law of love. Love God and love people. Simply put, but challenging enough to remind us to set aside all hints of Pharisaical legalism.

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Reading Guide: Week 15 (Matthew 22:41 – 24:41)

Matthew 22:41-46

In previous passages, Jesus fields questions from the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. Now, it's time for a very pointed question from Jesus. Quoting Psalm 110:1, Jesus challenges expectations of the Messiah and the concept of a coming Kingdom. If Jesus is indeed the "Christ" (Greek for "Messiah"), deliverance will not come through military or political means. How important is the deity of Jesus to understanding and recognizing the true nature of God's Kingdom?

Matthew 23:1-12

Addressing the Jewish crowd and His Disciples in this "do what they say, not what they do" commentary, Jesus' issue with the scribes and Pharisees wasn't necessarily based on their authoritative view of the Torah, but rather is a response to their callous disregard for justice and the intrinsic worth of all persons. Jesus' scathing rebuke of those who hypocritically elevated status over substance is an indictment of inflated social standing, self-serving political positioning, blatant avarice, and misapplied religious authority. All of these lack the qualities of servant-leadership, compassion, and humility, which are defining characteristics of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus. What religious trappings, attitudes, and self-imposed obstacles impede our true worship and celebration of the joy of God's Kingdom?

Matthew 23:13-33

It's easy to develop a scriptural reading conducive to beating up these hypocritical scribes and Pharisees and conveniently forget that many of them began with sincere intentions to zealously follow God. The risk in doing so is we can eventually nurture the same judgmental attitudes in ourselves we recognize in them as antithetical to genuine Christianity. Will I dare consider the "seven woes" Jesus' delivered to them as a spiritual "gut-check" for me? Am I creating barriers to the Kingdom for others? Do I strive to be more like Jesus as much as I expect others to be more like me? Am I so consumed with the details that I miss the main point? Do I prioritize justice, mercy, and faithfulness over religiosity? Am I more concerned with my outward image to people than my spiritual condition before God? Does my piety have an "on-off" switch? Do I see myself in light of my best intentions while viewing others under the microscope of their worst acts?

Matthew 23:34-39

This is the last public address of Jesus recorded by Matthew. If you read yesterday's passage simply as an angry rant by Jesus, go back and read it again with the perspective of a broken-hearted parent pleading with a wayward child bent on self-destruction while rejecting all offers for help. Jesus' grief is palpable, and His desire to redeem, rather than to condemn, is as evident here as it is ultimately revealed at the Cross. In a paradox of divine physics, the ever-moving elusiveness of human responsibility meets the immovability of God's sovereignty, love, grace, and forgiveness. As Jesus establishes His Kingdom on earth, He also provides a realistic picture of both internal and external threats to believers. What are some distractions, obstacles, and "false prophets" of our times?

Matthew 24:1-8

After the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE, the second Temple was rebuilt around 515 BCE. Herod the Great, for all his faults, expanded it as a means of placating the Jewish population, but the Romans would destroy this second Temple in 70 CE. The center of Jewish life for almost a thousand years, it was so much a part of daily life it was customary to swear by the Temple (Matthew 23:16). The First-Century historian Josephus described blinding gold plates and blocks of marble so white that, from a distance, travelers mistook it for snow. In this discourse delivered on the Mount of Olives, Jesus addresses His second coming and the total destruction of this Temple at Jerusalem. If every other component of your faith was taken away today, is Jesus enough?

Matthew 24:9-28

Have you ever begun any project, job, or even relationship with full devotion only to find your commitment waning as the reality of the situation set in? In time, what you once experienced as a burning desire is reduced to yet another dream up in smoke. While many of our earthly affiliations do – and sometimes should – end when addressing our eternal condition, Jesus warns that distraction brings complacency, and complacency kills. Much of this portion of the discourse relates to persecution. Then, as now, some had been experienced and more is yet to come. God will not forget us. But how can we prepare to remain loyal to God when it may cost us everything to do so? Or, are we so complacent we don't even consider that a possibility? Perhaps that's the real question.

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Matthew 24:29-41

Note again the imagery of the fig tree in verses 32-35...gotta love the metaphorical versatility of the fig. Matthew records Jesus' response that the exact day and hour of His apocalyptic return is unknowable by people, angels..., or even by Him. Without detracting from the hopeful expectation and eschatological anticipation of the promised earthly return of Christ, should my reaction be that much different even if I knew the time? Whether by my physical death or end-times reality, what if I stressed less over how many of my days remain and instead focused on what I'm called to do with the remaining days? Either way, what if we, as a community of believers, lived and loved every day as if it's our last one in Christ? Worst case scenario, one of these days we'd be right. How might that change our lives, our community, the world... "on earth as it is in Heaven?"