

A Walk to Remember: Matthew

Introduction

Welcome to what I hope is a journey of spiritual growth and self-discovery for you. The task before you is pretty straightforward—to read through the four Gospels of Jesus Christ (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) in one calendar year. To help walk you through this process, you'll be provided four different *guidebooks*, one for each book of the Bible. The *guidebooks* are each broken into days, with each day providing a selection to read from the Bible, reflections on the reading, questions to consider, and room to respond.

Along the way, you will get to know Jesus better. You'll discover who He is and what He is about, with the ultimate goal that you'll be able to follow Him more closely. You'll notice pretty quickly that the ponderings and questions will be less about the context, the geography, or the history, and much more about what this passage reveals about Jesus our Savior.

Let me encourage you to find a quiet place and a consistent time each day to take this journey. Ultimately, I pray that you will discover Jesus in a deeper way and learn what He is truly about. Happy reading! Now, let's get started!

Day 1

Read: Matthew 1:1-25

Going Deeper:

This is the beginning of your journey of discovery, and you've begun with the first chapter in the first Gospel of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning, the primary work of Jesus is revealed. Check out 1:21—"you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins." Along this journey, as you dive into all four Gospels, you'll observe a very active Jesus. He travels and teaches, He calls people to Himself, He heals, and so much more. From the outset, His primary purpose is revealed: "to save people from their sins."

Apply:

As we read through the four Gospels, Jesus is challenging us to examine ourselves. Along the way, you'll find that Jesus is less concerned with external actions, and considerably more concerned with what's going on within you, personally. So start this expedition by opening up to God a bit. How are you? How would you describe your relationship with God? What's getting in the way of having a deeper relationship with the Lord? Remember, Jesus is more than just a teacher, a social revolutionary, a healer . . . he came to save people from sin; to save you!

Reflect:

Day 2

Read: Matthew 2:1-23

Going Deeper:

Take note of who finds Jesus here, and who misses Him . . . The Magi from the east are searching, even though they were not the religious type. Truthfully, not much is known about the Magi, but it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that these men were not from within the religious elite; not part of the organized religion of the day. They were castoffs, rejects from the Jewish establishment.

Yet still they find Him. Meanwhile, the religious scribes, the religious inner circle, the ones who knew the scriptures by heart, can't find Him because they are not even looking (see 2:5).

Apply:

As you take this trip, you'll quickly discover that Jesus doesn't just seek out religious people, doesn't just draw the attention of those within organized religion. He's actually looking for the outcast, the rejected, "those from the east" (2:1). This should give ragamuffins like us hope. Sometimes we feel like we're on the fringe, yet it's there that Jesus reveals Himself to us, and like the Magi, we find Him. In the space below, reflect on what makes you feel like an outsider with God . . .

Reflect:

Day 3

Read: Matthew 3:1-17

Going Deeper:

After noting yesterday that Jesus is reaching those on the edge, here we see that the message of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Christ is starting to reach those within the religious inner circles of the day. This passage from Matthew 3 records that “Pharisees and Sadducees” came to where John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, was preparing the way. The message they received was as straightforward as they come: “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). Their problem, you see, was that they were saying that they knew God, yet they weren’t acting accordingly, because their hearts weren’t right with God. They thought focusing on externals was enough, but as we observed earlier, Jesus is considerably more concerned with how spiritually healthy we are internally. So, in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ, John calls out their hypocrisy.

Apply:

Fundamentally, a relationship with Jesus must be personal. It cannot be based on what church you are a part of; what your spouse or family believes. Don’t let any externals get in the way of the message here—get right with God, individually. Use the space below to accept the invitation of John the Baptist to repent. Confess your sin below, and begin the process of getting right, individually, with your God . . .

Reflect:

Day 4

Read: Matthew 4:1-25

Going Deeper:

The devil is the father of lies, always trying to pry us away from a relationship with God. It begins in the garden, when He lies to Adam and Eve that if they eat the forbidden fruit, they “will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4). Here, in Matthew 4, Satan even lies to Jesus’ face: “All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me.” The truth is—it’s not Satan’s to give! Satan even quotes the Bible, showing he knows the scriptures, but his heart isn’t right. This passage reveals an important truth: the devil looks for a foothold, and he’ll lie and deceive to gain it. Here’s the good news—if he doesn’t find it, he leaves!

Apply:

You and I face temptation every single day. Another part of the Bible refers to Satan as a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8). God gives us the power to stand up against him! Think about how you are uniquely tempted, and what this passage teaches you about how to stand against it . . .

Reflect:

Day 5

Read: Matthew 5:1-48

Going Deeper:

Here we see the first recorded extended teaching of Jesus, and it's important that we take the time to dig deep into the content. In much of the second half of the 'sermon', we see Jesus employ the phrase "you have heard that it was said" (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Here, Jesus is quoting the Old Testament; the law; the 10 commandments; but each time, He is challenging His followers to go deeper than what the command says. As we alluded before, Jesus is less concerned with the external actions, and much more concerned with the heart that is underneath it all. Here the message is straightforward—go deeper. Focus less on actions and more on getting right with God.

Apply:

It is so easy for us to get caught up in actions, to focus on doing what we think is right and avoiding what we think is wrong. Here we see Jesus caution us against such a focus on externals, on "what you heard was said," (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43) and He invites us to a discipleship not based on actions, but on a heart of repentance. Bottom line, Jesus wants us to do the hard work of probing our own hearts first, before we focus on externals. Take some time here and examine yourself. What mischief resides within you? Anger? Resentment? Unforgiveness? Pride? Unpack it below . . .

Reflect:

Day 6

Read: Matthew 6:1-34

Going Deeper:

Take a second look at verse 19. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” I think we expect to hear this from Jesus. Perhaps more surprisingly, Jesus also says this: “For where your treasure is, your heart will be also.” Said a different way, your heart actually follows your actions. You’d think it would be otherwise; that your actions would follow your heart. While that may sometimes be the case, Jesus calls us here to watch what we treasure; guard our actions, because they impact the health of our heart.

Apply:

Are you starting to get a handle on the complexity of following Jesus? Earlier, we were challenged to care less about the external actions, and more on our own heart health. Yet here, it’s watch our actions. Confused yet? The truth is, **both** are important, and Jesus’ point here is quite valid. While our heart can surely lead to bad actions, unhealthy external actions can also corrupt our hearts. It’s a big reason why I’m inviting you to study the Gospel—this practice of reading the Bible and reflecting on it personally will impact your heart. In the next few moments consider: What actions do you need to pick up to help your heart get healthy? What do you need to put down?

Reflect:

Day 7

Read: Matthew 7:1-29

Going Deeper:

This concludes Jesus' teaching that began in chapter 5. At the end of it all, Jesus says this, (it's so important I want you to read it again!): "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." After reading this passage twice now, I hope you see this: the rain lands on **both** houses, the streams rise against **both** houses, and the winds blow against **both** houses.

Apply:

Following Jesus will not prevent the "rains and storms" of life from falling upon you. Hardship, trial, and conflict will come. However, having the word of God, and putting it into practice in your life, **will** help establish a foundation that will help see you through it all. Consider for a few minutes on the following questions: In what way are you experiencing "rising waters" around you? How is your faith helping you to stay strong?

Reflect:

Day 8

Read: Matthew 8:1-34

Going Deeper:

Here we are introduced to a Centurion. Centurions were Roman soldiers, officers in the military, and thus not part of the religious leadership. Yet surprisingly it's the faith of this "outsider" that Jesus affirms so effusively—"I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (8:10). What follows next is perhaps the most scandalous statement that Jesus makes in the entire Gospel of Matthew; scandalous at least to Jewish ears. Check out again verse 11: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Imagine how this was received by Jewish ears. Jewish leadership had wrongly assumed they were the only people God loved, when, from the beginning, the call of God to the Jewish people was for them to be a blessing to **all** peoples (Genesis 12:1-3). So here, Jesus not only says that the great heavenly banquet will include those "from the east and the west", but that the "subjects of the Kingdom" (the descendants, the offspring of Israel) will be "thrown outside"! Reading this, it's amazing Jesus' ministry makes it three years before He is crucified!

Apply:

This early in Jesus' ministry (we're only in chapter 8), the focus is already becoming clear. Jesus has come to gather **all** people to Himself. It doesn't matter to Jesus how long, if ever, you've been "in the church," what matters is where you are at with God today. Although we are among the "outsiders" because of our sin, Jesus seeks us out to bring us to Himself. It's time to start thinking like a missionary. Who in your life is on the religious fringe? Based on what we see here in Matthew 8 and other passages leading up to this, what might your message to them be?

Reflect:

Day 9

Read: Matthew 9:1-38

Going Deeper:

Meet Matthew, the author of this very Gospel. He's a tax collector and official in the Roman government before he is introduced to Jesus. Understand that tax collectors were among the most despised in 1st century culture. They collected a tax for the Roman government and were often accused of taking more than the appropriate share to pad their own incomes. Yet it's one of these despised that Jesus transforms and makes the author of this first Gospel. (Starting to see a pattern? Starting to think Jesus has something for people on the fringe?) Matthew meets Jesus and His life is completely changed. The cool part is—check out the very first thing Matthew does upon becoming a follower of Christ—he invites all his tax collector and 'sinner' friends to meet Jesus for themselves (9:10). When the grumbling from among the Jewish leadership starts, Jesus is ready with an answer: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13).

Apply:

This is one of my favorite parts of the Gospel of Matthew, because it absolutely shatters so many preconceived notions about following Jesus. First of all, God doesn't wait until we "clean ourselves up" before He reaches out to us; instead this passage reveals that it's when we're down and dirty in sin that Christ reaches deepest and hardest. Second, this passage reveals that following Jesus is not about striving to appease God, but striving to love and serve others! That is how we show love to God. New believer Matthew doesn't withdraw to a monastery upon coming to faith, he runs back to his friends with his good news! Let me pose this question: Who has God put in your life that needs love and mercy?

Reflect:

Day 10

Read: Matthew 10:1-42

Going Deeper:

Now that Jesus' disciples have travelled with Him for a while and learned from Him, it's time for them to go out themselves, to love others, and to put what they've learned into practice. After all, as we just saw in 9:13, the Lord desires "mercy, not sacrifice." Said a different way, we worship God by loving others in real life, not by staying in the temple. As they go, Jesus wants them to know in a powerful way, that their heavenly Father loves them and is with them. Read again just three verses, Matthew 10:29-31 . . .

Apply:

Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens apart from, or our outside of, "the will of the Father" (10:29). God is driving and directing everything. We are a people who like to think that we are in control, but here God tells us otherwise. How is it a comfort for you to know that, like the disciples, our lives are completely in the hands of God?

Reflect:

Day 11

Read: Matthew 11:1-30

Going Deeper:

John, the same John from chapter 3, John the Baptist, is now wondering, “*Is Jesus really the Messiah?*” Jesus responds by pointing to the signs—“the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (11:4-6). Bottom line, the miracles are really signs that the Messiah has arrived. The problem is many don’t see it that way. In fact, according to 11:20, the place in the text where the most miracles occurred, people still don’t believe. Why, because they saw the miracles as ends in themselves not as signs pointing to the Messiah. They wanted more and more miracles, but unless they began to see the miracles as signs of the coming of the Messiah, they would never believe.

Apply:

The Lord’s miracles are still with us—the smile of an infant, an unexplained healing, a fractured relationship that experiences restoration. Are we seeing them as good things only, or as signs of God’s love for us and windows into his goodness and provision? Consider this: What good things are you experiencing in your life lately that you can recognize as windows into the goodness of God?

Reflect:

Day 12

Read: Matthew 12:1-50

Going Deeper:

The ministry of Jesus is progressing, and chapter 12 is a chapter of hints, a chapter of foreshadowing. Matthew is no literary slouch, and in 12:14 we get the first hint that conflict is looming with the religious elite: “The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.” That’s not the only hint in this lengthy chapter...check out verse 40: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Also, let’s not miss Jesus’ instructions to His disciples in 12:34 concerning how important it is that they stay connected to the things of God: “For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.” Let those words sink in for just a moment . . . Basically, Jesus is telling us that what comes out of us—our words, our attitudes, our actions—they are all a reflection of what’s bubbling up from within. Thus, Jesus shares with His disciples (and us) to be filled with Godly things. He continues in verses 44 and 45 to tell us that when evil spirits look to take residence, they look for people not filled with the things of God, houses “swept clean” (44).

Apply:

This process, taking this *Walk to Remember*, is filling you up. Don’t let it stop here. What other practices will fill you up, spiritually, with the things of God? What will lead your heart to overflow? Think of how you are wired, and what works for you: Prayer? Christian music? Fellowship with other Christians? Worship? Acts of Service? What fills your spiritual tank?

Reflect:

Day 13

Read: Matthew 13:1-58

Going Deeper:

Again, here is another first. While in chapter 12 we had the first foreshadowing of the looming conflict on the cross and the first prediction of the death and resurrection of Jesus, here in chapter 13 we have the first indication that life as the disciples knew it, and life as we know it, will one day come to an end. Two times in Matthew 13, Jesus makes reference to the end times and a day of judgment (13:41-43; 49). Don't worry. Jesus comforts His disciples, and us, with the words of chapter 11: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you." And what is it? Repentance! "Turn, and I would heal them" (13:15).

Apply:

This was really John the Baptist's message from the beginning: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). The only way to get right with God is through repentance—to acknowledge that we don't measure up, acknowledge our sin, and acknowledge our need for someone or something to come from outside of us to restore us to God. Only then will healing come.

It's appropriate once again for us to reflect on our shortcomings; the words, attitudes and actions that pull you away from God and hurt others. What sins do you need to bring to God today?

Reflect:

Day 14

Read: Matthew 14:1-36

Going Deeper:

Here we see the heart of Jesus the shepherd. Always looking out for the needs and feelings of others, this is Pastor Jesus. Upon hearing of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus wants to be alone but the crowds and the people of the village have other ideas. It's not all that different from a busy Mom who just needs a break but is surrounded by children who need "Mommy." So Jesus, Pastor Jesus, sees the people and the Bible says He has "compassion on them" (14). The people are hungry, and even though the surrounding villages have food, and Jesus could have simply sent them back to their neighborhoods, He doesn't. Instead He feeds them. When God provides, He provides in abundance, in an overflow. Finally, don't miss the ultimate example set by Jesus here . . . When Jesus finally gets the break He longed for, what does He do? Check out verse 23: "After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray."

Apply:

The heart of Jesus isn't just for His 1st century disciples, and He isn't done Pastoring. The heart of Jesus beats for us as well. As we saw here, when God provides, He often provides in abundance, giving us more than we expect; more than we need. Pull back, for just a second, and measure God's love for you, revealed in abundant blessings. How are you blessed by Pastor Jesus?

Reflect:

Day 15

Read: Matthew 15:1-39

Going Deeper:

Having earlier revealed His disdain for how the Jewish leadership lived out their faith (9:1-8; 12:1-14), Jesus once again calls out the Pharisees for not “getting it.” This first narrative in chapter 15 details an exchange between Jesus and the Temple leadership concerning cleanliness practices. Once again, Jesus exposes the Pharisees for their blatant hypocrisy. Imagine the drama in the room when Jesus stings the Jewish leadership with these words from way back in Isaiah, words they certainly recognized, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” (Isaiah 29:13)

Immediately after this, it’s a Canaanite woman who reveals true, authentic faith. Again, it’s a woman, the sex not usually accepted in Jewish leadership, and a non-Jew at that, who shows us the kind of heart Jesus is after. Think about what the Lord is trying to communicate to us by pairing these two stories together.

Apply:

Jesus exposes the ones who think they have it all figured out as being far from Kingdom, yet it’s the begging Canaanite woman whose faith leads Jesus to heal her daughter. The question to ponder today is simple: Where are we at on this? Are we thinking our practices are good, and we just need a little help and clarification here and there? Do we come to the Lord needy, vulnerable, broken, and utterly helpless? Having read these two stories, which posture is more likely to be received by the Lord? What does that mean for your prayer and worship life?

Reflect:

Day 16

Read: Matthew 16:1-28

Going Deeper:

There's no mistaking it—any Bible scholar will tell you that Peter was the lead dog among the twelve disciples. He almost always speaks on behalf of the group, and he's the type of guy who wears his heart on his sleeve—if he's feeling something, he'll let you know. Do you know anyone like that? The events in the second part of chapter 16 reveal the good and the bad of emotional, impulsive Peter. In a very dramatic moment, Jesus is walking with his disciples and he asks a simple question, "Who do people say that I am?" (16:13). Hearing the word on the street, Jesus makes the question considerably more personal, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (16:15). Guess who speaks . . . none other than Peter, who nails it—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). For sure, it was a high point for Peter

Only verses later, Peter's impulsiveness gets him in trouble after he hears Jesus explain that although He was the Son of God, He came to suffer, die and be raised to life. Wanting to protect Jesus, Peter pulls him aside and tries to straighten Him out: "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (16:22). It was then that Peter heard words from Jesus that must have stung—"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (16:23).

Apply:

If you are like most, you have days when life is good, you are in synch, and you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. If you're like most, you also have days when you lose your temper, stew in bitterness and judgment, and you fail to walk in the light of the Lord. Friends, it is for this very reason that Christ came to forgive, and it is for this very reason that we have the example of Peter. Think about it. Peter goes from boldly, correctly, nailing the identity of Jesus to being called Satan! If there is room in the Kingdom of God and heaven for Peter, there is room for us too! Pray and then write below what your high points and your low points look like, and what this chapter reveals about how God handles them . . .

Reflect:

Day 17

Read: Matthew 17:1-23

Going Deeper:

It's amazing how themes from one chapter run so smoothly into the next. Follow with me—In chapter 16, we see Peter's high point—acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, but we also see Peter's low point—being called “Satan” by Jesus after He tries to talk Jesus out of going to the cross. This pattern continues in Chapter 17, as Peter, James, and John literally experience a mountain top moment with Jesus—the Transfiguration. Here Jesus shines bright, and the Father's voice from Heaven confirms Jesus as His son; but then they come down from the mountain and are unable to drive out a demon, something Jesus Himself gave them the power to do. The Father of the demon-possessed boy comes to Jesus and says it plainly, “I brought him (my son) to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” The highs and lows continue . . .

Apply:

What's neat about this chapter is the dialogue Jesus has with his disciples after they are unable to expel the demon. They come to Jesus with a good question, “Why couldn't we drive it out?” (17:19). Jesus responds, and I want you to think of His response as being spoken to you as well: “Because you have so little faith” (17:20).

Going through this *Walk to Remember* experience, you are starting to get a handle on Jesus' identity. Perhaps all or some of this is new for you; perhaps you've known Jesus your whole life. Either way, it's appropriate to take inventory of your faith in Jesus. Who do you believe He is? (Be honest—this is **your** experience.) In the space below, write about who you believe Jesus is.

Reflect:

Day 18

Read: Matthew 18:1-35

Going Deeper:

In the last half of this chapter Peter comes to Jesus with a pretty good question, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” (18:21). Friends, we’re 18 chapters into this journey, and I’m wondering if you’ve noticed something about how Jesus operates: rarely does He answer a black and white question in a black and white manner. More often than not, he’ll answer the question by telling a story, which we call a parable. Why? Jesus isn’t trying to avoid the question; he’s inviting the questioner to go even deeper, to probe within, to search their own heart.

This is a great example. Instead of replying to Peter’s question with a simple “many times,” he shares a story about a merciful master who forgives his servant’s debt, but then watches as the forgiven servant refuses to forgive those who owed him. It’s a story of forgiveness, definitely, but how does it answer Peter’s question?

Apply:

Peter’s question is a pretty fair and honest one, don’t you think? How many of us have asked a similar question from time to time? We’re hurt by the piercing words of another, a confidence broken, an unfounded accusation. How many times are we supposed to forgive, Jesus?

Jesus invites us to first consider our own forgiveness. We are the servant who has a huge debt to pay to God because of our sin. Unfortunately, it is a debt we can’t pay. But the merciful master, our heavenly Father, takes pity and forgives our debt through Jesus’ blood shed on the cross. Now, then, we go out as forgiven servants. Will we share the forgiveness we ourselves have been given? Or will we be like the servant in this parable and refuse. Now, reflect on how you’ve been forgiven, how you have a debt like the servant, and how you will respond to God’s forgiveness.

Reflect:

Day 19

Read: Matthew 19:1-30

Going Deeper:

Sandwiched in the middle of this chapter is a seemingly simple conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It seems people were bringing their children to Jesus to have Him bless them, but the disciples turned them away, rebuking them (19:13). I can image the rebukes, can't you? *"He's too busy."* *"He focuses on the adults only."* However Jesus, upon hearing of this, turns and rebukes the disciples! "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (19:14).

Consider with me the magnitude of Jesus' statement here. He doesn't just say, *"No, I like children."* or *"One day they may grow up and follow me."* Instead he says: *"the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."* Now. Today. It belongs to the children.

Apply:

In the midst of your quest for spiritual growth and discovering Jesus, don't miss the truth of Jesus' statement here. We don't "grow up" in our faith, until one day we attain it. There is no "climbing the ladder" in the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead, a relationship with Jesus Christ is given to us as a gift. We don't earn it or work our way into it. It's a gift. The way Jesus teaches us this truth is to point to children, telling us that we receive it, just like the young ones do!

In the space given below, consider the gift of faith that Christ has worked in you. What are you especially thankful for that you believe? How is having faith in Jesus Christ blessing your life?

Reflect:

Day 20

Read: Matthew 20:1-34

Going Deeper:

For 20 chapters now we've taken this *Walk to Remember*. We've looked at some milestone moments in Jesus' life, examined His teachings, and observed His miracles. After all this, we are now drawing near to the pinnacle of the life and ministry of Jesus—his death and resurrection. This will be the defining moment in His life; ultimately it is why He came to earth. Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Now why would we talk about that here, before it even happens? Take a look at 20:17-19. Read those words again, slowly . . . Jesus is journeying with His disciples to Jerusalem, and along the way He pulls them aside for what must have been quite a dramatic moment. There on the side of the road, Jesus tells His disciples what awaits Him in Jerusalem—betrayal . . . condemnation . . . flogging . . . a crucifixion . . . a resurrection.

In the next series of chapters we'll watch this all unfold. As it does, remember these three verses from Matthew 19, and remember this—Jesus knew what was coming.

Apply:

Imagine with me for just a moment what that must have been like—taking each step, knowing the destination, knowing the pain on the horizon. Yet Jesus takes each step willingly. Perhaps here's the most important point of them all—dying on the cross is not something that happens to Jesus as though He were a victim. Instead, everything Jesus endures He endures by choice, willingly, knowing what is going to happen. He knows beforehand, and yet He takes each step towards it. Why? One word: Love.

In the space below, write out a prayer of thankfulness to Jesus for what He has done for you in willingly going to the cross. He knew it was coming, and that makes a big difference . . .

Reflect:

Day 21

Read: Matthew 21:1-46

Going Deeper:

We are now reaching the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry. This chapter begins with Jesus arriving in Jerusalem, the capital city, where the people greet him as a king. Picture the scene with me—people laying down their cloaks or cut palm branches to smooth the road, shouting words of praise; an entire city stirred.

How does Jesus choose to enter the city? He is riding on a donkey, a humble and lowly donkey. If there was ever a time for chariots, it was this, but Jesus chooses a donkey. It's like the President coming into town, but leaving Air Force One and the motorcade in the garage, and choosing instead a scooter . . .

In some ways, it just doesn't seem right—the Messiah, the chosen One, **the very Son of God** choosing a low-riding, stubborn donkey. Upon further reflection it makes perfect sense. The people greet Him as they would a king, and Jesus accepts their praise only to, in a subtle way, communicate **what kind** of king He is. He's not a king with an army and chariots who comes to rule. He's a king who rides on a donkey, with a few ragamuffin disciples tagging along, who comes to serve. In fact, one of the first things Jesus does in Jerusalem is heal the blind and the lame (21:14). Once again, think about Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Apply:

You have now completed 21 chapters in the book of Matthew and you only have a few to go. By now you are starting to solidify a portrait of Jesus—who He was and what He came to do. This triumphant entry into Jerusalem reminds us to check and recalibrate our portrait of Jesus against the real and authentic Jesus of the Bible. Are we making him the type of king that he isn't? Do we want Him as a king on our terms only—a king who does what we want, existing only to make our life better? Will we accept Him as the king he was—the king who came "to be mocked and flogged and crucified" (Matthew 20:19), all out of love for us? What kind of king is Jesus for you?

Reflect:

Day 22

Read: Matthew 22:1-46

Going Deeper:

In the previous chapter, we heard Jesus rebuke the Temple leadership: “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (21:31). It’s quotes like this which lead me wonder how Jesus’ ministry lasted as long as it did before He was crucified! Here Jesus is telling the leaders that those they had considered so far from God were actually closer to the Kingdom than they were—Scandalous indeed!

Here in the beginning of Matthew 22, Jesus shows them what He means, once again using a parable. This parable is about a host of a wedding feast who invites all the standard guests, only to see those invitations get rejected. But this host then does the dramatic, he goes to the street corners, inviting “both good and bad” (22:10). Illustrating in a powerful way that “the tax collectors and the prostitutes” (21:31) were getting in to Heaven before those who expected to be there . . .

Apply:

If you haven’t done so already, it’s time to shatter your preconceived notions about who Jesus came for. The tendency is to believe that Jesus comes for those who have their lives together; those who have religion figured out; those who do the right thing. Have you seen that tendency in the Jesus of the Bible? The Bible portrays a God in Jesus who reaches out to those on the fringe, the broken and the humble.

It’s not a fun or comfortable exercise, but it’s appropriate once again to mull over where you stand with God. Are you the comfortable, religious person? Or are you, in your own way, “on the street corner” (22:9); plagued with sin, broken, and needing God? It’s clear in the Bible who Jesus is seeking . . .

Reflect:

Day 23

Read: Matthew 23:1-39

Going Deeper:

Matthew 23 is comprised of one extended dialogue where Jesus issues warnings to those in positions of religious leadership. In his earthly ministry Jesus has observed some very unhealthy practices among those who lead, and here He calls them out using seven “woes,” or warnings.

Of all of Jesus’ words in this Gospel, these are perhaps His most severe. He calls the Temple leadership “blind guides” (23:16), who “shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces” (23:13). He calls them a “brood of vipers” (23:33), and in the strongest rebuke, refers to them as “white-washed tombs” (23:27); seemingly clean (“white”) on the outside, but spiritually deceased.

Apply:

As a Pastor these are challenging words for me to hear and reflect on. I cannot help but think of the words of James 3:1, which cautions, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers . . . because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” I pray that as I am placed in a position of leadership, I never, ever “shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces” through words of judgment or a haughty attitude. I pray I never become a “white washed tomb,” seemingly healthy, but spiritually sick.

These warnings are not just reserved for clergy. They are for any of us placed in positions of influence. As parents, grandparents, teachers, relatives, and friend we all have the capacity to influence others spiritually. We are blessed by God, in order to bless others. Even if you don’t think of yourself as a leader, or in a position of great influence, consider even the impact you can make on your peers. Take a moment here and write out a prayer to God asking for continued growth, repentance, and humility, and that what was said by Jesus in Matthew 23 will never be said about us.

Reflect:

Day 24

Read: Matthew 24:1-51

Going Deeper:

This chapter in Matthew is arguably the most confusing chapter in the entire book. It's a conversation Jesus is having with his disciples about "the end of the age" (24:3), and Jesus shares with His disciples some ominous warnings. Perhaps most confusing of all is that some events described in this chapter are fulfilled later in the 1st century, while others will see fulfillment when Jesus comes back to earth. For instance, Jesus' reference to "not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down" is understood by many Bible scholars as a reference to the fall of Rome in 70 A.D., something that would happen for the disciples in "this generation" (24:34). Meanwhile, 24:36 and what follows is most certainly addressing the return of Christ to earth—"so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (24:37). End times discussions seem to be challenging enough without all this confusion, so I'll keep the question for today pretty straightforward—what are we to make of all this?

Apply:

Bottom line—this world that God created will not go on forever and one day God will bring this to an end by having Jesus return to judge (we'll see this talked about in Matthew 25). Although we are not made aware of "that day or hour" (24:36), we **are** living in the end times today. In fact, the disciples of Jesus and the leaders of the early church were convinced Jesus' return would happen in their lifetime. In Romans 13:11, Paul writes, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." So what's the message for us? Be less concerned about "reading the tea leaves", and understanding all the signs; instead, as Jesus Himself tells us in 24:42, "keep watch." Don't get so lost in all the end times confusion that you forget the most important message, "keep watch." The chapter concludes with Jesus sharing a parable about our readiness. For just a few moments, wonder about what "keeping watch" might look like for you . . .

Reflect:

Day 25

Read: Matthew 25:1-46

Going Deeper:

Sandwiched in the middle of Matthew 25 is one of Jesus' most poignant parables. It's the story of three different reactions to being entrusted with the property of another. A man heads out on a journey, and before departing distributes his wealth to others for safekeeping. The wealth here was significant, as a 'talent' was a unit of coinage worth more than a thousand dollars. The parable goes on to reveal how some use the talents to gain more, while another buries his in the dirt and produces nothing. Those who do well are affirmed, while the one who buries the money has what was given to him taken back.

Apply:

The challenge when reading and interpreting the parables of Jesus is to always seek out the greater and deeper meaning. Underneath each parable is a timeless truth that Jesus wants us to discover. Here the truth is pretty straightforward—if you are faithful with some, you'll be given more. It's a parable that challenges us to consider how we are managing all that we've been given—from our jobs, to our money, and most importantly to our relationship with others and with God. Process below how you might be "burying" what you've been given, but also think about the ways in which you are getting a good return for which you will one day hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (25:21, 23)

Reflect:

Day 26

Read: Matthew 26:1-75

Going Deeper:

Matthew 26, the longest chapter in the book of Matthew, highlights each step in the painful journey that Jesus takes to the cross. Although many of the events described here take place over only a matter of a few hours, Matthew wants us to be aware of each trying part. In reading through this chapter one cannot help but draw the distinction between the sheer determination of Jesus to get to the cross, over and against the absolute weakness of the human will. The frailty of the human will is seen in the Jewish leadership who desire to end Jesus' life merely out of jealousy. The frailty is seen in Judas, himself from within Jesus' inner circle, who agrees to betray Jesus for mere money. The frailty is seen in Peter, who promises to never deny Jesus but later does. The frailty is seen in the disciples, who in the hour Jesus needed them most are fast asleep. Meanwhile, Jesus is steadfast and resolute, determined to see salvation accomplished, even if it means great pain and emotional anguish.

Apply:

“For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” These are the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:19, and they describe powerfully what we see at work in Matthew 26. All of us can in some way identify with Paul here, as we know all too well our own weakness. Unfortunately, the answer often given by the world is “try harder.” That is, if you find yourself weak and failing, buckle down and increase your effort. The Bible, meanwhile, comes at this differently. For Paul, and for the rest of the Biblical authors, the answer is never to try harder, but to accept forgiveness. In Jesus we see resolve that does not fail, and it's this perfection that covers our imperfection. In the space below, comment on your own frailty experiences and give thanks for the steadfastness of Christ.

Reflect:

Day 27

Read: Matthew 27:1-66

Going Deeper:

You'll remember that we began this journey in Matthew chapter 1 by looking at verse 21, where the angel instructs Joseph, ". . . you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins." We said that from the very beginning of this Gospel Jesus' purpose and mission were very clear. Now, in Matthew 27, **it is accomplished**. The amazing thing is that everyone is trying to tempt Him out of completing it! Verses 39-40 tell us that "those who passed by hurled insults at him . . . save Yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" Later it's the Jewish leadership in verse 42, "He saved others . . . but He can't save Himself." Finally, the rest of the crowd joins in, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

Apply:

How utterly soul piercing it must have been for Jesus to be revealing such love, only to have it be so mockingly rejected. Rejecting Christ's offer of unconditional love and forgiveness through His death on the cross is unfortunately not just a first century error. Even today people around us see Jesus as a polarizing religious figure, or a social revolutionary, or a great teacher, but not as who He truly was; the one who came to "save people from their sins" (1:21). Today consider what Christ's death has won for you. Then compose a prayer for people in your life who know Jesus as someone other than He truly is . . .

Reflect:

Day 28

Read: Matthew 28:1-20

Going Deeper:

Thankfully the death of Jesus Christ is not the final word. Even though Pilate made the tomb as secure as possible (27:55-56), going as far as to place a “seal on the stone” (27:66), it could not hold Jesus. Matthew 28 shares the Easter story, the resurrection of Christ, which is proof that God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The Gospel concludes with news that is almost as good as the Resurrection of Christ itself . . . it’s the very last words of the Gospel, 28:20, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” This Jesus who went to the cross for us, gave His very self for us, and **is still with us**, ALWAYS.

Apply:

This beautiful promise of Christ is one that resonates with so many, yet if we’re honest with ourselves, we must admit we sometimes wonder. The trials and temptations of life occasionally draw us into loneliness and doubt and we end up questioning the very presence of God. Perhaps that is why Matthew records that after all Jesus had done, even after rising from the dead, still “some doubted” (28:17). Doubt is one of Satan’s favorite and most powerful weapons, but the presence of God with you through the Holy Spirit will overcome it. You have now completed this journey; 28 chapters of discovering Jesus and who he was. It’s time to ponder who He is for you. Perhaps you’ve still got questions, and that’s OK. After reading all that Jesus did and what He was truly about, think upon where you are at with Jesus. Who is Jesus Christ?

Reflect:

Dedication

This labor of love is dedicated to the people of Lord of Glory, with whom I am so thankful to take this spiritual journey; to my wife, my parents, and my family, who are an earthly manifestation of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ; and ultimately to the Glory of God, that I and others may press even further into knowing Him.

Lord of Glory

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