

MATTHEW Bible Reading Schedule

7 Weeks

WEEK 1

Our journey through the Gospel according to Matthew during Lent is an ideal book for this purpose. I have always appreciated Matthew's account of the life of Christ. He definitely had a bird's eye view of Jesus. The blend of his writings includes such a beautiful combination of action and teaching from Jesus. Matthew's use of the Old Testament brings the identity of Christ front and center. Jesus is obviously the Savior but Matthew brings out his kingship as he emphasizes the kingdom of heaven alive in Christ.

A favorite author of mine, Michael Green, writes, "The Gospel according to Matthew is among the most influential books ever written. It is wonderfully complete, linking Jesus with his Jewish origins and Old Testament background, pointing forward to the growth of the Gentile Christian mission, and embodying the teaching, actions, parables, miracles, death, and resurrection of the central figure." Welcome to our focus for Lent. The official beginning of Lent is this coming Wednesday when we will read chapter 3 as Jesus begins his ministry on earth. But we don't want to skip the arrival of the Messiah as a baby born in Bethlehem.

DAY 1 – Matthew 1

The purpose of Matthew's genealogy is to show Jesus' heritage as running from Abraham through David. Jesus' genealogy confirms him as the legitimate heir to the throne of David. On one hand, this genealogy affirms the Jewish roots of God's plan beginning with Abraham, and on the other hand, the four women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba) included in the list emphasize God's gracious acts of redeeming even those deemed unworthy by others. Normally, we might skim over a genealogy but the insertion of these women and the culmination of Mary and Joseph clearly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. The last eight verses are fairly well known giving us Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. What Matthew includes will be repeated time and again in his book with a strong reference to the Old Testament. Isaiah 7:14 announces the miraculous virgin birth of Immanuel 700 years before the coming of Messiah. Matthew will make sure we know that the Old Testament expectations and promises are fulfilled in Jesus. This is an inspiring distinctive of Matthew's account. The name Jesus is purposeful but not unique. There were many other Jews named Jesus which is also the name Joshua in Hebrew. Yeshua literally means "the Lord saves." This obviously fits Christ's role. Jesus will express his main purpose later on in Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save those who are lost." Did anything new catch your eye as you read these familiar words?

DAY 2 – Matthew 2

This chapter always fascinates me with the inspiration of the Magi but also the devastation of Herod's jealousy. Each of these events is again supported by an Old Testament prophecy. Matthew would not

have needed to include Micah's prophecy for the story to make sense but this amazing Scripture links the connection between David and Jesus the Messiah. Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David who was a shepherd boy and then became the Shepherd of Israel. This makes perfect sense as Jesus is the Shepherd King and obviously fits his role so succinctly. This truth (Micah 5:2) is tucked into the story of the Magi seamlessly. But the Magi affirm that the Gospel is for all, even these unlikely Gentiles. The star and the gifts and their origins are all so compelling. They were truly wise because they realized the significance of this child and showed incredible determination to find him. Wise men still seek God, right? The intensity of this next episode is very disturbing. It is so vicious and so inhumane to wipe out innocent children because of insecurity and anger. But verse 19 tells us that Herod died shortly after this event as history records his death in 4 BC. Also, take note that most scholars believe that Jesus was born in 6 BC even though that doesn't make the dating of BC & AD. These dates are more clearly outlined in Luke 2. Herod had plans to secure his position and authority but God stopped him prematurely because he was a ruthless man and God promised that justice would prevail. The last few verses casually tell us that Jesus ended up in Nazareth which was definitely God's divine plan. Jesus would stay in Galilee, where Nazareth was located, as he began his ministry for three years. We will read about Jesus entering the scene as John the Baptist prepares the path for our Lord. Galilee would be the region where Jesus would flourish and yet Jerusalem would be a place of opposition. We know Jesus' teachings and most of his miracles from his days in Galilee. What impresses you about the Magi? What is God telling you/us through their story?

DAY 3 – Matthew 3

This is Ash Wednesday and launches the religious tradition of Lent. Evangelical believers are often turned off by the idea of Lent. But I assure you that the original motivation was worth duplicating. From the 4th century AD, we read about believers who practiced prayer and fasting leading up to Easter. From today until Easter, there are 46 days but traditionally Lent took Sundays off which makes the Lenten season 40 days long. A significant event for Lent is the reading for tomorrow as Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. Matthew will help us revise the life of Jesus, his teachings, his determination to go to the cross, and with that, his suffering. Today's reading about John the Baptist is ideal for Ash Wednesday which coincides with John's emphasis on repentance. Again, Matthew refers to the Old Testament with Isaiah's prophecy about the one who would prepare the way. Isaiah is speaking about John in 40:3 "Prepare the way for the Lord's coming! Clear the road for him!" If ever there was one verse to define the original motivation for Lent, it would be Mt 3:3. You might think that Lent has a deep meaning but it simply refers to springtime from the old English definition. Lent was practiced before it was named Lent but the idea of preparation for Christ's death and resurrection fills Christian history books. John's ministry is briefly highlighted in this chapter heightening our anticipation of meeting Jesus. The Lord's introduction begins with his baptism. This all fits Lent and Ash Wednesday so well. Along with this chapter, there is also a prayer suggested for Ash Wednesday in Psalm 51:1-3, 10-12. I am praying for us to go "deeper" in our walk with Christ during this season. Thank you for joining me. How has the reading today stirred your heart? What might your repentance prayer be as you begin this journey to Easter?

DAY 4 – Matthew 4

As I mentioned yesterday, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness has often been the focal event for why we practice Lent. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness and so too, the Spirit is moving us to pursue a deeper connection to the Lord. These days could be just that for you. I am fascinated each and every day as we read Matthew about his use of the Old Testament. I might sound like a broken record but Matthew quotes Deuteronomy and Isaiah with such significance. As Jesus is tempted by the devil, he fortifies himself and confronts the devil with Scripture. Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13 gives me the idea that Jesus had been thinking about those passages and used them like a sword (Ephesians 6:17). The Lord knew the Word and it was a great defense for him but also it pushed the devil away (V11). The other purposeful reference is from Isaiah 9 which is probably my favorite messianic prophecy as the Messiah is announced as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.” (9:6) But the reference that Matthew gives is Isaiah 9:1-2 which connects the Messiah/Jesus to Galilee and promises that he will be the light of the world. Matthew’s affirmation of Jesus being from Galilee and his acceptance of the Gentiles is very profound. I already told you that Jesus would grow up in Nazareth which is located in Galilee, of course. To the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, Galilee was a rebellious place and often thought of as spiritually deprived. This is where Jesus hung out and is the focal point of his ministry as 4:23-25 summarizes. I encourage you to take the time to read this chapter again and listen to what God might be saying to you.

DAY 5 – Matthew 5

Our first four days this week have been chapters that are shorter and more focused than today, as you now know. This is the beginning of what is known as “the sermon on the mount.” There is so much to consider in these 48 verses. I have always appreciated the amazing “upside down” teaching of Jesus in verses 3-12 known as the “Beatitudes,” or simply the blessings of Jesus. These point to God’s special favor which is far better than any earthly pursuit. So often these principles highlight the opposite of our inclination. This list: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry, merciful, peacemakers, pure in heart, and persecuted. “Blessed” points to God’s approval with the overarching truth of humility, right? Reflecting on the meaning of these characteristics and contemplating the evidence of them in my life could easily consume my morning of prayer. But this chapter goes on and reminds me of how much I need God’s mercy. The call to righteousness and the confrontation regarding anger, combined with the need to reconcile and forgive, quickly show me how far I fall short and how much I need his grace. The chapter continues with even more topics that blow me away: lust, divorce, vows, revenge, and loving my enemies, and wraps up the first chapter of three on the sermon on the mount. As you read through the chapter again, I encourage you to have a piece of paper by your side and write down the words and phrases that get your attention. Then, I suggest you pray and release these concerns to the Lord. May God lighten your load!

WEEK 2

If you thought last week in Matthew was inspiring, you are in for a real blessing this week. The depth of the Lord's teaching in chapters 6 & 7 is a great lead into the activity of Jesus with one miraculous event after another. By chapter 10, the Lord is ready to launch the disciples for on-the-job training. Some of these principles are just as helpful today as they were then. One point of instruction: if possible, slow your reading down to a pace that allows you to take in the significance of the Lord's teaching and at the same time, be uplifted by the Lord's ability to do the supernatural.

DAY 6 – Matthew 6

Recently, I have read about how many people believe that their faith is supposed to be private. The words of Jesus in this chapter would give you the impression that private faith is the right focus. Whether the topic is giving or prayer or fasting, you should not make a show of yourself. The message from Jesus to us is about righteousness for public recognition. That kind of righteousness is empty and void of reward from God. If we do religious activities for the main purpose of being seen, we are then more concerned about people's approval than we are about knowing and obeying God. Galatians 1:10 has been a convicting verse for me: "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (NIV) Jesus uses a word to describe such people, "hypocrites." The word means playacting. My personal relationship with Christ begins in private with a sincere desire to know the Lord. This will be blessed by God and will spill out from me to the people I meet. Our faith is never meant to be solely private. What God whispers in our ears in private, he tells us to shout it from the housetops in Mt 10:27. There is another topic that gets my attention – worry. Jesus presents a compelling challenge to trust God for your needs. (6:25-34) The person who forgets the power and promises of God is described as one with "Little faith." You would do well to memorize verse 33 which tells us about God's promise to provide. But I can't close my notes without reminding you that Jesus has given us a prayer as a model for us in verses 9 to 13. Jesus did not give us this prayer to pray over and over again in vain repetition; he said something about that in verse 7 right before teaching the disciples about how to pray. What does Jesus teach us about prayer in what we call "the Lord's Prayer?" How has God spoken to you through this marvelous chapter of teaching from Jesus?

DAY 7 – Matthew 7

Jesus presents teachings on seven different aspects of faith in this chapter. Which one catches your eye? Why? The good tree and the good fruit spill over into verses 21 to 23, in my opinion. Spiritual rebirth is absolutely necessary if one is to produce good fruit. This is also true about those who call out, "Lord! Lord!" The key is not what you announce with your lips but what is true in your heart. Jesus says he never KNEW them. Doing good things for God can seem like that is what matters most. But people can fake it for a variety of reasons. The crucial issue is one of relationship. Without a genuine relationship with Christ, no effort to be good or do good things has the power to save us from our sins. The NLT says this in verse 23, "I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's law." That translation makes a lot sense to me. If someone is trying to be good enough but does not have a genuine relationship with Christ, the law actually condemns them. A person would have to completely fulfill the law to perfection

in order to enter eternity in heaven with Christ. But no human being has the ability to live sinlessly. Even for us who have faith in Christ, we would immediately fall short without the Lord's sacrifice for forgiveness. The Apostle Paul wrote these words regarding our redemption: "When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those (that's us) under the law, that we might receive (spiritual) adoption..." (Galatians 4:5-6, NIV) Jesus fulfilled the law because he was sinless and died for us as the blameless Lamb of God so that we could be redeemed as we place our faith in him. Our faith in Christ invites us into a relationship with Jesus who then will empower us to do good works. The warning pertains to the right order of "faith then works" which is clearly presented in verses 21 to 23, not the other way around. How is your personal relationship with Christ? This is always the key to our spiritual journey as believers.

DAY 8 – Matthew 8

This chapter is Jesus in action, right? He addresses a variety of significant challenges with miraculous healings for paralysis as well as a fever, plus, demonic oppression, and the dangers of a fierce storm. We also notice Matthew pointing us to Isaiah. During the sermon on the mount, Matthew did not emphasize his interest in the Old Testament and how often these prophecies connect with Jesus both in identity and in his actions. In verse 17 he specifically highlights Isaiah who tells us that the Suffering Servant "took our sicknesses and removed our diseases" in 53:4. The Messiah would have power from on high. But the statement that gets my attention is in verse 20 when Jesus calls himself "Son of Man." Jesus, through the author Matthew, will use this title for himself more than any other name. I counted 27 times in Matthew when Jesus affirmed the title Son of Man for himself. This too has an Old Testament connection with the prophet Daniel in 7:13-14: "As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed." With this background, you can realize that Jesus knew exactly who he was. Some have suggested that Jesus used this title to stress his humanity compared to his divinity like Son of God. I think Son of Man is more of a reflection that he represents mankind as he came to earth to come near to us. But Daniel elevates this title to the ultimate victor and the One who will reign forever someday. This is a unique emphasis found in Matthew and I am personally drawn to the depth and meaning of "Son of Man." What episode or event in this chapter do you identify with the most? Why?

DAY 9 – Matthew 9

Don't you just love the unique and miraculous evidence of God alive in His Son, Jesus!? If you thought Chapter 8 had a variety of encounters with Jesus, I think this chapter might have more. Matthew 9:35 is a summary of what we read in this chapter. There's no question that Jesus is the Messiah because no one can do what he does. "Nothing like this has ever happened in Israel!" (V33) But I am contemplating Matthew's call, and the new wine skin, and the great harvest that still exists. If you have watched the "Chosen," you know that Matthew is portrayed as an outsider. This is not saying he is a Gentile because another name for him is "Levi," which is obviously Jewish. He was a tax collector, hired by the Romans. This made him an outsider and someone the Jews despised. They thought of him as a trader. But after meeting Jesus he hosts a party with "notorious sinners." This is actually a marvelous thing to do and can

be repeated in our day. Invite a mixture of people and have a Matthew party. This allows Christians to rub shoulders with those who need Christ. It is an exceptional idea with eternal possibilities. And, as you also probably know, Matthew is the author of this Gospel account that we are reading. Another phrase caught my attention: I often tell the men in the jail that if they come to Christ, he offers them “new wine” (new life). But if they put their new wine in old wine skins it will burst. Men, while incarcerated, often ask God to save them and forgive their sins. But when the Lord opens the door for their release, they too often go back to old wine skins, and their faith bursts which means it spills out on the ground and loses its power to change them. This happens too often and every time I get the chance to challenge them about their faith after they are released, I do it. Finally, the mention of the Harvest is significant to me. You probably know why, but maybe not. As I was seeking God about receiving a call to be the new pastor at a new start-up church, Matthew 9:35-38 became my focus. A small group of people meeting in Keizer Elementary gymnasium asked me if I would consider being their pastor. That’s when I said yes and suggested the powerful significance of being workers in the Lord’s harvest field. So, the Lord launched a church named New Harvest with a heart of compassion and a desire to serve God in his harvest. Are you a worker in his field? How so? What aspect of this inspiring chapter caught your eye?

DAY 10 – Matthew 10

The Lord’s instructions to his disciples may seem out of date with today’s modern ministry but I find several points of relevancy. I read through the chapter at a normal reading pace but then I read it again more slowly and noticed these important principles that easily apply to us today. Verse 8 says, “Give as freely as you have received.” This may be about not asking for money, but I find a strong principle of sharing what God so freely gives us like comfort or forgiveness or salvation. God never meant for us to keep what he shares with us to ourselves. It is supposed to spill out. Also, the call to ministry is not self-effort. The Lord promises the help of the Holy Spirit as he clearly tells us in verse 20. The message of the New Testament elevates the activity of the Spirit in our lives. This is especially true for ministry. The importance of being close to God as we minister to others is found in these interesting words from verse 27, “What I tell you in darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear.” God’s love for us and his watchful care over our lives are portrayed by him knowing the number of hairs on your head in verse 30, along with a statement of value in verse 31. I was reading Psalm 18 when it says, “He rescued me (David) because he delighted in me.” (V19) My value and loving connection to God assures me that God is with me and watching over me as I endeavor to serve him. He is delighted to have me as his son, and this applies you as well. But this will not be easy, by any means. Verse 38 tells us that ministry in this world calls for sacrifice and surrender by taking up your cross. The cross was a brutal symbol of torture and execution. There’s nothing easy about that. Jesus summarizes his challenge to them in verse 39, “If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give your life for me, you will find it.” The chapter ends with giving a cup of cold water to someone in need which is a small gesture but significant because it is given for the sake of Christ. The smallest acts of kindness are affirmed by our Lord. These are the principles that caught my eye. Do any of these resonate with you? What other points of application got your attention?

WEEK 3

Let's walk with Jesus this week. His journey is more than fascinating to me. He does plenty of teaching with the introduction of "parables" and the continued power of miracles. He is not afraid of confrontation or discouraged by disappointment. I imagine myself walking near him but behind him. These chapters are filled with variety, insight, and plenty of inspiration. We are five weeks away from Easter.

DAY 11 – Matthew 11

How's that for a chapter filled with variety but, of course, the tribute to John the Baptist stands out?! The first thing I notice is the message of verses 4 & 5 that affirm something I say quite often, "show & tell." "Are you the One?" John asks. In so many words Jesus says, tell him the evidence is in many lives being touched and transformed through my love and power. Plus, the Good News is being preached. There's no doubt that Jesus understood the need to show who he was before telling anyone who he was. I try to follow that same principle. However, John had some doubts. Can you blame him? At about age 30, he is thrown into prison. It isn't supposed to work out like this. We would have doubts too; in fact, we often struggle when difficult things happen. John fulfilled his heavenly purpose as verses 9 & 10 indicate. I would also note, for your interest, that Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum are no longer towns but just places visited because of the ancient ruins. I visited Capernaum, the city of Jesus. There's a partial structure for the synagogue and there are the remains of what is considered Peter's home. Jesus denounced these towns and they no longer exist. As I am writing these notes, I feel a bit weary. I guess life has been somewhat busier and the rhythm of life has been thrown off with a preemie granddaughter and Hannah's hospitalization. But God has shown his faithfulness and things are going very well. However, the promise of verses 28-30 has come into play then and now. Isn't it fantastic that Jesus gives us such an open and gracious invitation to "come to him?" It has to be one of the most comforting paragraphs in the Bible. Jesus offers rest! He offers to carry our burdens as we are yoked to him. If you are like me, you have appreciated this invitation and have experienced a rest that only Jesus can give. What burden are you carrying; how is your soul weary? Jesus has open arms for you and will carry your burden for you!

DAY 12 – Matthew 12

It is always exciting to discover something new in God's Word. One of the primary prophecies about the Messiah is found in Isaiah 42. Preparing for the class I teach on the Holy Spirit, I came upon these words, "I will put my Spirit on him..." (Isaiah 42:1) which is included in verses 18 through 21 in our reading today. Don't you just love the words, "A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not stuff out." This is a message about the character of the Messiah and would fit Jesus perfectly. Chapter 12 presents three episodes of the Pharisees confronting the Lord. It is one topic after another with Sabbath laws, casting out demons by the power of the devil, and testing Jesus by asking for a miraculous sign. Each of these deceptive questions follows with a response from Jesus. The Lord is not intimidated by their confrontation. He tells them that their understanding of the Sabbath is twisted. He counters their thoughts about casting out demons as the actual sign of God's Kingdom: "If I am casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among us." (v28) Finally, Jesus refers to Jonah

and the Queen of Sheba by simply saying someone greater is here. He is obviously referring to himself. His warning for this generation pertains to how clear it is that He is the Messiah and they have rejected the Spirit of the Messiah and now things will get far worse. Seven evil spirits will move in and take over so that the situation is worse. The summary would be that the Messiah came in victory over demonic powers, but instead of repenting, the nation as a whole rejected the Messiah. This is still the stance of most Jews in the world. Does any of this teaching apply to you? How so?

DAY 13 – Matthew 13

There's no doubt that this chapter is meant to introduce and highlight the significance of storytelling in the ministry of Jesus. We refer to these as parables. Matthew would use this opportunity to explain the what and why of parables from Jesus. Again, he points to a prophetic word from Isaiah 6:9-10. Right after Isaiah is called by God and sent Isaiah 6, the Lord says people will not listen; they will refuse to see because their hearts are hard. Jesus says he uses parables to separate those who are seeking him versus those who refuse to listen. There are seven parables in this chapter to verify that some people will want to hear more and others will turn their backs on the Lord's message. The parable of the four soils is the first parable in Matthew and Mark and Luke. It is a very profound story that tells us about all the possible responses to the Good News. This is the number one parable we present to inmates in prison as we challenge their response to Jesus. But my favorite parable in this chapter is another new discovery for me; the wheat and the weeds (verses 24-30). I was teaching on the problem of evil and this story helped me reconcile the tension. This is the nature of the Kingdom of God; wheat and weeds, good and evil, God and the enemy. At first, the wheat and weeds look alike but the weed (darnel, a weedy ryegrass with poisonous black seeds) will only be distinguishable as it matures. Pulling the dense weeds would harm the roots of the wheat so this illustrates the need to "let both grow together." The wheat are believers and the weeds are unbelievers, of course. But with it, is the comingling of good and evil. Weeds have great potential to suffocate the wheat which seems unjust with the obvious tension that this portrays. But the weeds, by nature, do not care. However, the justice of God will prevail as Jesus explains the parable in verses 36 to 43. This is very insightful teaching and matches the tension we feel as evil continues in this world. But one day the wheat will be separated from the weeds; one enjoying the eternal kingdom of God, the other separated from God forever. Hang in there!

DAY 14 – Matthew 14

The feeding of the Five Thousand is recorded in every Gospel account. So, most likely you are very familiar with it. Since we are studying Exodus on Sunday mornings, I thought of how God provided Manna (flakey bread with a touch of honey) from heaven in the wilderness every day and doubled the amount before the Sabbath (Exodus 16). You can be confident that God knows your needs and will provide just like his teaching says in Matthew 6:25-34. But for me, the low point of John's beheading and the high point of Peter walking on the water gets my attention. The first story reveals to me that God ordains our days on earth. John's death seems so untimely to me. He had so much more to offer. But I am finite and God is infinite; he is orchestrating all of creation with his divine purpose in mind. John had fulfilled his purpose. This actually helps me rest in God's plan. He has graciously given me (& you) these many years and whatever remains is in his hands. This inspires me to continue serving him with all my heart. This thought leads to the importance of keeping my eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 3:1; 12:2). Peter

stepped out of the boat with faith and his eyes fixed on Jesus. He was walking on water! “But when he saw the strong wind and waves...” (V30) That means he took his eyes off of Jesus and began to sink, right! Peter is such a fascinating disciple. I think he will be very popular in heaven. His personality is more than intriguing. I think we would summarize it as “bold and impulsive.” When we read the next chapter in Matthew (16), we will again be impressed with Peter as he professes that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter has many highs and lows, but his love for Christ is unaltered. I encourage you to pay attention to Peter because he is a stand-out for the cause of Christ and the kind of person Jesus can use in an audacious way. How has your heart been moved by the message of chapter 14?

DAY 15 – Matthew 15

There are three unrelated stories in this chapter with each having a message worth contemplating. The primary event for me is Jesus confronting the Religious Leaders who arrive from Jerusalem. You get a glimpse of how the Pharisees operate with their first question related to their religious system of hand washing. This seems like a minor concern but not to these leaders who were determined to police the traditions of the law. The ritual of handwashing was a manmade rule added to the hundreds of stipulations that must be followed or one was then deemed disobedient to the Torah. Essentially, what people did on the outside became more important than the inside. This confrontation was somewhat minor compared to what we will read in Matthew 23. But the word hypocrite is used and as I mentioned previously; it refers to “playacting.” Simply put, doing something on the outside that isn’t truly motivated by godliness on the inside. Matthew includes a very strong prophecy from Isaiah on the subject. “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (V8) (from Isaiah 29:13) This principle even confused the disciples so Peter asks the Lord to explain the teaching. He doesn’t exactly address handwashing but rather an overarching understanding that what you take in by the mouth (food; all kinds of dietary laws for Jews) isn’t what defiles you. What really matters is what comes out of your mouth which is a reflection of your heart. Jesus was elevating the importance of inner purity compared to outward practices to be seen by people who are watching. Too often, Jesus suggests that religion becomes a show that is not connected to a heart of genuine faith. Religion continues to emphasize one’s outward practice, when Jesus cares more about transformation from the inside and then out; not the other way around. I am often convicted concerning the words of Isaiah 29:13. Do my actions and my worship flow from a heart that truly loves God and wants him to be glorified through me? This question is my moment of reflection today.

WEEK 4

Some of the most profound and practical teaching is found in these next five chapters of Matthew. They have been the focus of many sermons in my life over the last 25 years. I am delighted to revisit the Lord's teaching about life and relationships. The topics will be the Lord's identity, discipleship, conflict resolution, marriage, unforgiveness, and more on the Kingdom of God.

DAY 16 – Matthew 16

How often has God provided for me and my family and yet I so easily forget? The first story about yeast and bread triggers a concern about not having bread from the disciples (verses 7-12). I have to admit that I can be so forgetful regarding the faithfulness of God and his solid promises to take care of me and my loved ones that I can be like the disciples with human worry. It is a bit humorous to me that Jesus isn't even talking about real bread but rather the deceptive influence of the religious leaders. However, that message pales in comparison to the next one when Peter professes that Jesus is the Son of the Living God (v16). Jesus gathers his small group together for an interactive study of his identity. He could have told them straight out who he was/is. But the approach of Jesus is a great example of helping people discover things through questions. He begins with a general question and then gets more personal, right?! What takes place in this episode is so profound. The long-awaited Messiah is with us. The disciples might have thought, "This is too good to be true!" But what happens next in the chapter is also surprising to me; from Peter sharing a revelation that is God-breathed to being an instrument of Satan in verses 22 & 23. I am sure that brought Peter back down to reality. He did struggle with pride and yet by the time he writes 1 & 2 Peter, he is a very humble man, the kind of man God can use. The statement from Jesus about Peter being the rock has also taken on a life of its own. The succession of Peter is something the Catholics embraced as representative of one person whom they call the Pope which was adopted in the 9th century and refers to "father." You might get the impression that Peter is the only one who will have the authority to forbid and permit as is announced in verse 19. But all the disciples are included in the same way in Matthew 18:18. The passing on of responsibility and authority would begin with the disciples and then be shared with the Body of Christ. The Lord has entrusted us with his Kingdom! How has this chapter spoken to you? How has the announcement of Jesus as the Messiah inspired you?

Day 17 – Matthew 17

Jesus addresses himself as the Son of Man three different times in this chapter. I mentioned that previously but it continues to intrigue me. The commentary simply says that this was the title Jesus used for himself, but why? I told you that Daniel refers to the son of man in 7:13-14. Because of Daniel's prophecy, the name, Son of Man, seems much more significant than Jesus only identifying himself with humanity. Even though my first thought is the amazing truth that Jesus was/is fully human, I also believe Jesus is very aware of the divine connection of the title as he uses these words in Matthew 24: "And they (people of the earth) will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." (24:30) These words are almost identical to what Daniel wrote. At one point in my Christian journey, I felt that the name, son of man, was too small. I wanted Jesus to say it stronger but I was

wrong. Jesus used parables to find out who were the true seekers of truth. So too, this title could cause someone to pursue the truth about Jesus or not. The Lord has a way of leaving some mystery that will only be understood by true seekers. The primary event for me is called the transfiguration in verses 1 to 9. Jesus tells the disciples not to share this experience with anyone right now. I have always thought that was because it would shorten his time on earth with the religious leaders hunting him down sooner because he was telling people he was the Messiah. The transfiguration clearly identified Jesus as such. Peter elevated this experience by including it in 2 Peter 1:16-18. I think you should verify the testimony of Peter by reading those words. I am drawn to this episode because the glory of Christ is unveiled. I want people to realize that Jesus is the Son of Man full of glory and the centerpiece of history. This event reveals that eternal truth. Imagine yourself with Peter, James, and John on this mountain. What would you do? How might an experience like that inspire you to want more of Christ?

DAY 18 – Matthew 18

If you are like me, the first thing you notice is “cutting off your hand.” Jesus has a way of getting our attention. No one thinks Jesus is speaking literally, thank goodness. He is addressing temptation. We are all tempted but can too easily give in. To raise the stakes, Jesus gives them a comparison of the smoldering flames of rubbish that was constantly burning in the Valley of Gehenna near Jerusalem. It became a metaphor for the fire of hell. (Verses 7-9) This challenges us to utilize real determination in resisting sin because sin is the product of hell. Regarding sin, Jesus reminds us about our interconnection with each other and our desire to help each other remain strong and follow the path of righteousness as we honor our Lord Jesus. Verses 15-17 have implications for our Christian relationships as well as the church. I have taught on these numerous times and I would summarize them with an interpretation like this: “Lovingly confront with a motivation for the person’s good, eager to forgive... ultimately letting go.” I have seen Christians using these principles in destructive ways because it wasn’t implemented in love and wasn’t about serving someone who needs help. The topic in this chapter addresses sin but it also highlights the importance of forgiveness, right? The parable on the unforgiving debtor has to be one of the most convicting stories Jesus gave. What do you think? Evaluate how much you have been forgiven and then examine yourself on how freely you have forgiven others. First, let me say, that forgiveness is not “sweeping something hurtful under the rug.” The whole idea is honesty, love, and wanting what is best for each other in the Body of Christ. But the foundation of our faith is based on grace and mercy. We have received abundant grace and mercy which is meant to spill out from our lives. That makes us want to forgive because we have been forgiven so freely. How do you respond to these profound truths and principles of living the Christian life in the context of God’s Kingdom?

DAY 19 – Matthew 19

In this chapter, Jesus honors marriage, which he elevates with standards of faithfulness, commitment, and exclusivity. Marriage between a man and a woman is how God designed it to be from the beginning. However, he is also realistic in identifying the possibility of hard-heartedness which can impact the original plan that God had in mind for marriage. Several years ago, I served single adults in ministry as a pastor and often referred to verse 12, “and some choose not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.” It is a gift to remain single for the sake of Christ which often allows for greater potential for ministry. I enjoyed serving single adults; many of them were so dedicated to being used by God. The

section about a rich man raises some questions for me. It appears that he might gain right standing with the Lord by the proficiency of his obedience. "I've obeyed all these commandments..." (V20) But he still isn't sure of himself so he asks Jesus, "What else must I do?" So, the Lord uses the word "perfect" on purpose. In other words, you must obey the commands "perfectly" to be sure you get in. In some ways, the rich man thought he had. Jesus knows his thought process already and cuts to the chase. "Sell all you have and follow me." Following Jesus by faith is the way to eternal life, right? Jesus revealed that the man had not in fact kept all the commands because it actually fell short of the first command, "Have no other gods before me." His possessions—his wealth and security—had become his god. When the Lord explains this to his disciples, he is emphasizing the miracle of salvation which only God can do, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible." (V26) The overwhelming stance on going to heaven in our world is about being good enough. That was the posture of the rich man. But Romans 3 clearly tells us no one is good; in fact, Jesus says that in this very chapter (V17 – there is only One who is good). Without the sacrifice of Jesus and the grace offered, we would be hopeless. The beauty of the Gospel is found in "gift form" and received by faith and faith alone. Why are we so prone to try to earn our way to heaven? How are you responding to the words of Jesus as we listen to his teaching day after day through Matthew?

DAY 20 – Matthew 20

Verse 17 says "As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem..." He would never return to Galilee again until after he had been raised. These are some of his last days before the crucifixion. Next week our first reading will be the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem which we know as Palm Sunday. Jesus tells the disciples plainly that he must suffer and die for the third time. Plus, he would be raised to life on the third day. But you know that his disciples did not get what he was saying because what happens from here on out is surprising to them. I am intrigued by the main parable of this chapter about equal reward for the work performed by the vineyard workers (Verses 1 to 16). The frustration of the original workers who worked 12 hours compared to 1 hour is understandable to me. I have sometimes thought about this story as an illustration of salvation with the gracious gift being given to the person who knows Christ from childhood to the person who professes Christ on their deathbed. But I am persuaded to think of it differently with the message being more about comparison. I think we are often inclined to compare ourselves with other believers. The person who works harder and longer "deserves" more. But isn't it a privilege to serve the landowner (God) longer?! Isn't it marvelous that God is gracious to all who serve him? "Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?" (V15) Serving the Lord is not about earning but about gratitude. Do you agree? Why or why not? Again, the least may end up being the greatest in eternity. Let all of us remain humble and full of gratitude for the joy of knowing Christ and serving him! This posture is clearly highlighted in the request from the mother of James and John in verse 20. Matthew put this encounter right alongside the parable of the vineyard workers on purpose because he says the same thing twice in verse 16 & verse 27. In other words, the one who serves is the greatest in the kingdom. Is there any question about the emphasis on serving seen in Jesus? How does his example direct you concerning the importance of serving others?

WEEK 5

We have arrived at the final week of Jesus prior to his resurrection. The Gospel writers emphasize these 7 days more than any other part of the life of Jesus on earth. So, we will too. For the next three weeks leading up to Easter, we will go slower and deeper with several of these chapters lasting more than one day. We will affirm the truth that “less is more.” I encourage you to place yourself in these final scenes of Jesus before he rises from the dead.

DAY 21 – Matthew 21:1-17

These verses highlight two very significant events worth contemplating. This is the Sunday of Easter week in the Bible which we refer to as Palm Sunday. The Old Testament prophecy from Zechariah (9:9) was clearly understood as a messianic prediction and Jesus was intentional to fulfill it. I had the opportunity to walk the path (road) from the Mount of Olives to the valley below. It was very steep and passed by the Garden of Gethsemane and then back up an incline to the wall surrounding Jerusalem. Verse 10 is quite telling as many of the people were wondering “Who is this?” they asked. The crowd’s understanding of Jesus might have been similar to how many people think of Jesus today. “It is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (V11) and nothing more. It was not a compliment to connect Jesus to Nazareth; a fairly insignificant village north of Samaria. The importance of this parade, in my thinking, is the connection to Christ’s identity as the Messiah. But the people were shouting for reasons of excitement and amazing miracles along with the thrill of a crowd. In some ways, the week begins on a high note but just a few hours later reality is blatantly displayed around the temple with such dishonoring behaviors and a marketplace mentality. Obviously, Jesus’ actions show how contrary the religious environment was to God’s character and standards. Common people with minimal financial resources had to purchase animals for sacrifice. It was a big money maker. Jesus says it all, “The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a house of prayer,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.” (V13) They were robbing people right in front of the Temple. Then, the scene closes with children praising Jesus. There is something about a child’s faith that Jesus elevates because the innocence of a child reflects purity compared to the corruption of the religious leaders. Jesus always had a fondness for children but you never notice that in the religious system of that day. Kids are very important to the Lord. Again, I am reminded of the principle, that you honor me with your lips but your hearts are far from me, as a reflection of the Lord’s righteous anger in the temple courts. How can you make sure your inside and outside are both honoring the Lord at the same time?

DAY 22 – Matthew 21:18-46

Verse 18 tells us that this is the next morning so we are reading about what happened on Monday. Jesus is full of courage as he faces the leading priests and elders. In our reading for today, Matthew again draws us into the Old Testament by referring to Psalm 118:22-23 in verse 42. Jesus is telling the religious leaders and all those listening that he is the “cornerstone.” Some translations used the word, “capstone.” The capstone would be the last stone placed on the arch of the building or the cornerstone would be the first stone laid which made everything align to it. You see how either one of these would fit for the identity of Jesus, the Son of the Living God. Since Jesus uses the word stone in verse 44, I think tripping

over the cornerstone makes the most sense. Jesus would be a source of stumbling as some stumble over that stone. There were so many things about Jesus that confused and even offended the Jewish leaders. Jesus was from Nazareth, a very unprestigious place. His primary ministry was in Galilee which was thought of as a “backwoods” region. Jesus had a connection with John the Baptist who was not esteemed by the religious elite. He hung out with some sketchy characters like a tax collector, a zealot, and a bunch of fishermen. His teaching was unique and the stories he shared were often misunderstood. He had nothing to do with the institutional religion of his people. These aspects of his life and other concerns made him a stumbling stone for many. They did not affirm him in any way even though he often won the argument, exorcised demons, healed many wondrously, pointed to the Old Testament prophecies, and impacted many lives. Jesus was vindicated as he willingly suffered death only to conquer the grave through his resurrection. Jesus will always be a stumbling stone for some people as many still misunderstand his true identity. Who is Jesus to you? What stands out to you from verses 18 to 46? Why?

DAY 23 – Matthew 22:1-22

I am trying to get a sense of the sequence of events during this final week of Jesus. Yesterday we ended with the Pharisees wanting to arrest him. But today we read in verse 15, “Then the Pharisees met together to plot how to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested.” I perceive that the Pharisees met and then the next day they sent a group to ambush him with questions that he would answer in a way that would break the law. The in-between parable about a wedding feast could have been taught on Monday or Tuesday of that week. I actually think the parable is very illuminating but first the wisdom of Jesus concerning taxes. Roman taxation was a controversial issue in first-century Palestine. Most everyone resented Roman rule. However, supporters of Herod were in cahoots with the Roman authorities. But the issue of Jesus united them in this case so they asked Jesus this question: “Is it right to pay taxes to Ceasar or not?” What is the right answer for everyone who was asking him? “No!” But no would mean the Romans could possibly arrest him. The Jewish leaders didn’t care who arrested Jesus but only that he be taken care of. They gave Jesus a question with a no-win answer. But our Lord amazes everyone and still amazes us with his answer. Jesus’ answer has governed my approach to the subject of government. Jesus outwitted his opponents. Loyalty to God does not necessarily entail disloyalty to the governing authorities. Jesus was acknowledging two dominions. Ceasar’s and God’s, the latter having priority. Isn’t that the way you understand earthly authority compared to heavenly authority? Also, the parable, in verses 1-14, reminds me that the invitation to the Kingdom of Heaven is for all and oftentimes the less likely are the ones accepting the invitation. However, without the clothing of Christ, no guest will be admitted. Is that how you understand this story from Jesus? Does your preoccupation from time to time with life get in the way of your connection to Jesus? How so?

DAY 24 – Matthew 22:23-46

This is a more concise reading but worth contemplating in so many ways. The center paragraph is central to our relationship with God. Many churches have this simple theme: “Love God, Love Others.” (Verses 37-39) I could close my notes right here and encourage you to “chew” on these verses only. Did you know that the word meditate refers to chewing? I was taught to chew my food for 20 bites. That meant I could get all the nutrition from the food and it would also slow me down. I would suggest that is good

advice for reading God's Word. Add to that the Jewish tradition of reciting the Shema every morning; "Hear (Shema), O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) This is the core statement in God's covenant with Israel and surely applies to our relationship with God today. Along with this high point in our reading are two interesting and significant truths from Jesus. He clearly teaches that our eternal home in heaven will be much higher than the importance of marriage. (V30) This verse, along with others, gives me a picture of heaven that far exceeds the earthly covenant of marriage. But also, Jesus likens our immediate entry into heaven to the idea of an angel. The Scripture assures us we will receive a heavenly body when Christ returns but what about before the end of the age? I have thought of heaven, as it is right now for believers, being a spiritual fellowship of perfection and unending joy. Obviously, that is a big subject; so, I will let you "chew" on that. Finally, Jesus is not holding back any longer. He is proving that he is the Messiah as his time is short with the cross just a couple of days away. The Old Testament reference is from Psalm 110:1, which the Jewish leaders would have already thought of as messianic. Matthew is such a marvelous author to thoroughly emphasize that Jesus fulfills the prophecies for the Messiah so completely. How has God directed your thoughts from these verses?

DAY 25 – Matthew 23

This chapter is upsetting to me because some of the most religious people in Israel were doing it all for show. They looked the part on the outside but on the inside they were empty. Isaiah 29:13 clearly expresses how they operated religiously and how the Lord felt about it. The religious leaders were in charge of dictating religious practice which was leading the whole flock astray. There were 613 legal prohibitions and commands that laid a heavy weight on the people (V4). So much of what they did was meant to draw attention to themselves, with long tassels, wide prayer boxes, etc. Seats of honor upfront and titles were all so important to them. Growing up in a traditional church, the Pastor wore a robe and he was the only one who could bless communion which is just one example of how easily we can fall into religious structures that are not taught in the Bible and this section confronts these practices as wrong. Verse 11 clarifies the timeless principle that Jesus taught, "The greatest among you must be a servant." The repeated phrase "woe to you" is connected to "hypocrite" which means "playacting." Jesus does not hold back his rebuke. Again, he is close to the end with his sacrificial death, and more just around the corner. And the religious leaders will be the ones to condemn Jesus because of their hard-hearted religiosity. Verses 25 to 28 are a warning to us all. The authenticity of our faith is based on internal humility and sincerity. If that isn't true, then grace is given in vain and our faith is shallow at best. When we get overly concerned about what people think and how they react to us, we most likely care about the outside more than the inside which was one of Jesus' strongest warnings. "Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness." (V28) I would suggest this is a strong summary of the Lord's rebuke. Verse 37 is important to notice. Despite the severe judgment Jesus has just leveled against Israel's religious leaders and those who follow them, he truly longed for them to repent and receive God's grace. I'm sure this was a heavier chapter for you but what aspect of the Lord's warnings gets your attention? How might you be susceptible to religiosity?

WEEK 6

We are less than two weeks away from Easter! Matthew 24 & 25 have some of the most important teachings from Jesus with his own prophetic record about his return in triumph which we call the Second Coming. Also, three parables that have so much to say to us about living well, being ready, and identifying what Jesus cares about most. Plus, we will read about Jesus being anointed with oil which is quite a story full of meaning, followed by the upper room and the Last Supper. You can see how things are intensifying.

DAY 26 – Matthew 24

The topic of Christ's second coming is very interesting and popular. The Bible also emphasizes it through many of the prophets with Daniel being the most pronounced in the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul has much to say as well, with 1 & 2 Thessalonians being quite thorough. Revelation has a flavor all of its own from John's revelation on the Island of Patmos. But none is clearer than the very words of Jesus. Whenever I speak on the subject, I am most drawn to what Jesus says in this chapter. Since I have given a 4-part sermon series on this one chapter, I could go on and on. Let me highlight a few high points of this chapter. Jesus tells us everyone will have an opportunity to hear the Good News and then he will return (24:14). The Antichrist will subtly manipulate his way into prominence so that he gains a tremendous following and rules from the temple. (24:15 & Daniel 9:27, 12:11) But the one reference that is repeated by many of the authors of the Bible is verse 29 which has been titled the Day of the Lord as Isaiah and Joel, for example, name it. This is often described as the most "dreadful" day in all of history, "Who can endure it?" No one is the answer; so, thank the Lord, that every indicator tells us that believers will be removed before that day (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17). Jesus makes it clear that everyone will see his appearance in verse 30 as the angels of the Lord gather those who have believed, rescuing them from God's wrath. Revelation 11:18 says, "The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for destroying those who destroy the earth." (NIV) The heartbeat of Christ's message in this chapter could be summarized as, "Are you ready; are you prepared?" As I said, there could be so much more to write about the strong words of Jesus telling us about his eventual return, but the best way to prepare for his second coming is obedience, service, and mission. How are those priorities in your life?

DAY 27 – Matthew 25:1-30

I think I have thought about the Parable of the Talents as much as any other parable. It is fascinating and reassuring that the two-talent servant gets the same accommodation as the five-talent person. The importance of being the Lord's steward of the gifts he so generously gives us is especially strong and has always been a motivational thought in my mind. I am grateful for the challenge this parable brings but also the certainty of God's welcome in eternity with such an affirming announcement, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" But the first parable about the ten virgins has a message that we do well to remember. The failure of the five virgins can be confusing if you only think about oil and what that might mean. Jesus clarifies what is essentially meant by not having oil in verse 12, "But he (most likely referring to the bridegroom) replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'" The story suggests that these virgins

were just hoping to be included but they didn't really know the bridegroom. This is the message of the New Testament; the essence of salvation is knowing the Savior as well as him knowing you, of course. John 17:3 says, "Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent." Eternal life means entering into a personal relationship with God through His Son. Many people profess that they believe in God and even in Jesus for what he did. But the crux of salvation is receiving him into your life. I know you know that but this stipulation can help you as you share with family, friends, and coworkers what it means to have saving faith; RECEIVING JESUS into your heart. Do you remember the people who came to Jesus and told him about all the things they had done for him in Matthew 7:22 and what is Jesus' response? "I never knew you..." (7:23) "Yet to all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..." What does knowing Jesus mean to you?

DAY 28 – Matthew 25:31-46

One of the main questions that is asked about this parable has to do with the things that are necessary for the righteous to do. The tension for the believer is the emphasis on works as we are called to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit the prisoner, etc. But the strongest verse (34) and the most compelling message from Jesus is the invitation to inherit the kingdom prepared for all those blessed by the Father. No one would suggest that these deeds listed are required to get into heaven. The Bible is very clear that salvation is by grace through faith; nothing added is necessary. To me, the nature of these deeds requires mercy and compassion. Jesus clearly demonstrated compassion as he walked the earth. The essence of knowing Christ is the promise that he lives in us through the Holy Spirit. Then, his compassion resides in our hearts as believers. It only makes sense that we would be motivated to do what he did while he was among us in a human body. To lack compassion is to quench the influence of Christ in your heart. This parable reminds us of what living for Christ might look like. These deeds are generated by the Spirit and reflect Christ to the world. The Lord desires for us to live a fruitful life and if he is really in charge of your life and mine, these acts of kindness will flow from us. Otherwise, the Apostle Paul says that we would be receiving grace in vain. "As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it (Literally, receive God's grace in vain)." (2 Corinthians 6:1) The Lord wants all people to repent; he wants all his redeemed children to live spiritually fruitful lives; he wants us to be formed into the image of His Son, Jesus. He doesn't just want us to be saved but to live outward a life that brings glory to Him. Does this make sense? How does this parable challenge you?

DAY 29 – Matthew 26:1-16

Let's slow our pace down even more with the intense events of Jesus' life often called the passion of Christ. This is our shortest reading yet. However, I have always appreciated the message given through the woman who anoints Jesus. Every Gospel author includes a story of anointing but Luke places it in the context of Jesus' ministry (Luke 7:36-50), while the others point to a strong connection with Jesus' fast approaching death. Matthew and Mark's accounts are almost identical but John has many more specifics like Mary is the woman, Judas is the one criticizing, and the timing is before Sunday and the triumphal entry in the Gospel of John. I am inclined to think of these as two different events but the similarities are very strong because both use expensive oil and connect the anointing to preparation for his upcoming

death. However, smarter theologians than I present these different accounts as one in the same event. Nonetheless, this event reflects generosity, sacrifice, devotion, and spiritual meaning as Jesus tells those present that this is preparation for his burial. This woman's actions had to uplift the burden that Jesus was carrying. Before this event, he tells his disciples that he will soon be handed over to be crucified (V2). After this event, Judas runs to the leading priests (V14) to make a deal with them to betray Jesus. The Gospel of John indicates that Judas was a greedy man so his vulnerability to make money and betray Jesus is not totally surprising. But in light of all that is going on, the woman's (probably Mary, John 12:1-8) beautiful gesture of love had to touch the heart of our Savior. How do her actions speak to you? What keeps you from expressing more fully your love and devotion to Christ? Fear of what people might think? Concern for the cost? A lack of that kind of love for Jesus? Let us each take time to contemplate the meaning of this event for our own response to our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

DAY 30 – Matthew 26:17-35

Two very significant events take place with Jesus and his disciples on Thursday night of Holy Week. The first is the Last Supper in the upper room and the next is Jesus praying in the Garden. They are both so important that I have split them up. Today we read of Jesus sharing the Passover with his disciples and then the denial of Peter that follows. The Passover meal is especially compelling to me as I am preparing a sermon on the first Passover from Exodus 12 for this coming Sunday. It is also such an important part of the story as we continue to this day with sharing in the meal as believers. There is great spiritual meaning in the meal but there is also the affirmation of friendship and mutual trust. At the same time, the betrayer remains at the table even after being subtly identified. The drama intensifies as Jesus says some expected words, "This is my body; this is my blood." These words are so strong that interpretation has been varied with some church leaders believing that the elements actually turned into body/flesh & blood, while other religious leaders believe that the "real presence" is contained "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. But our tradition teaches that Jesus was directing us to remember him as the Lord of our lives as we partake in these symbolic elements. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this in his teaching with these words, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:24) The bread and wine were the center piece of the meal with unleavened bread pointing back to the Passover (Exodus 12:18) which they could make in haste not having to wait for it to rise. There are traditionally 4 cups of wine corresponding to the fourfold promise of Exodus 6:6-7, "I will free you from your oppression and will rescue you from your slavery in Egypt. I will redeem you with a powerful arm and great acts of judgment. I will claim you as my people, and I will be your God." This means there are two cups symbolizing deliverance, one cup for redemption, and one for fellowship with God. The third cup is the cup that Jesus offered his disciples because his death was payment for their redemption. The spiritual significance of this meal lives on in our lives and it is tied to God's deliverance in Egypt as you will see this Sunday. Why is the meal special for you?

WEEK 7

The last week in Matthew and our final week before Easter has arrived. This has to be the best week of the year for believers. However, it is not an easy week as you will read. Most of us are fairly familiar with these events but I am praying that we will experience the Lord in new ways and the Spirit will draw us close. I also hope that you will be able to carve out more uninterrupted time for our pursuit of Jesus. I know that is a tall order for some of you because it is also spring break. But I am praying for you!

DAY 31 – Matthew 26:36-56

Several years ago, Decision Magazine contacted me to write an article on friendship and I wrote on how not to be a friend from Matthew 26. Jesus bares his soul to his friends and they are rather disengaged, to say the least. I entitled the article, "Garden Friends." Jesus wanted his closest friends with him in his darkest hour. Even Jesus needed friends. I also had the privilege to visit the Garden of Gethsemane during my 10-day trip to the Holy Land in 2015. It still seems like an ideal place to pray and huddle together with those closest to you. But the intensity of Jesus' emotions and his prayers make the quiet surroundings far from tranquil. Jesus knew what kind of suffering he would endure but also the meaning of the "cup" which meant to carry the punishment for sin on his shoulders. He did not deserve it but it was the only way to save the world. This shows me that Jesus can personally identify with my strong, heavy emotions because he dealt with his in the garden. The disappointment of his friends was coupled with the betrayal of Judas. I get the impression that the Lord was not about to acknowledge the gesture of a kiss since it was completely insincere. He quickly responds with, "Go ahead and do what you have come for." (V50) Jesus can see my insincerity a mile away. I have made it my aim to try to never pretend with the Lord. So, the episode begins with the lack of connection with his friends and closes with them displaying aggression which is also disappointing to Jesus. All this closes with these words, "At that point, all the disciples deserted him and fled." (V56) Jesus also shares these words, with the assurance that all of this had to be done to fulfill the Scriptures (also from V56). But the precise Old Testament Scripture he is referring to has been debated but my guess is Isaiah 53. So many of the specifics are predicted by Isaiah in chapter 53. If you have the time, please read this familiar chapter. It is at the heart of Christ's predicted passion. How would you have wanted to be a better friend to Jesus on the night of his betrayal?

DAY 32 – Matthew 26:57-75

"The leading priests and the high council were trying to find witnesses who would lie about Jesus, so they could put him to death." (V59) When the NLT uses the word "high council," it was referring to the Sanhedrin which in the Greek language means council. This high council was made up of Jewish aristocrats in Jerusalem who wielded considerable power in governing the Jewish people. They were not just religious leaders but also made judicial decisions regarding crimes and even arrests. Though the Sanhedrin could not of its own accord put tried criminals to death, apparently, it could do so with the support of the Roman officials. Essentially, Jesus had a Jewish trial and a Roman trial. The trial by the Sanhedrin was done at night because they were afraid of a riot. In Matthew, none of the witnesses ended up giving concrete evidence that could produce a death sentence. So, they took things into their own hands after Jesus admitted that he is the One who will one day be seated at the right hand of God.

(V64) They must have truly hated Jesus as they punched him and slapped him (VV67-68). You know the denial of Peter very well. His denial is accentuated by his previous boasting of standing up for Jesus even if it meant death. His words were not backed by action and his failure would stick with him until the Lord restored him according to John 21. In the moment, he did not realize that he was doing just what Jesus said he would do. But when the rooster crows, it struck him like a ton of bricks. His betrayal could have ended like Judas, but he repented with godly sorrow and Judas responded with worldly sorrow. To see the difference, please read 2 Corinthians 7:8-10. What impresses you about Jesus before the Sanhedrin? How can you relate to Peter?

DAY 33 – Matthew 27:1-26

This is a tough read even though we know it well. Judas takes his life and the people shout, “Crucify him!” It is just like Matthew to insert the Old Testament prophecy about 30 pieces of silver and the potter’s field as both Jeremiah and Zechariah express words and meaning that match what takes place with Judas, especially Zechariah 11:12-13. Matthew is the champion for connecting Old Testament prophecy to the life of Jesus. The number of references that Matthew gives exceeds any other author. My first and primary focus today is on Judas. He is an example of feeling guilty but not repenting. The word for “remorse” in verse 3 suggests as such. He even says to the religious leaders, “I have sinned.” But that fell on deaf ears so he was stuck in his sin. Yesterday, I had you read about worldly repentance and godly repentance. Judas was desperate for his sin to go away but not for God to cleanse his heart. He would take his life as a guilt-stricken man instead of turning to God for mercy and cleansing. (1 John 1:9) In Isaiah 53 we read, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.” (V7) I have a red-letter edition and the only words spoken by Jesus as he is before Pilate are verse 11, “You have said it.” He affirms that he is the Messiah but he does not defend himself or give a response to the governor. This surprised Pilate but we know that it honored the words from Isaiah. Something else is interesting to me. Pilate’s wife warns him. It is ironic that a pagan, like Pilate’s wife, recognizes that Jesus is innocent while the Jewish crowd does not. And listen to these words that seemed to come true throughout history, “We will take responsibility for his death—we and our children.” (V25) This surely does seem that the Jews have lived with this curse in so many ways. The reality of Jewish persecution is undeniable. How are you responding to this aspect of Jesus on trial?

DAY 34 – Matthew 27:27-44

The NLT expresses the abuse of the Roman soldiers like this, “When they were finally tired of mocking him...” (V31) This may not be the literal translation but it is telling because our Lord received so much abuse. Most likely he was too weak to carry his own cross so a fellow named Simon from Cyrene was chosen to carry it for him. It probably was another form of mockery. Some have wondered if the reference to Simeon the Niger in Acts 13:1 is the same man in our passage today. Niger is the Latin word for black; Cyrene was a city in north Africa. This would mean that Simon became a follower of Christ which is a cool possibility. Plus, it seems that both Simeon and Lucius in Acts 13:1 are both from Cyrene, thus, the connection. The short sentence that simply says he was crucified sure doesn’t match the atrocity of it. This brutal form of execution was instituted by the Romans who portrayed a disregard for the value of a human being. It was thought of as the worst form of execution due to the excruciating pain and public shame. Hanging suspended by one’s arms eventually caused great difficulty in breathing.

The victim had to push up with his feet to take the weight off of his arms to catch a breath and then slump down again. It is hard to imagine and difficult to think about what Jesus went through. It upsets my stomach and saddens me greatly. It is also unthinkable to me that while a person is dying and in enormous pain people would walk by and ridicule Jesus. Tomorrow we will read about his hours on the cross but today we take in the fact that this was the plan of God which reveals to us the weight and filth of sin and what was necessary to pay for its penalty. I have studied Isaiah 53 this week also and suggest to you that this prophecy tells us about the Messiah's suffering and death as precisely as if he had written while witnessing Jesus' betrayal, beatings, and execution on the cross. But Isaiah wrote his words 700 years before Christ which is quite inspiring to me. How does this crucial reality of what Jesus went through affect you? How might you pray to the Lord in light of what you have read?

DAY 35 – Matthew 27:45-66

It is interesting to me that Matthew only includes one sentence from the cross but the other authors add several more with a total of seven different "words" from the cross. But this one has significant meaning as it is from Psalm 22 which is the most illuminating Psalm about the suffering of Christ that David wrote. Also, we can understand the Lord's words describing separation from the Father. It takes me back to the Garden when Jesus asked for the cup to be removed. That is the cup of God's wrath as Jesus carried the sins of the world. This would cause separation, for sure. Psalm 22 also says this, "My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me. They pierce my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. My enemies stare at me and gloat. They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing." Verses 6-8 and 12-15 in Psalm 22 are also very specific to what Jesus went through for you and me. I know Jesus was fully aware of this prophecy from David and his words from the cross help us understand what was going on as he hung on the cross. 1000 years before Jesus, David gives us these words. Jesus knew that what he said on the cross would live on and help us love and appreciate what he did and how we now have access to the Father because he bore the sins of the world. "My righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous for he will bear all their sins." (Isaiah 53:11) One other aspect I noticed from our reading for today has to do with the guards. Matthew gives us additional information in verses 62-66 that adds to the credibility of the resurrection. Even in tomorrow's reading, the soldiers guarding the tomb would be bribed with a payment to spread a false rumor. Matthew could not have fabricated this information because it could easily be countered by other witnesses to the tomb and the soldiers. How does reading the account of Jesus' death speak to you this time? How would the disciples react as they live out Saturday with Jesus buried in the tomb?

DAY 36 – Matthew 28

He is risen! Happy Easter. You may be reading this before Easter, which is fine. Nonetheless, this is our last reading for Lent 2024. This is the high point of our faith because it assures all those who know Jesus of ultimate victory. "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55) I look forward to celebrating Easter with you and your guests. But I feel a tension in these verses. The certainty of the resurrection compared to the uncertainty of Christ's followers honoring our Lord's command. The last words of Jesus in this Gospel are the mission. But it is not mission impossible, rather mission possible. At no other time in history can we say with confidence that the world is small enough for us to extend the arms of Jesus to every nation; "make disciples of all

nations.” I have studied this commission from Jesus and can tell you there is one main verb, “make disciples.” There are three modifiers that outline how to make disciples: go, baptize, and teach. Scatter the message of Christ throughout the world; baptize people into the faith as they profess Jesus as their Savior; and, teach them the ways of Christ as relayed to us through God’s Word. This is the primary mission and all other aspects of life are meant to be pathways to accomplishing that mission; whether it be family, work, community, school, hobbies, etc. And isn’t it fantastic to know that Jesus promises to be with us every step of the way? “I am with you always...” May the excitement of the Easter Resurrection propel you and me to the mission!