

Background for Week 4

What has happened on the journey so far: Jesus was baptized, driven into the wilderness, and tempted for forty days and forty nights (reminiscent of Israel's exodus). Afterwards, he takes up John the Baptist's baton, starts to proclaim God's word, and selects ordinary people to partner with him in his Father's mission. Following that his ministry of teaching and healing begins. This precedes his well-known Sermon on the Mount, which we just started to study.

The text for this week from Matthew is the last portion of Jesus' message, the closing remarks of his inaugural address if you will where he continues to reinterpret scripture. The Oxford-Annotated Bible breaks it down into subcategories that describe different, but connected themes in each:

- 6:5-15 he finishes his discourse on prayer and teaches us what we call the Lord's Prayer.
- 6:16-18 guidance about fasting.
- 6:19-34 relates to one aspect of stewardship (which according to Clarence Stoughton is "Everything we do after we say we believe."). It gets at the heart of our relationship with possessions, what place they hold in our lives compared to God.
- 7:1-6 Judgment within community.
- 7:7-29 practical advice and warnings for the community.

Text: Matthew 6:5-7:29. (We encourage you to post your answers to these questions on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page and engage in a discussion.)

1. Read 6:5-7:29 in its entirety. Because of the length, it might be helpful as you are reading to write down answers: What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?
2. Next, we'll break it down by verse(s). Read Matthew 6:5-8. The term hypocrite meant something slightly different than how we use it today. It referred to someone who was putting on a show, playacting, a.k.a. a pretender. However, his advice is applicable for both definitions. What do you make of Jesus' cautions and instructions regarding prayer? What do you think he is telling us? When and where do you pray? Are you comfortable offering an off-the cuff prayer out loud within a group setting or in a public place such as a restaurant? If not, why is that?
3. 6:9-15. How does it feel to pray in terms of "our Father," including even people we don't like or who we might consider to be our enemies? Explore the different

- sense you get from each of these three words: debts, trespasses, sins. A seminarian from Liberia once asked me, “why do you need God, your daily needs are met? For us, we *have* to rely on God every day to get our food.” How do you understand the term “daily bread?” How might someone from a different class than you (poor/middle/wealthy) hear or interpret it? Why do we need to forgive? Has there been a time when you were unable to give forgiveness? To receive it? Has someone ever withheld it from you? If so, what did that do to you?
4. 19-34. As we learn here, among other places, God should not be relegated to just the spiritual corner of our health. Rather, the Lord has something to say and is involved in every facet of our lives, including our wealth (possessions and finances).
 - What comforts you in these verses? What challenges you?
 - Vs. 19: What would you say to someone who asked, “doesn’t this verse basically oppose the practices of savings and investments?”
 - Vs. 21: What do you think Jesus means when he says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” How would you explain this to someone new in the faith? To a 5 year old?
 - Vs. 25-34: How does Jesus “don’t worry” counsel sit with you? How might someone who does not have food security hear these words?
 - What point is Jesus ultimately trying to drive home here? What is this particular section finally all about?
 5. 7:1-6. As happens still today, people within the community were treating one another not as God intended, but from a seat of perceived superiority. In the last year, there have certainly been plenty of examples of judgmental attitudes and behaviors. How has it affected you? How has it impacted the community (MLC, the city, state, country, the global church)?
 6. 7-29.
 - Vs. 7- 11: As occurs throughout the whole Sermon on the Mount, the Greek verbs translated as “ask, seek, and knock” are imperatives. So they are more than mere advice, but directives for our relationship with God. And keeping in line with the theme, this about more than obtaining material goods. So imagine you’re sitting in the crowd listening to Jesus. Perhaps you find yourself questioning, how will I/we fulfill all the demands Jesus just placed on me/us? Even as an imperfect human parent looks after her/his child, so much more does the Holy One provide grace through our persistent prayers of asking, seeking, and knocking. How might these verses be misused though, and thus damaging?

- 12-20: For Matthew, the Golden Rule basically sums up all the instructions Jesus just gave and leads into the next portion of the Sermon, where through warnings Jesus presses upon his listeners the importance of his teachings. As Jesus talks about identifying bad and good trees by their fruits, it can be easy to reflexively label individuals and organizations. Lest we fall prey to the judgment he just directed us to avoid, what have your fruits told others about God? What have the fruits of the whole church revealed about God?
- 21-23: In Lutheran theology, we emphasize grace alone. In other words, we do not enter the kingdom of heaven by our works, but only by God's free gift of love and mercy. Verse 21 seems to contradict that. What do you do with it then? What are your initial reactions to verses 22-23? Remember, whenever we read scripture, it's important not to take things out of context, but to read and interpret it in light of God's whole saving narrative.
- 24-27: What implications does this metaphor have for our lives? For human relationships?
- 28-29: Picture yourself for a moment in that crowd. You're sitting at the base of the mountain listening to a different preacher. For many years you had been hearing the same explanation of the holy texts. Now, however, this new guy is taking everything you thought you knew and turning it upside down. Have you ever been astounded by something you learned in your faith journey? If so, what was it? How did you react?

For your prayers:

Slowly meditate/pray the Lord's prayer pausing at the periods and commas: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Next week: Matthew 13:1-58