

## **Thoughts on Matthew**

**2009 December 23<sup>rd</sup> for 2010 January 22<sup>nd</sup>**

To conclude our survey of the entire Bible, we reprise the Gospels which, to Christians, are the most important books of the Bible. The four Gospels are four tellings of the story of Jesus himself and the first of these is Matthew.

We will not refer to our prior pass through here that began in 2004, when we started with John, then did Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Technique, thought, and motivation have all changed in the five years since then. At first I understood but could not elucidate why I was even doing a Bible survey in this form. After a few partial starts at an explanation, I decided to just wait until the end, which is now nearing, to figure out, in retrospect, what I had done.

And, here at the end, we will be looking in depth at the four tellings of the story of Jesus interleaved with the remaining minor prophets of the Old Testament for the last several months.

Matthew tells the story to Jews who have become Christians, that is, those who have declared (“confessed” is the religious term) that they believe Jesus to be the Son of God. Matthew was one of the twelve disciples and so can be considered a primary source. The story begins with the genealogy through Joseph, the husband of Mary, Jesus’ mother. It ends with the resurrection and the Great Commission. Most of the narrative concerns Jesus ministry including his teachings, healings, travels, and interactions with all sorts of people from the most lowly and outcast to the most exalted and powerful.

As I have said many times, I find Jesus to be the most difficult character in the Bible to understand. The rest seem to be human as I am. They all make awful mistakes and pay for them. The whole story of and expectation about Jesus is that normal human sins and errors won’t and don’t happen, that we take Jesus’ word as God’s Word translated into “human.” It is possible to read it any way you want, of course. I won’t purposefully be cynical and interpret Jesus as just a very clever magician or an unusually charismatic leader who just took advantage of his talent to pretend to be God. On the other hand, as he is the “word made flesh,” this time through I need to look for the humanity of Jesus, the “flesh” part, something with which I can identify from, as we say, “his mother’s side” and also, what he is really talking about as he teaches.

## **Matthew 1**

**2009 December 24<sup>th</sup> for 2010 January 25<sup>th</sup>**

The lineage of the Messiah was crucially important to the Jewish converts because their prophesy had been that the Messiah would be a king from the house and line of David. In that culture certain offices, such as the kingship, were inherited and legitimate only through established family lines.

The genealogy given by Matthew begins with Abraham and proceeds through David and the exile to Babylon to “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called

Christ.” In all there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to Jesus. This symmetry would also be important to the convert of Jewish heritage.

The names are:

Patriarchs:

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez (whose mother was Tamar, Judah’s daughter in law who, after her husband’s death, engaged Judah as a prostitute in order to reestablish herself in the family), Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz (whose mother was Rahab), Obed (whose mother was Ruth, the Moabitess), Jesse, and David.

Kings:

David, Solomon (whose mother was Bathsheba, widow of the murdered Uriah), Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, and Jeconiah who, with his brothers, lived at the time of the exile.

After the exile:

Jeconiah, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Akim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob, and Joseph.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ -- which means, ‘God with us.’

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

The story of Jesus' early recognition by world and regional leaders during his infancy is an adventure story guided by several dreams and several events in which Matthew sees fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

First, rulers from the east, following a star that they believed portended a great birth, arrived in Jerusalem and inquired with Herod, the sitting sectarian ruler, about the newborn. This was disturbing news to Herod and everyone in league with him, as he was a usurper and in power only due to his alliance with the Romans. He told the rulers from the east to go find the child and come back with details.

They did find the child. They worshipped and gave the family expensive gifts. God told them in a dream, however, not to go back to Herod, so they left the country a different way.

“When they [the rulers] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” Joseph got up in the middle of the night and took Mary and Jesus and went to Egypt. This fulfilled the prophecy, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Spoken by Moses to Pharaoh, referring to the nation as God’s son in Exodus, and also similarly in Hosea.)

Herod was furious when he realized he had been tricked and sent the army down to kill all of the newborn boys in the Bethlehem area. This fulfilled a prophecy of Jeremiah:

“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”

(The context in Jeremiah is not exceptional; most of the book is this type of material.)

After Herod died, God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream telling him to return to Israel. Joseph was worried about Herod’s son, the new ruler, however, and moved to Nazareth, in the backwater of Galilee.

This refers to another (unreferenced) prophecy, that Jesus would be a Nazarene. I don’t know if this means he would be a Nazarite like John the Baptist and Sampson, if it is a play on words, or means something else. The lack of a reference makes it difficult to know. Maybe it was just a colloquial saying.

Nazareth was “across the tracks” in Israel, so being called a Nazarene would be endearing from friends but a slur from enemies.

Moving ahead several years, we find John the Baptist preaching in the desert. This fulfills Isaiah who said,

“A voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (This is from one of Isaiah’s comforting passages.)

Before radios and motorcades, this is the sort of thing that would be proclaimed when a king and his entourage were approaching and intended to use the road without difficulty.

John was a wild man, wearing camel’s hair clothes and subsisting on grasshoppers. People came from all over Jerusalem the big city, and from all over Judea to hear this preaching.

John was baptizing people as a sign of their repentance from sin and in preparation for the coming wrath of God. When some of the religious leaders showed up for baptism, he was furious and told them to act right first. “And,” he continued, “do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Further, John preached, he was only the warm up act. “But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Burn ‘em!

Jesus himself then arrived, wanting to be baptized but John demurred. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus told him that it was proper “to fulfill all righteousness” that John baptize him, so they proceeded.

When Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

#### **Matthew 4**

**2010 January 4<sup>th</sup> for 28<sup>th</sup>**

The Spirit then took Jesus to the wilderness for a time of extended fasting. After forty days he was hungry and was tempted by the tempter.

“If you are the Son of God tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus answered,

“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

The claim seems to be that God’s word is more important than food.

Placing Jesus at the highest part of the temple in Jerusalem, the tempter said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered,

“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Both quotes of Jesus are from Moses in Deuteronomy. In this one, Moses was referring to the test at Massah, one of the places where the Israelites wandering in the desert grumbled for water, grumbling that angered God.

This presents a problem of faith for me. The scientific method, which is a powerful tool, is all about testing nature to discover truth but God himself cannot be tested. If you think of testing a ruling monarch, like God, it does seem inappropriate and demonstrably God cannot be tested when he doesn’t want to be. We mortals must reserve our testing for the rules of nature which are held consistent by a faithful God.

The tempter has quoted Psalm 91 and although I have heard it preached that he quoted out of context, looking the Psalm up, this does not look, on a superficial reading, any more out of context than some of the other prophesy and scripture fulfillments that the Bible itself claims. Maybe the quote is accurate. Maybe the prohibition against testing God is higher precedence.

Finally, the tempter, now directly called the devil, places Jesus on top of a mountain where he can see the “whole world.”

“All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.”

This, arguably, is the crux of history. The whole error that the devil made in the first place, the alleged cause of all imperfection in creation, could be blown, continued, right here.

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord you God, and serve him only.’”

This, of course, is the first of the Ten Commandments, quoted here from Deuteronomy. It addresses the temptation directly but not the side issues, such as legitimate ownership of “the world.”

The devil then gave up and angels took care of Jesus.

Jesus heard that his cousin John the Baptist was in prison and returned to Galilee. He moved from Nazareth to Capernaum which being in Zebulun and Naphtali fulfilled a prophecy that “the people living in darkness have seen a great light” from Zebulun and Naphtali. This prophesy, on review, seems quite generic. I hate to use the word “superstition” since I think of superstition as bad, but some of these scripture references seem more like fulfillments in search of a reference rather than references in search of a fulfillment.

Jesus began to preach repentance saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Walking along the lake, Jesus began calling his disciples, including Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. All these men were working as fishermen at that moment and left their businesses instantly to follow Jesus. James and John also left their father Zebedee, the head of their family business.

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.”

**Matthew 5:1 - 20**

**2010 January 4<sup>th</sup> for 29<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus then teaches from a mountainside so that he can reach as many listeners as possible. This section is the basic, core teaching of Jesus, known to us as “The Beatitudes.” Compared to the way that the world is generally understood to work and experienced, it is quite radical. It starts with declared blessings upon the down and out.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Living in a democracy, we consider equality a high value, but here we see a class structure. The class structure is different in the kingdom of heaven than it is by birthright or economic or social status. In the kingdom of heaven it is based on actions in concert with the kingdom of heaven.

Our Christian teaching is usually that the law is obsolete, or at least is only a basis for understanding grace. Paul said that the law led only to condemnation and death. None measure up, yet here, Jesus demands it, in every last detail.

We are instructed that the downcast are blessed. We are instructed to be open and overt about our kingdom principles and to suffer the abuses that come from it because that abuse is a blessing. We are instructed that the Law and Prophets, the old scriptures, are still valid and will remain so “until everything is accomplished.” It was probably obvious to the speaker, but we are not told what “everything” was.

**Matthew 5:21 - 48**

**2010 January 4<sup>th</sup> for February 1<sup>st</sup>**

Jesus continues with his basic teachings.

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the

Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

“Raca” means something like “empty-headed.” Jesus elevates anger and name calling to capital offenses. People who take this literally and narrowly are comforted that they never use those two words. People who take it literally and broadly are afraid to ever speak or feel at all.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.”

Does this mean not to even approach God while you have problems with your own peers?

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

That’s what Paul had to say about the Law! Avoid it. (Though it is unavoidable.) Good advice in any faith.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Here, do we take the Bible, indeed, the very words of Jesus literally or allegorically? People who have taken this literally have usually been institutionalized.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

When Jesus says, “it has been said,” or “you have heard it said,” he is nearly always quoting Moses, the author of the Law. He is pushing the Law into the inner life, not just external actions, which can be observed and evaluated by others.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.



Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

The use of oaths is meant to indicate sincerity or seriousness. Used spontaneously, they are exaggeration. Jesus condemns this practice.

"You have heard it said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

I have heard it preached that all these seemingly weak and submissive actions were really taunts. For example, it was legal for a Roman to compel a local to carry his load one mile, and there were mileposts along the road to indicate how far this might be. It was illegal and considered abusive to compel more than a mile. Trying to go two was a way of getting the coercer in trouble. Similarly with striking on the cheek. Hitting with the right hand, a strike on the right cheek would be backhanded, which is less forceful and abusive than forehand, which was illegal and was what was being offered with the "other" cheek. It was illegal in the Mosaic law to take all the clothing a person had for a debt in that it would leave them without anything in the cold night. (Precisely, you could take the cloak too, but had to return it for use at night every night.) It is offered here in, possibly to tweak the one who seemed otherwise to have the upper hand.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [I don't know who said this -- not Moses that I know of.] But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those you love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

God, in providing sustenance and comfort does not distinguish the good from the bad. We are told not to distinguish either.

**Matthew 6:1 - 18**

**2010 January 5<sup>th</sup> for February 2<sup>nd</sup>**

"Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your

right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

This has the effect of curbing egotism and exhibitionism from charity. It also protects the recipients from shame. What is Jesus’ purpose here, to prevent these well known and annoying abuses? God seems very annoyed by overtly religious acts.

“And when you pray do not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

This is the second case where you can either be seen by other people doing “good” and that is the entire reward, or you can not be seen except by God and be rewarded by him. Notice that the Father sees but is unseen.

“...babbling like the pagans ... heard because of their many words” reminds me of a Rosary I once heard recited for most of an hour. Maybe this is an unkind response, but the Rosary seemed like much seemingly mindless repetition.

“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.”

Note that this is abbreviated from the Lord’s Prayer that we sometimes recite (sometimes mindlessly, but from a different Gospel), and note that we are delivered not from “evil” but from the “evil one.”

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

In other words, don’t be selfish.

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Seen, unseen, and secret observance again.

Does anyone intentionally fast in our age of plenty?

**Matthew 6:19 - 34**

**2010 January 6<sup>th</sup> for February 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Jesus continues his sermon from the mountainside.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if you’re eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Noted that birds have not developed agriculture.

'Don't worry, I'll worry,' I say. But I don't worry about some of the things Jesus is talking about here -- food and clothing, basic necessities that they are. I do worry a lot about tomorrow, however, troubled though today was.

**Matthew 7**

**2010 January 7<sup>th</sup> for February 4<sup>th</sup>**

The end of the sermon on the mount begins with one of the most famous, and most inappropriately quoted Bible verses. Sometimes it's just quoted as, "Judge not," without further context, which is clearly wrong and can be manipulative.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Come to think of it, all of this are misquoted or taken out of context more than not. Not that it is an example of that, but I've been called a swine and had this one last used on me!

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you; if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

And this last, the "Golden Rule," is the most misquoted, mangled, and distorted of all.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

This, of course, is where we get the term "straight and narrow."

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

I find this concept both comforting and disturbing. Charismatic spiritual leaders (think anyone from Billy Graham to Jim Jones) are not necessarily “insiders” with God. What is disturbing is the obvious next question, “Who is?”

“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 against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

The crowds found this all amazing. Jesus taught like he knew what he was talking about, unlike their own religious leaders.

Learning about this last teaching in Sunday School long past, I remember a lot more emphasis on the weather and the disasters than on what it would practically mean and how one would go about following Jesus’ words with integrity. Maybe the latter was supposed to be obvious. Some of those words are only illustrative. Others are counterintuitive. All are tricky and difficult. And, saying, ‘Lord, Lord...’ isn’t enough.

**Matthew 8:1 - 22**

**2010 January 8<sup>th</sup> for February 5<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus now healed several people as he traveled around the region. First a man with leprosy came to him and asked to be made clean. Jesus healed him and told him to go himself to the priests as required by the law but not to tell anyone else.

Later he encountered a Roman centurion who asked that Jesus heal his servant. When Jesus asked where this servant was, the centurion said that he need not bother to go there, but just give the word from here. He gave as an example that as a soldier he was under authority and also had people under him (about a hundred, thus “centurion”) who did what he said. He expected that Jesus could do the same thing with spirits and health. Jesus was amazed at this show of faith and

commended it. Then he said the word and the centurion's servant was healed remotely, right then.

Visiting Peter's house, they found Peter's mother-in-law with a high fever. Jesus healed it and "she got up and began to wait on him."

That evening people came or were brought from all over the region. He healed all their sick and drove out all their demons. This was said to fulfill a prophesy of Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." (This prophesy is indeed a "suffering servant" Messianic prophecy.)

People came wanting to become Jesus' followers. To one he said that they didn't have any place to stay each night. To another who wanted to go "bury his father" first (that is, wait until his father died so he could be free to follow), Jesus said, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

To family oriented Israelites, this would have seemed an extreme, possibly unreasonable price, to leave behind family responsibilities to follow this Rabbi.

**Matthew 8:23 - 34**

**2010 January 11<sup>th</sup> for February 8<sup>th</sup>**

Here are two stories that are told in greater detail in other Gospels.

"Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!'

"He replied, 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

"The men were amazed and asked, 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'"

And, I would also point out, he is able to sleep in a raging storm with waves crashing over the boat. Indeed, the Son of God sleeps at all!

"When he arrived at the other side in the region of Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. 'What do you want with us, Son of God?' they shouted, 'Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?'"

This statement to Jesus by demons raises many interesting theological questions that have been studied and debated at great length. What is, for example, is meant by "the appointed time?"

“Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, ‘If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.’”

Note that to Jews (such as Jesus) pigs were unclean. This, then, is a type of slam against the local religion or lack thereof.

“He said to them, ‘Go!’ So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.”

At first it seems strange that a whole town would come out to the Son of God and beg for him to leave the area, but through his act of mercy to demon-possessed men, he had just destroyed a major part of their local economy. What an unusually bad day at work that must have been for those pig herders. What an unusually good day it must have been for two men who had been living in tombs, a menace and not an object of concern to anyone, for who knows how long.

And, a metaphysical question is raised. What becomes of demons that inhabit drowned pigs?

**Matthew 9:1 - 17**

**2010 January 13<sup>th</sup> for February 9<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus bucks the status quo in three ways, explaining himself as he goes.

In the first, some people brought him their friend who was paralyzed. He said to the paralyzed person, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”

This made the teachers of the law mad. Only God could forgive sins, they claimed.

“Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, ‘Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . ‘ Then he said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’” And the man did so, filling the crowd with awe.

It is one thing to win an argument through wit and rhetoric. It is another to do a real demonstration.

Continuing with his tours, he came to the tax collector’s booth manned by Matthew. Just as he had previously done with the fishermen, he said to Matthew, “Follow me.” Matthew got up and did so. At Matthew’s house they were dining with Matthew’s friends, “tax collectors and sinners.” The religious establishment took offense at this cavorting with normal people, and

worse. Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

This is fortunate since all are sinners, whether they know it or not. The quote is from Hosea and Micah, which we have just finished.

And then there was the question about fasting. Fasting is a religious observance in which one goes without food and devotes his time, energy, and attention instead to prayer and meditation for a day or more. The religious establishment wondered why Jesus and his followers didn’t do the ritual fasts.

“Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’”

Jesus is saying that he is the bridegroom and that means that this is a time for celebration, not “mourning.” Apparently fasting is like mourning. But this wouldn’t last forever. They would get back to fasting after he was gone.

Jesus then goes on with the famous analogy:

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

As is often the case, though this is practical advice and, by analogy, extends to nearly every other realm of life, it is unclear what it has to do with the fasting question.

**Matthew 9:18 - 38**

**2010 January 13<sup>th</sup> for February 10<sup>th</sup>**

More examples of Jesus’ power are given.

A ruler came to Jesus, telling him that his daughter had just died but claiming that Jesus could restore her life. Jesus went with the man. While he was on the way a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years came up from behind and touched his cloak, having faith that if she did so she would be healed. When she touched him, “Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ They finished their trip to the ruler’s house where Jesus threw out all the paid mourners and the “noisy crowd.” He then went in and restored the girl to life.

“News of this spread through all that region.”



As Jesus' travels continued, two blind men followed him, shouting, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." When Jesus went inside and the blind men came to him. He asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They replied that they did and he then restored their sight, saying, "According to your faith will it be done to you."

Interestingly, he also told them not to tell anyone about it. Was this because he was a finite human with time and space limitations? Whatever the case, the formerly blind men spread the news all over the region as well.

"While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.'

"But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.'"

Later on, Jesus will answer this accusation.

In general:

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"

In this way too, Jesus seems humanly finite. He needs workers to whom to delegate. Another interpretation is that God wants to share the work with us mortals and delegates to them what they can do for that reason. God gives us life. By sharing his work with us he gives us a reason for living.

## **Matthew 10**

**2010 January 14<sup>th</sup> for February 11<sup>th</sup>**

The disciples were Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot.

Jesus commissioned these men to go out and heal all sickness and disease and drive out evil spirits. His instructions were lengthy and dealt not only with how to do their ministry and how it would be supported, but with attitudes of life, matters of deportment, relationship priorities, and what one can expect being an active Christ follower. This first trip was only to the Jews.

"Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely

give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

“Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

“Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!

“So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

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

“a man against his father, a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law --  
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”

[This quote is from Micah.]

“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

On the face of it, this does not make the faith look very attractive. Perhaps he is saying, ‘Life is tough, especially for those closest to God. Deal with it.’

## **Matthew 11**

**2010 January 15<sup>th</sup> for February 12<sup>th</sup>**

After sending the disciples off, Jesus continued teaching and preaching in Galilee. His cousin John the Baptist was in prison and sent word asking, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Perhaps John felt he should not be in prison if God’s Messiah were on the scene.

Jesus’ reply is interesting. It is in two parts, the first a message to be sent back to John, the second a commentary on John for the crowd.

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 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. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

By saying this, Jesus was claiming to be performing all the signs that the Messiah was to perform. The last sentence is mysterious to me. Does he mean that he understands that he does not meet everyone’s expectations for a Messiah?

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus addressed the crowd.

“What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”

He has just called John the greatest and the least. What is the problem with John? He appears to have just said that Judaism has not run as it was supposed to to date, but has been violent. Next Jesus talks about the crowd itself.

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

“‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

“For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.

Then Jesus went after the cities where he had been working, the thankless lot.

“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

Then Jesus turns to a curious prayer.

About kingdom knowledge:

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father for this was your good pleasure.”

About himself:

“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

About his invitation to follow:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

It is true that Jesus' voluntary burden is easier than many involuntary ones that people choose.

**Matthew 12:1 - 21**

**2010 January 18<sup>th</sup> for February 15<sup>th</sup>**

It was a Sabbath when Jesus and the disciples were traveling, passing through grain fields on their journeys. Because the disciples were hungry they were picking heads of grain and eating them as they went. Although this sort of crop usage was allowed by the Law of Moses as protection for the poor, it was a Sabbath and was therefore considered harvesting by the Pharisees, who accused them of being lawbreakers.

Jesus took the challenge and answered, “Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread -- which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” The quote is from Hosea.

They visited a synagogue where one of the parishioners had a shriveled hand. Trying to find a way to condemn Jesus they asked him on the spot if it was legal to heal on the Sabbath.

This line of questioning, particularly in the presence of the deformed man, seems rather cold to our sensibilities.

Jesus said, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

He then healed the man. That's a ruling!

The response of the Pharisees to this defeat was to go out and plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus knew of the plot and left the area. Big crowds followed. He healed the sick but told them “not to tell who he was.” This was to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah:

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.”

**Matthew 12:22 - 37**

**2010 January 19<sup>th</sup> for February 16<sup>th</sup>**

A man was brought to Jesus who was blind and mute, and demon possessed. Jesus healed him. The crowds, in astonishment, wondered if Jesus might be the “Son of David,” that is, the Messiah. The Pharisees retorted, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” They could not believe that a person who did not follow all their rules, who was not a member of their sect, or even approve of it, could be The One, since they believed they were the true ones. This sort of belief continues among the various elect today.

This got a rise out of Jesus which led to another extended teaching about himself. Knowing their thoughts, he said,

“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

“Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.”

Here Jesus has analogized himself to a robber, and Satan to a strong man.

(Flame on <Jesus>.)

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word

they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

(Flame off, for now <Jesus>.)

**Matthew 12:38 - 50**

**2010 January 20<sup>th</sup> for February 17<sup>th</sup>**

Some of the Pharisees and teachers asked Jesus to do a miracle for them. This was his response:

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon ‘s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.”

This quote is why we have the book of Jonah in our Bible.

I always wondered why these questioners didn’t just look for the miracles Jesus was already doing anyway. Miracles on demand? Manipulation? Maybe that’s why he said, “wicked generation.”

But that’s not all.

“When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”

Jesus is not impressed with the specific generation to which he was sent, and apparently grace is reversible.

While he taught, his mother and brothers came and asked for him. He did not go to them.

When he was told his family was looking for him, he told the messenger, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Then pointing to his disciples he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus has truly “left home.”

Did Mary not do the will of the Father in heaven?

**Matthew 13:1 - 30**

**2010 January 21<sup>st</sup> for February 18<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus went out by a lake to teach. So many people came to hear him that he got in a boat and pushed out a ways in order to address them. He said:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop -- a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.”

The disciples were confused as to why he taught in parables like this. He answered them.

“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables:

““Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

“In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

““You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

It is unclear to me whether this classist reality is the way God intends the world to work or if Jesus, quoting Isaiah, quoting God, is just stating the way things are. To my memory, I have never heard this point preached or read an interpretation of it. In the parable itself, he describes life in the plant world the way it is. Did God intend that some plants would not live lush, fertile existences and others would wither in their youth and die or is also just a statement of reality?

Jesus continues, explaining the parable to his inner circle. Does the explanation shed light on the question?



“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

This makes it sound more like freedom of choice in some cases, circumstances in others, but the responsibility for producing is with the seed regardless.

Another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

Is that a statement of “post millennial” theology?

I understand the last paragraph to mean that God does not take the evil people out of the world because that would be disruptive to the good, but that he judges everyone at the end, destroying some and (then) reaping others. I wonder if the land owner in the story understands. Did an enemy really do this, or are weeds just part of the way things are? My piano teacher used to analogize clean playing versus playing with errors as being like “weeds” where some people have to do more weeding than others. To me, then, it’s just the way things are. And, yes, I am one of those who has to do more weeding.

Jesus continues teaching in parables.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus (at least in the record) only explains one parable, the one from yesterday about the sower.

“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

This is one of many places where we get our concept of eternal reward or punishment. In his parables Jesus talks about little else. There is the kingdom of God, a great treasure with great rewards and there is punishment for those who are outside. And a little bit goes a long way.

After all this, Jesus asked the disciples if they understood all this and they said they did. His response was:

“Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

I guess storing of treasures isn't always a bad thing.

When he came to his own home town he got no respect. The crowds were incredulous saying, "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" They found him offensive and that offense elicited the famous quote:

"Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

At least this is pretty good proof that Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus.

**Matthew 14**

**2010 January 25<sup>th</sup> for February 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Herod the tetrarch heard about Jesus and thought he might be John the Baptist come back to life.

The author here has to take an aside to explain why John the Baptist *needed* to come back to life.

John had preached to Herod that it was illegal for him to have his brother's wife Herodias. Fair enough, but Herod had him put in prison for this. Then on Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter danced for the party and this pleased Herod so much that he made a promise to give her whatever she asked. "Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.'" Herod didn't want to harm John but because he had promised, he gave the order and the head was brought out to her. The girl gave the head to her mother and John's disciples came and buried the rest of him. "Then they went and told Jesus."

"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."

It was getting late and nobody was going home, so the disciples suggested that Jesus send them away to buy food. He told them to feed the people themselves, but they complained that they had nearly nothing. He ordered that they bring what little they have to him. He blessed it and handed out enough to feed everyone in the crowd plus leftovers, several thousand people.

Jesus then sent his *disciples* away in the boat and went up the mountain to continue to try to pray.

It doesn't say this, but I imagine that Jesus was deeply troubled by John's death, perhaps even surprised. It had been unexpected to John, and perhaps also to Jesus, that John was in prison in the first place. If this was the Messiah, how could such a high-ranking co-worker be treated so poorly? Did Jesus have his own internal questions along these lines? We're not told. We're led to believe that Jesus knew everything all the time and never had a doubt or a misgiving. We're also led to believe that Jesus was human, and therefore finite.

This moment of tragedy would have, at the very least, required clarification from the Father, after all, Jesus and John were first cousins, they doubtless knew each other growing up, probably quite well, and now they were on the same ministry team together. But John's ministry had ended abruptly and prematurely.

The crowd, as always, interrupted. Notice that Jesus showed compassion by healing and feeding them but that no preaching or teaching is mentioned. Jesus' drop back position was compassion. (Mine is going home or at least stopping to think.) Maybe he sent the disciples away in the boat as a distraction to the crowd so he could finally get away by himself. Maybe he would rather have had them with him at that point, but this was the only way he could go off to pray.

While he was praying, evening came and nightfall and the disciples were struggling in the boat in the wind and waves. This always seems to be the way of the world on the lake. In the dead of night, a few hours before dawn, Jesus came to them walking on the water. This scared the bejeezus out of the disciples (so to speak). They thought it was a ghost. In the human order of things, it might not be too surprising for Jesus to also have been dead at this time of crises, or maybe they thought it was the ghost of John on the water. Seeing someone walking on the water in the middle of the night in a storm would be disorienting at the very least.

It turned out to be Jesus himself, alive, and Peter, speaking before thinking as always, asked Jesus if he could come out to him on the water. Jesus told him to come on and Peter got out of the boat. And sank. Jesus saved him and when they got back in the boat the storm stopped.

This was an awesome moment for all.

Much is made of the walking on the water, but I am curious as to the nature of Jesus' prayers back on the mountain. Did he ask his Father what in the world was going on here? Did the Father answer that this world was like this and Jesus' own turn was coming? But ... right now you have all power so get with it! So Jesus, reassured and re-energized, walks out to the disciples in the middle of a storm, saves them again, and carries on.

Something like that? No one knows, in this world anyway.

**Matthew 15:1 - 20**

**2010 January 26<sup>th</sup> for February 23<sup>rd</sup>**

The Pharisees and teachers challenged Jesus again. They asked why the disciples broke "the tradition of the elders" by not washing their hands before eating.

Another nit-pick.

Jesus answered:

“And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

“‘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.’”

Jesus then addressed the crowd:

“Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’

His disciples came and asked Jesus if he realized that he had offended the Pharisees by saying all this. He told them:

“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

Peter asked that Jesus explain the parable. Jesus answered:

“Are you still so dull?”

“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean;’ but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”

... it just makes him unsanitary.

**Matthew 15:21 - 39**

**2010 January 27<sup>th</sup> for February 24<sup>th</sup>**

Traveling on, Jesus went through an area with some Gentile presence. A Caananite woman followed him crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! my daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.”

He did not respond to this at all and eventually the disciples asked him to run her off, she was so incessant. His answer was, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

When the woman came directly to him and begged for help he said only, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs.

The woman was desperate and clever. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Jesus replied to this, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”

It is also remarkable in Jesus’ time and place that he would talk to not only a Gentile but a woman.

From there he continued along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and stopped on a mountainside to heal the lame, blind, crippled, mute and those with other illnesses. The crowd was amazed at all the mute people speaking, blind people seeing, lame and crippled people walking.

It was a big crowd and it was getting late and they were hungry. Jesus told his disciples to feed them. They claimed lack of resources. He asked what the resources were and it turned out to be seven loaves of bread and some small fish.

He had the crowd sit and blessed this food and passed it around so that everyone ate, four thousand men plus women and children.

## **Matthew 16**

**2010 January 28<sup>th</sup> for February 25<sup>th</sup>**

The Pharisees and Sadducees came looking for a sign from Jesus again. He pointed out to them that they could read the signs in the weather, the clouds, the color of the sky, and so forth, and predict what was coming but that they couldn’t even read the signs of their own times. Jesus said, “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” He then went away.

On their next crossing of the lake, the disciples forgot to bring along any bread. Jesus, apparently using the opportunity to play on concepts, said, “Be careful. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” They thought he was talking about food. Seeing this, he told them not to worry about food. Didn’t they remember the two times he had fed thousands of people on nearly nothing? “How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

They then realized that it was the teaching of the religious establishment he was warning them about.

“Yeast” had a mixed reputation in Jewish thought. It often symbolized evil. The Passover bread was made without yeast because the people were in a hurry to get it cooked. Sometimes yeast was good, as in, “a little leaven (kingdom of God) leavens the whole loaf.”

Later, in the Caesarea Philippi area, Jesus asked his disciples who the people thought he was. There were many answers: Elijah, John the Baptist, Jeremiah, some other prophet. Jesus asked them who *they* thought he was. Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Usually we are taught that Jesus was not looking for information that he didn’t have here, he was being didactic, or Socratic, teaching by questioning.

Jesus replied to Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” He then told them not to tell anyone who he was.

This was a great piece of recognition for Peter. It made him look like Jesus’ right hand man. This is the text by which the Catholics crown the Pope, with Peter being the first in the line of Popes.

At that point, however, Jesus began talking about his destiny. He would be killed but raised back to life on the third day. Peter, his right hand man, started telling him this was unthinkable but Jesus stopped him immediately: “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.”

(That part of the dialogue is not used in the Papal coronation.)

Then he told them of the real price of the kingdom of God:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

I don’t know what the religious establishment of 2010 makes of that promise.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John alone up on a high mountain. “There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.”

Peter offered to set up shelters for the three of them, but while he was talking “a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

They fell on the ground in terror, but Jesus had them get up and told them not to be afraid. When they did the four of them were alone again and Jesus told them not to tell anyone about this until after he was raised from the dead.

The disciples asked about Elijah coming first. Jesus answered:

“To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

At this point they realized that Jesus meant John the Baptist when he spoke of Elijah.

Back at work, a man came out of the crowd asking Jesus to come heal his son. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” Jesus was frustrated:

“O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” Jesus then rebuked the demon and healed the boy.

The disciples asked privately why they had failed at this.

“Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Later in Galilee, Jesus told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.” The disciples now understood this and were “filled with grief.” As we will see later, they did not understand until after the resurrection about the “raised to life” part.

The temple tax collectors asked Jesus disciples if he paid their two-drachma temple tax. This interrogation was a taunt. Embarrassed, they said that he did. Later Jesus asked Peter, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes -- from their own sons or from others?” Simon thought, “From others.”



“Then the sons are exempt. But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”

So Jesus, while claiming that he did not need to, covered Peter’s claim, and graciously covered Peter too.

## **Matthew 18**

**2010 February 1<sup>st</sup> for March 1<sup>st</sup>**

Jesus gives long answers to two questions.

First, the disciples asked who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child [he used a child as a demonstration] is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

“Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin. Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.”

To act out this behavior in our culture is considered insanity. Most teachers of the Bible say that Jesus was exaggerating for effect. There are things that are important to each of us, however, that will not be allowed into heaven. Best they not be permanently attached.

Jesus says that sin is inevitable, but for someone to be the cause of sin of it is worse. Be like a child, then.

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

This is one of the bases of the theology of universal salvation. But most of the rest of what Jesus says, including a couple of paragraphs up, says there is exclusion anyway, though God does not like it and does not cause it.

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

I don't know what that means.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”

Peter then asked how many times he had to forgive someone who had wronged him. Thinking generously, he thought maybe, “seven times?”

“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [a comparatively trivial amount]. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in, ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

We see that God condones torture, but only for those who are not fair.

Does God also condone unwise lending practices? Does he practice reversals of judgment? What do you think?

**Matthew 19**

**2010 February 2<sup>nd</sup> for March 2<sup>nd</sup>**

Jesus was put to another test, this time about marriage. Pharisees asked him to unravel the problem of divorce. They asked first if it was even lawful.

“Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

This phrase appears near the end of our traditional wedding ceremony. This is a statement of God’s ideal. It appears to say that divorce is non-ideal, which is also common-sensical.

The Pharisees pressed on. Why did Moses allow divorce then?

“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

His own disciples, realizing the difficulties here said that it must be better not to marry at all then. Jesus agreed, at least in some individual cases, but noting in a rare demarcation of individuals from each other, that some could remain single and, by implication, others should not. Monastic traditions are based on this teaching, at least the Christian ones.

“Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Some more children were brought for Jesus' blessing and again the disciples tried to run them off. Business is no place for children! But Jesus countered them:

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” He then blessed them and moved on.

A rich young man now came to Jesus and asked what good things he should do to “inherit eternal life.” Jesus first took issue with the idea of “good.”

“Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

The young man asked which which commandments. Did he want limits? Specificity? Were there some he wanted to follow and others he didn't, or did he just not want to be overwhelmed by overly restrictive traditions?

“Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

These are six of the Ten Commandments.

The young man said he had always done all that but seemed to feel he still lacked something.

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

The young man was rich and went away sad. He could not part with everything for this deal. It is interesting that Jesus did not bring him in *with* his wealth. That might have financed the ministry permanently. Jesus had already passed through those temptations, having dealt with the devil directly.

After the young man went away sad, Jesus talked to his disciples.

“I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

We have 2000 years of church history in which we have been taught that having nothing was most godly. Before that, it was thought that wealth, possessions, family, and so forth were signs of God's blessing. Consider, for example, what Job had, lost, and regained. Consider the blessings the patriarchs extended to their children.

The disciples were, therefore, totally shocked at this concept. Clueless about what the answer might be, they asked who could be saved then? If not a rich man who was obviously blessed by God, then who? What was going on here?

“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter, confused, personalized the question further. “We have left everything to follow you? What then will there be for us?” One would think that working for the Messiah would pay better.

“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

This teaching further disturbs the traditional Jewish order of things that valued family and property. Jesus also repeats his proclamation of an inversion of the social order.

So, when is the “renewal of all things?”

**Matthew 20:1 - 19**

**2010 February 3<sup>rd</sup> for March 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Jesus continues his discussion of the inverted social order of the kingdom of heaven.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About the third hour [9 a.m.] he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour [noon] and the ninth hour [3 p.m.] and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour [5 p.m.] he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“When evening came [6 p.m.], the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This brings to mind the quip I’ve heard: “God is a liberal; he can afford it.”

Jesus and the disciples were headed to Jerusalem. He told them:

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

This was a startlingly accurate prediction. It does not say what the response of the disciples was.

**Matthew 20:20 - 34**

**2010 February 4<sup>th</sup> for March 4<sup>th</sup>**

Right after Jesus told the disciples that he was going to be mocked, flogged, and crucified by Gentiles following betrayal by his own people, “the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

“‘What is it you want?’ he asked.

“She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.’

“‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said to them. ‘Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’

“‘We can,’ they answered.

“Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.’

“When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

After this they were on the way to Jericho when two blind men were calling out of the crowd for Jesus. The crowd tired of this and was trying to run them off but this only made them shout louder. At length “Jesus stopped and called them. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’”

They wanted to be able to see.

“Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.”

**Matthew 21:1 - 22**

**2010 February 5<sup>th</sup> for March 5<sup>th</sup>**

When they got close to Jerusalem, Jesus sent two disciples ahead to a place where he said they would find a donkey tied up. They were to bring it back and he would ride it into the city. Riding a donkey was a sign that he was a king, and a peaceful one. A warrior would have ridden a horse.

As he rode into town the people threw their cloaks on the road in front of him, an act of homage to a king, and shouted

“Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest!”

When he got to the temple he ran off all of the money changers and animal sellers working in the courtyard there and turned over their tables of business. They were selling the sacrificial animals that visitors to the area needed to fulfill their festival worship obligations (at a profit) but Jesus angrily said, “It is written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’”

Jesus healed blind and lame people in the temple and the children were rejoicing and shouting. This got the attention of the chief priests and teachers who were indignant with Jesus and asked him if he knew what the children were saying. He answered:

“Have you never read,  
‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?”

This is quoted from Psalm 8 which is quite famous.

After spending the night in Bethany he was headed back into the city the next morning and was hungry. He came to a fig tree that had only leaves on it and cursed it commanding that it never bear fruit again. It withered immediately and the disciples, again, were amazed.

I remember as a youth making the claim that Jesus must have been irritable that morning. This was probably one of the first times I felt I could understand and identify with him. I knew what it was to be cranky and hungry early in the morning. A proper interpretation of this incident, I was instructed, was that Jesus was responding appropriately and without emotion to a perfectly good creation that was not fruitful. It was all the tree's fault.

I still think he was irritable. People who live in human bodies can be that way and it is not necessarily a sin.

**Matthew 21:23 - 46**

**2010 February 8<sup>th</sup> for March 8<sup>th</sup>**

The establishment (priests and elders) came and asked Jesus who gave him the authority to do what he was doing. He said he would answer if they would tell him where John the Baptist's baptism had come from, heaven or men? They didn't answer because Jesus had trapped them. If they said "from heaven," then he could ask why they didn't believe him. If they said "from men," the crowd, who believed he was a prophet, would be angry. As a result, Jesus didn't answer them either.

There was the parable of two sons. The father asked one to go work in the vineyard that day. That son refused but later changed his mind and went. He asked the other to go work and he agreed to, but never showed up. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

The correct answer was: The one who said "no" but went anyway.

In summary:

"I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Jesus told another parable. A man built a vineyard and planted it up and rented it out then went on a long trip. At harvest time he sent for his part of the produce and the rent. The tenants beat up and killed the messengers. The owner sent more messengers and got the same result. Then he sent his son saying, "They will respect my son."

"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."



“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

The correct answer was, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

In summary, Jesus quoted a psalm:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to the people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

Clearly, those who originally had the kingdom will not only not be rewarded for it, they will be punished wretchedly.

(A grammatical aside: My understanding of the words “but” and “and” suggests that “and” should be used here, as in “he who falls will be broken *and* he on whom it falls will be crushed,” but this sort of confusing usage is everywhere, including, apparently, translations of the Bible.)

By now, the chief priests and Pharisees, the establishment of the temple, of the kingdom of God, realized that Jesus was talking about them in all these stories and they started trying to figure out how to arrest him. They didn’t move yet, however, because they were afraid of the crowd.

**Matthew 22:1 - 22**

**2010 February 9<sup>th</sup> for March 9<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus, never missing an opportunity to cast his own people as ungrateful and undeserving murderers, tells another parable, direct from the events of the scriptures.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

“Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

“But they paid no attention and went off -- one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless.

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

This story seems straightforward until we get to the part about the improperly clothed guest. It is unclear from the story what his sin was. Was it a dress code violation? Was he uninvited? Was it that he had nothing to say for himself? Was he “invited” but not “chosen?” How does that work? The king did call him “friend.”

I have heard it preached that any guest would have been supplied with proper attire by the host. If this was the case why did he not use it? Could he not say why not?

The punishment, clearly allegorical to hell, seems harsh unless we can understand the transgression.

Next, some teachers came and tried to trick Jesus by asking him if it was legal to pay taxes to Caesar or not. His reply was short and personal.

“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” When one was brought, Jesus said, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

They were looking at a picture of Caesar, so Jesus concluded, to their amazement:

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

This teaching is widely applied to participation in world systems, including our very own Internal Revenue Service and our very own Selective Service System.

**Matthew 22:23 - 46**

**2010 February 10<sup>th</sup> for March 10<sup>th</sup>**

The Sadducees, a Jewish sect that did not believe in the resurrection, immortality, reward and punishment, or anything but the Pentateuch (the Law), came to Jesus with a question. They described a case where there had been seven brothers. The first had married a woman and died

childless. By the law, the next brother was required to marry the woman to carry on his line. He did, but also died childless. Indeed, all seven married her in turn and died childless in turn, then the woman died herself. In the resurrection, they wondered, whose wife would she be? Jesus answered.

“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead -- have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

This argument was based on the present tense of the verbs and Jesus made it from the Pentateuch (That is, the Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). He is clearly teaching the resurrection and immortality.

The Sadducees having been shut down, their biggest rival, the Pharisees, took a shot. What commandment, they asked, was the greatest. Jesus’ answer was direct.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

This reminds me of the joke about the physicist who, when asked what he would ask God about said, “Why turbulence and why relativity?” He thought he might have an inkling about relativity.

Similarly here, I think I have an inkling about what it is to love a neighbor. (Jesus defines a ‘neighbor’ as any other human being on earth in another Gospel with the parable of the Good Samaritan.) Love is not so much about desire, which is the attractive emotion often denoted by the word “love,” and sometimes leading to acts of real love. Love is, rather, desiring and doing the best for the beloved.

What it means to do this for God, utilizing every dimension of one’s being, I do not well comprehend.

Jesus, having defeated the two major sects at their own question and answer game, now turns to the crowd with his own riddles.

“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”

The educated in the audience gave the stock answer, “David.”

“How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord?’ For he says,

“The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’

“If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”

How indeed?

After this, no one dared interrogate or try to trick Jesus any more. Me neither.

**Matthew 23:1 - 22**

**2010 February 12<sup>th</sup> for March 11<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus now addressed everyone.

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tied up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not all anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

The lordship of Christ notwithstanding, this is the teaching from which we get the notion of Christian egalitarianism.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’ You

blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."

**Matthew 23:23 - 39**

**2010 February 12<sup>th</sup> for March 12<sup>th</sup>**

As Jesus continues the tirade intensifies.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices -- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law -- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

**Matthew 24:1 - 35**

**2010 February 15<sup>th</sup> for March 15<sup>th</sup>**

As Jesus left the temple area, the disciples were trying to give him a tour of the impressive buildings. Jesus asked:

“Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Later in private they asked him what this meant. His lengthy reply is sometimes considered a prophesy for the downfall of Jerusalem that would happen a few decades later. It is sometimes considered a prophesy concerning our own future. Much apocalyptic theory comes from this reply.

“Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

“So when you see standing in the holy place the ‘abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel -- let the reader understand -- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now -- and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect -- if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

“So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is out in the desert,’ do not go out; or ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

“Immediately after the distress of those days

“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;

the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

(This is a quote from Isaiah 13 concerning “the day of the Lord,” “-- a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger --”)

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

The “this generation” reference leads us to believe that all this distress accompanied the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

**Matthew 24:36 - 51**

**2010 February 15<sup>th</sup> for March 16<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus continues to discuss how the “end will come.” Notice that there are things that even Jesus does not know, such as the time of the end.

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an

hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

**Matthew 25:1 - 30**

**2010 February 17<sup>th</sup> for March 17<sup>th</sup>**

Two more parables, continuing on the theme of the end times.

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came, ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said, ‘Open the door for us!’

“But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

This “not knowing” of those who were not attentive and ready does not square with the universalist, all inclusive God.

Note that “wise virgins” don’t share, not when it means going under themselves. I have heard a lot of preaching that is not supported by this selfish appearing example.

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.



“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

“‘Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

A common theme in these parables is that the master might be gone for a long time, thus allowing laxness. Indeed, he might be gone for two thousand years!

I was always puzzled that the master here confessed to being unfair, that is, reaping where he did not sow and so forth. Further, he expects more from his servants than just safety and the return of his property. He wants them to do more with it. Failure to read the master’s mind and do more than is expected is grounds for being thrown out of the house and grinding up one’s own teeth. Or was it the servant’s fear of the unfair master that was the error? Further, he gave out resources according to the servant’s resources, but seemed to miss his guess on one of them. The master left no instructions. How do we know that the servant, who is now eternally punished, wasn’t just stupid or timid rather than lazy?

**Matthew 25:31 - 46**

**2010 February 18<sup>th</sup> for March 18<sup>th</sup>**

Jesus now describes the final judgment.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and cloth you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you did not cloth me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life”

The stakes in this game are quite high. The message seems to be: take care of your peers, if you can, regardless of what you think of them.

**Matthew 26:1 - 30**

**2010 February 19<sup>th</sup> for March 19<sup>th</sup>**

All the teaching of the last few days is Jesus’ last major output. After that he and the disciples headed down to Jerusalem for his final Passover. The “chief priests and elders” under Caiaphas the high priest were plotting to kill him, but wanted to avoid doing it during the festival because the people might riot.

Jesus and the disciples were staying in Bethany at the home of Simon the Leper when a woman came with “an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head.” The disciples were “indignant” at this. It was a huge waste of money, they protested. They could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor! Jesus replied:

“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

It is said that Jesus was not being cold by saying, “The poor you will always have with you...” but that he meant that they would always have opportunity to help the poor while they would not always have them with them like this.

This display was all Judas could stand. He went to the chief priests and made a deal with them to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, a handsome sum.

The disciples asked where they should hold the Passover. Jesus gave them instructions about a certain house to go to and what to say to the owner, who would then prepare the Passover for them in his upper room. This all happened as Jesus said it would.

While they were eating Jesus announced that one of them would betray him. They all protested, individually, that they would not. On Judas turn, he said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” but Jesus replied, “Yes, it is you.”

Jesus then passed out the bread saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he gave thanks for the cup and offered it saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

They then sang a hymn and proceeded to the Mount of Olives.

**Matthew 26:31 - 56**

**2010 February 22<sup>nd</sup> for March 22<sup>nd</sup>**

After Judas was gone from the Last Supper, Jesus continued to predict other abandonment in his immediate future.

“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

“I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”

“But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

Peter proclaimed that even if all the others fell away he never would. Jesus replied to this,

“I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.”

Peter and the other disciples claimed that they would go to the death with Jesus.

The group then went to a place called Gethsemane. He had the disciples sit while he took Peter and James and John a bit further. He was very troubled and said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” He then went a little further by himself and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

From this anguish he came back to the disciples and found them sleeping.

“Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

Then he went aside and prayed again, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Again, he returned to the disciples and found them sleeping, but this time it was time to go.

“Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

At this point Judas returned leading a large crowd of armed men, vigilantes. As he had planned, Judas greeted and kissed Jesus to indicate to the crowd which one to arrest. When they moved in to seize him, one of the disciples drew a sword and cut off someone’s ear. Jesus, ever in charge, responded.

“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

He then addressed the crowd.

“Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.”

All the disciples then deserted.

Perhaps their vows to stay with Jesus until death were based on the notion of making a stand and fighting, the normal thing that people would do in such a situation. Deprived of that option by

their leader, following him would only mean surrender and subjugation to the mob. Rather, they fled.

**Matthew 26:57 - 75**

**2010 February 22<sup>nd</sup> for March 23<sup>rd</sup>**

The mob took Jesus to the ruling council where high priest Caiaphas was presiding. They were looking for false evidence with which to convict him and send him to death but none of their false witnesses could get their stories straight. Finally two (two witnesses were required in a capital case) said that they had heard Jesus say he would tear down the temple and restore it in three days.

It is interesting that this claim, that Jesus had indeed made, but about the temple of his own body, not any buildings, is the one that finally stuck. Also note that the disciples themselves did not remember about the three days matter until after the resurrection.

Despite jeers and abuse from Caiaphas, Jesus did not answer even these charges, so Caiaphas went direct and said, "I charge you under oath by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ the Son of God."

Jesus did answer this. "Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

"Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?'

"'He is worthy of death,' they answered."

Then they abused him by hitting him and spitting on him jeering at him that he should prophesy as to who was hitting him.

It is not stated explicitly, but notice that this trial was held in the middle of the night, which was itself illegal.

Meanwhile, Peter, not the total deserter, had followed the crowd up to the courtyard and was sitting outside with the guards waiting to see what would happen. A servant girl recognized him and accused him of having been with with Jesus, but he denied it. He went out to the gate where another girl recognized him and the same exchange occurred.

Why girls, do you suppose?

"After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them, for your [Galilean] accent gives you away.'

“Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’ Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

**Matthew 27:1 - 31**

**2010 February 24<sup>th</sup> for March 24<sup>th</sup>**

“Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’

“‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’

“So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

“The chief priests picked up the coins and said, ‘It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.’ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled. ‘They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.’”

This is similar to a quote from Jeremiah where God told him to go buy the field of a relative in occupied territory as a sign that Israel would remain a nation with property laws despite the current distress. The price there was seventeen shekels of silver.

There is a differently similar quote from Zechariah (that we haven’t come to yet) in which the prophet is buying a field in which to pasture his flock. In that story he fired three other shepherds and did the shepherding work himself. He bought the field for thirty pieces of silver by throwing the money into the temple toward the potter. In that story it was called a “handsome price.”

“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’

“‘It is as you say,’ Jesus replied.

“When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, ‘Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?’ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge -- to the great amazement of the governor.”

In an “innocent until proven guilty” system, one cannot be compelled to mount a defense. That doesn’t seem to have been the standard here, as we see next.

“Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

“While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.’

“But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

“‘Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’ asked the governor.

“‘Barabbas,’ they answered.

“‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?’ Pilate asked.

“They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’

“‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate.

“But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said, ‘It is your responsibility!’”

No one in authority around here seems to want responsibility for anything. Women’s dreams seem to count for little or nothing.

“All the people answered, ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’

“Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

“Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on him, and took the staff

and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.”

This sort of behavior is why society does not want anyone in society to have unchecked power. Sentence an innocent man to a cruel death and people who have no accountability for acting humane will do things like this.

**Matthew 27:32 - 66**

**2010 February 25<sup>th</sup> for March 25<sup>th</sup>**

On the way to be crucified, the soldiers with Jesus came upon a man visiting from Cyrene by the name of Simon. They compelled Simon to help Jesus carry his cross out to the hill where he was to die. (And we think Jury Duty is a pain!)

They crucified Jesus at a place named Golgotha and gambled for his clothing, his only possession. He refused anything to drink, suspecting a possible drug. They put up a sign on his cross:

“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Two other crucifixions were in progress at the same time and place, two robbers. Everyone who passed by insulted the dying. They taunted Jesus, telling him to come down if he was so powerful that he could destroy the temple and raise it back up. The robbers also taunted and verbally abused him.

Then, at noon, it got dark like night over the whole land. The party atmosphere was squelched. At three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Some thought (because he used the word “Eloi” for “My God”) that he was calling for Elijah and waited to see if Elijah would come and save him.

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”

The significance of the curtain in the temple is that it was the boundary separating God, in the “Holy of Holies” from the people. The significance of it tearing from top to bottom is that God tore it.

There is no good scientific explanation for the darkness. Eclipses of the sun, to which this is comparable, and to which this is sometimes attributed, last no more than seven minutes. Of



course, science is not needed to explain any of this. God's absence, leaving the people to their own devices, would be terrifying darkness indeed.

Those who have been in major earthquakes like this one will understand the fear.

“When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God!’”

Some of the women who cared for Jesus and his followers were there including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

As it got on toward evening, a rich man who was also a disciple of Jesus, Joseph from Arimathea, went and asked Pilate for the body. Upon getting permission, Joseph wrapped the body in a “clean linen cloth and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.”

This means that the two Marys were witnesses. This would count for more today than it would have then (because they were women), but still it is mentioned.

The next day was the day after the preparation for the Passover. Some of the leading Jews went to Pilate and asked that the tomb be secured so that the disciples would not steal the body and claim a resurrection. “‘Take a guard,’ Pilate answered. ‘Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.’ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.”

## **Matthew 28**

**2010 February 26<sup>th</sup> for March 26<sup>th</sup>**

The final chapter of Matthew details the resurrection of Jesus, his appearance to the women, and the cover up by both the religious and civil authorities. Notice that the guards reporting that they had been asleep on duty was an admission of a serious dereliction of duty with potentially severe consequences but still they were willing to report inaccurately for the money. The book ends with the Great Commission.

Jesus had been put in the tomb before sunset on Friday, which began the Sabbath. The story picks up early Sunday morning.

“After the Sabbath; at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes

were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Now I have told you.’

“So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

“While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, ‘You are to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep’.” If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.’ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”

Did the chief priests believe the guards or did they think they were babbling? If they did believe them, why did they make up a lie, just to maintain the status quo? Does nothing ever change? If they did not believe them, why did they bother to cover for them and go to the length of paying them off? Just to keep things quiet?

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Gospel of Matthew 2010 March 1<sup>st</sup> for 29<sup>th</sup>**

In this reading of Matthew, I have directly quoted most everything Jesus said in an attempt not to interpret it away from what Jesus really said and meant. I have not referred to my own notes from the prior read-through five years ago except to determine that it was in fact five years ago when we were first in Matthew.

Who am I to paraphrase the Son of God, after all? Much that I have learned in the last five years makes me think I understand it all less now rather than more.

On this reading, however, I have identified more closely with Jesus and understood God's standard better. The extensive teaching in the sermon on the mount circumscribes most of the issues of life. The insider versus outsider theme in virtually all of the parables seems to argue against universalism. Also, we see Jesus being human, yelling at everything from fig trees to his followers to bad weather. Some of this, I am led to believe, is the expectation and understanding of mid-eastern culture. Some of it sure sounds to me like exasperation. Time to move to the back of the boat where there is a cushion, pastor Kreig Gammelgard says.

Denials of the resurrection seem implausible, and this is the crux of Christianity, without which it becomes just another OK discipline for your short life here on earth. It is always astonishing the degree to which those at the highest levels of authority can be the most corrupt and hypocritical. Buying off the tomb guards is clearly illegal and unethical at many levels. This corruption appears to be the cost of a privileged establishment in society, that is, a system in which those with the greatest responsibility also receive great privilege with it. Privilege seems usually to be more important than integrity to the rules for most people. We saw Jesus make the opposite choice, but he was the only one in the story who chose that way when things were at their very worst. Perhaps this is the meaning of "all have sinned and fallen short."

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