



MATTHEW

BOOK TWO

MISSION OF THE KING



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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

The material in this guide is intended to supplement the sermons preached on Sunday mornings. These booklets are prepared months in advance of the actual sermon series. As a result, as the Spirit leads, a preacher's sermon may diverge from the ideas presented each week.

The study guide is designed to be used by individuals, families, and groups. Before you begin to read, pray that the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see what He is teaching you in the Bible, and that He will give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.

Next, read the given Biblical text. Then read it again. Take notes. Underline your Bible. Write down questions. Once you have spent time in God's Word, then work through the study and write out answers to the questions. Resist any temptation to skip over the personal questions. Though these questions are sometimes the most penetrating and difficult, they are designed to help you apply these truths to your life.

After you have spent time in the text on your own, it is important for you to share with others who are wrestling with the same text. The Bible is meant to be read and studied in community. So take the time to do it on your own first, and then consider gathering with others to discuss what you have learned.

Each section of this guide is organized to help individuals and groups go **D.E.E.P.** into gospel truth:

- **D- DISCUSS SERMON:** A key verse and a summary to help the group discuss the biblical text, answer basic questions, and review the sermon.
- **E- EXCHANGE VIEWS:** A general discussion question encouraging individuals to share their first reactions to the text or sermon. Often, this will inspire deeper examination into the text in a particular direction.
- **E-EXAMINE TEXT:** A series of questions related to the biblical text and the sermon. These questions are designed to help the group dig deeper into what the text actually says and, together, determine what it might mean.
- **P- PERSONALIZE TRUTH:** One or two questions to help apply the text to your personal life and experience.



HOW TO DOWNLOAD PAST SERMONS

Should you miss a sermon, there are several ways to listen, read, or watch sermons from this series. Please visit our network website and click on SERMONS at www.3strand.org. In addition to the sermon you are looking for, you will also find past sermon series preached at various 3Strand Network Churches.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE WITH YOUR FAMILY

The Bible teaches us that parents, not pastors, are responsible for the biblical and spiritual training of their kids. As you are studying and learning, you need to teach your kids, share with them how God is challenging you, and impart to them a passion for Christ, His Word, and His Way (See Deuteronomy 6.4-9). Parents, we encourage you to spend the week preparing your family, especially the older children, for the public gathering and the sermon on Sunday. Here are some specific ways to prepare your family for worship:

Family preparation should always include reading of the passage that will be preached on Sunday. As you read, remember that the intent is not to teach them everything about the passage. Not only do you want to expose them to the Word of God, you also want to demonstrate its importance in your lives.

Family preparation should always include an age-appropriate discussion about the text. Following the reading, begin an age-appropriate discussion using the booklet as a guide. Ask probing questions that fit their specific maturity as they look forward to sitting under the preached Word on Sunday.

Family preparation should always include prayer. This should be done as a family and individually. First, pray to understand the text. Then, pray for the needs of your own family, for the church, and for our city. Individually read and pray with each of your children throughout the week and try to dialogue with them as individuals about the passage.

*Your efforts, not your expertise, will set an example for your children, will make the church gathering more meaningful, and will help your family feel more cared for.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE WITH A GROUP

The best way to use this guide is with a small group. As smaller expressions of our larger church body, small groups are where Christians can strive to learn together, love together, serve together, and go on mission together. Tim Keller has suggested that, *"The Primary Goal for the fellowship group is to develop a Christian community where Jesus Christ is experienced in his presence and power."* In other words, these groups are intended to be more than a group to "hang out with" and more than a typical bible study.

What should you expect as part of a small group?

- A welcoming atmosphere for strugglers and real sinners (Christ is for real sinners!) "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Mt. 9:13; "If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." 1 Jn. 2:1
- A family learning to live out of the Gospel "As you have received Christ Jesus, so live in Him..." Col.2:6 "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge..." Eph. 3:17-19; "Let us love one another, for love comes from God...He sent His one and only Son" 1 Jn. 4:7,9
- A safe place to share your struggles, confess your sins, and expect to be pointed to Jesus. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..." Rom. 8:1; "Confess your sins to one another..." James 5:16
- A family learning to celebrate grace! "Rejoice with those who rejoice..." Rom.12:15
- A place to be quick to listen and sympathize with another's struggles, and respond with compassion and prayer, and if you can, practical help to meet the need. Avoid superficial, pat answers that don't address and encourage the heart. "Be devoted to one another..." Rom. 12:10; "Everybody should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry..." James 1:19; "Pray for each other..." James 5:16; "Honor one another above yourselves...Rom. 12:10b; "mourn with those who mourn..." Rom.12:15

- A place to worship God by enjoying one another and God's good gifts (new people, food, art, etc.) "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate...." Luke 15

As you can see, the Gospel is never static, but moves us into grateful action. As we hear and believe the Gospel again and again, the love of Christ working within our hearts energizes us to practical works of love. We begin to ask, "What does loving my neighbor really look like?" This means that we will also want to avoid anything in our group that does not have this goal of Gospel motivation and love.

What should you not expect in a small group?

- A lengthy teaching monologue or lecture by one person.
- An overly- academic group of theological debaters who don't address matters/struggles of the heart, and how the Gospel applies to them (see I Cor.13:1).
- An affinity group to make you happy (Although sweet fellowship in Christ should occur and will bring joy!).
- A place to have your every need met (Although as we serve one another in love, many of your true needs will be met, prayed for, and clarified).

Introduction

BOOK TWO | THE MISSION OF THE KING | CH. 8-13

THE ISSUE OF MIRACLES

As we move from the Sermon on the Mount, we enter into the next phase of the book of Matthew. We move from Jesus being defined by His words, to Jesus being defined by His actions. The actions of Jesus that set Him apart and define His lordship most clearly are His miracles. In chapters 8-13 of Matthew will encounter a great number of unexplainable events done by Jesus.

Miracles in the Bible have become a major stumbling block for any person who exists in this post-Enlightenment world. We have been taught to believe that the Laws of Nature are the authority – that they hold the power of truth. Thus miracles are a direct challenge to the very structure and fabric of the world we live in. The basis for this foundation comes from David Hume – a philosopher from the 18th century. While he wrote a long time ago, his explanation of why miracles are not possible have led to the modern dismissal of what the Bible claims to be true. As an introduction to the Mission of the King, I want to explain these arguments that attempt to destroy the Bible's credibility, show you why they fall short, and then give you a new way to look at the miracles of Jesus.

THE BASIS FOR DOUBT

The way that Hume sets a foundation for his critique of miracles is to give 'true' statements and then show how taken together they denounce the possibility of miracles all together. The four 'true' statements that Hume uses are:

1. Natural law is by definition a description of a regular occurrence.
2. A miracle is by definition a rare occurrence.
3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare.
4. A wise man always bases his belief on the greater evidence.

If these four statements are true, then: **a wise man should never believe in miracles.**

The issue with the logic is that it assumes that you will agree with his unstated starting point: *belief rests entirely on human observation*. But personal experience is NOT the only means to developing belief. Christianity is based in relationship rather than experience. Our understanding of the world is informed by our understanding of God. This means that Christians have a completely different starting point than Hume.

In the same way that you have to accept the conclusion if you agree with the four statements, if they are not true, then we don't have to jump to the stated 'fact.' Specifically, while it is true that: natural laws are based on observation, that regular occurrences happen more often than irregular ones, and that it would be unwise to base your ideology on rare occurrences, this would only be true if the reason for the rarity was unexplained. If our faith was in miracles and our trust was that miracles would occur at every moment, then our faith would be in vain. Our hope would be in an uncontrolled, outlying event.

Miracles are not just rare occurrences; they are specific instances where God has suspended the regular order of the universe with the purpose of sending a message to His people. The rare, unexplainable nature of miracles – the very fact that causes Hume to reject them – points God's people to the fact that there is something more powerful than the Laws of Nature. The existence of the rare strengthens faith.

THE BASIS FOR FAITH

Hebrews gives us a definition for faith:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. **Hebrews 11.1-3***

Faith comes from the inward work of the Holy Spirit changing our hearts to believe (not from us arriving at a decision based on factual evidence). For every person who believes in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, the miracle of transformation is part of their experience. In one way, the experience of one of these rare, outlying events that goes against the Laws of Nature is the basis for faith.

It is much more than that, because as Christians we are not called to believe 'just because.' God doesn't ask us to believe in spite of the evidence in front of us. Instead, the things that we see simply fit into a different context. It is not up to us to define what could and could not happen, because: *we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible*.

Once you accept that truth, ALL THINGS BECOME POSSIBLE. It is no longer about everything fitting into a dead system, but everything being carried along by a living God. The idea that things could happen that defy earthly explanation has a very good reason: it is not of this world. What modern thinking fails to even consider is an all-powerful God that is not bound by the laws of the world He created.

Miracles become, for the Christian, much more than some hard to believe stories. Miracles are God placing a very personal stamp on His creation. Miracles are the places where God comes close to us to remind us that He is here.

HOW WE SHOULD READ THE MIRACLES

Not only does this starting point affect how you defend or prove the supernatural, but it also changes how you read the gospel account of Jesus' miracles. A good summary of this appears in Tim Keller's book, ***The Reason for God***. It says:

I don't want to be too hard on people who struggle with the idea of God's intervention in the natural order. Miracles are hard to believe in, and they should be. In Matthew 28 we are told that the apostles met the risen Jesus on a mountainside in Galilee: 'When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted' (verse 17).

That is a remarkable admission. Here is the author of an early Christian document telling us that some of the founders of Christianity couldn't believe the miracle of the resurrection, even when they were looking straight at Him with their eyes and touching Him with their hands. There is no other reason for this to be in the account unless it really happened. The passage shows us several things. It is a warning not to think that only we modern, scientific people have to struggle with the idea of the miraculous, while ancient, more primitive people did not. The apostles responded like any group of modern people—some believed their eyes and some didn't. It is also an encouragement to patience. All the apostles

ended up as great leaders in the church, but some had a lot more trouble believing than others.

The most instructive thing about this text is, however, what it says about the purpose of Biblical miracles. They lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to worship, to awe and wonder. Jesus's miracles in particular were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce. You never see Him say something like: 'See that tree over there? Watch me make it burst into flames!' Instead, He used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead.

Why? We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible tells us that God did not originally make the world to have disease, hunger, and death in it. Jesus has come to redeem where it is wrong and heal the world where it is broken. His miracles are not just proofs that He has power but also wonderful foretastes of what He is going to do with that power. Jesus's miracles are not just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.

The miracles of Jesus are much more than events set up to make us say: wow! They are designed specifically to help us to know God better. To peer past the broken nature that we exist in to something better, something beyond.

As we move into the next section of Matthew, look for these glimpses of beauty and let it stir your affections for our great and powerful God! The Mission of the King is to show you His greatness.

His miracles are not just proofs that He has power but also wonderful foretastes of what He is going to do with that power. Jesus's miracles are not just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.
- Tim Keller

THE POWER OF THE KING

MATTHEW 8.1-17

WEEK 1 | HEALING AS PROOF

For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith." V.9-10

Immediately after preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to display his saving and healing power as miraculous proofs of his identity as the Son of God. In three examples we see both Jesus power and compassion. With authoritative words Jesus is able to cure the incurable disease of leprosy of a man who came near to him in the crowd and heals the paralyzed servant of a Roman soldier without even seeing him. With his touch, Jesus instantly relieves the fever of Peter's mother-in-law and restores her to full strength. Jesus showed compassion for who came to him, those who were unable to come to him, and those who he saw that needed healing. In each case Jesus was willing and worked quickly to end suffering. In holding up the centurion's faith as an example and extending healing to his servant Jesus is clear his mission will not be limited to the nation of Israel but will extend from the east to the west.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Why would Jesus tell the leper not to tell anyone of healing, go to the priest, and give the offering the Law required for his healing?
3. What characteristics of Jesus does the centurion highlight in his appeal? What does this tell us about those who will recline at the table and those who will be thrown out?
4. Read **Isaiah 53.2-5** how does the description of Jesus work in verse 3 differ from the quote of Isaiah in Matt 8:17? How are diseases, sorrows, and grief similar?
5. How does Peter's mother-in-law respond to the healing work of Jesus? If Jesus has saved or healed you have you responded in the same way?

MATTHEW 8.18-22; 9.9-17

WEEK 2 | THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." 9.12-13

The cost of salvation is free to us because Jesus paid it all on the cross; free does not mean easy. The cost of following Jesus as a disciple is great because it requires renouncing the life we have been saved from and walking the new life we have been saved to. Those who hoping following Jesus will make their lives more comfortable or without hardship, will become quickly disillusioned as they are lead into difficult places. Being a disciple can often require forgoing every economic and social benefit you currently enjoy for the sake of following Jesus. This was the case of Matthew, the tax collector, who when called by Jesus to "Follow me" literally left all the wealth, power, and influence he had (and stood to gain) serving the king of Rome to follow Jesus. Matthew responded to Jesus call by celebrating with his fellow sinners and introducing them to his new king.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What do Jesus responses to the scribe and the man tell us about the level of commitment Jesus requires of his followers? Why does Jesus want them to count the cost before they begin?
3. Jesus' followers are challenged for not fasting as other religious people do. What does Jesus answers tell us about the future rewards of discipleship?
4. Read **1 Peter 2.11**. What does this tell the followers of Jesus their status is in the world during this life? Read the two preceding verses, what does this tell Christians about their true status?
5. What areas of your life has Jesus called you to leave behind to follow him? What are you still holding on to that keeps you from embracing Him fully?

MATTHEW 8.23-9.8

WEEK 3 | AUTHORITY OVER NATURE

For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." 9.5-6

There is fierce hostility to the reign of the king in both the natural and spiritual world. We see in these verses that this hostility can make lives dangerous as storms rage, difficult and destructive as demon possessed men block passage and terrorize a region, and debilitating as broken body and sin leaves a man physically paralyzed and spiritually empty. These forces appear overwhelmingly strong and insurmountable. Jesus shows that his power over these things is exceedingly greater than their ability to harm people or even pigs. Jesus rebukes the storm into calm, cast the demons into swine, and both forgives and heals the paralytic. All those who witness Jesus' divine power in these incidents respond with great fear and awe. For some the fear meant reverent worship and for others it meant rejection and terror. We are hopeless to stand against the storms, spirits, sin, and situation that seek to overcome us but none of these can resist the saving words of Jesus.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. The demons cry out to Jesus in verse 29, what does this tell us about the scope of power and authority the devil and demons have when compared to Jesus?
3. Jesus forgives the paralytic of his sin, then he heals his body. What does this teach us about Jesus concern for both our spiritual and physical health?
4. Read **Acts 16.16-19**. How is the reaction of the slave girls' owners similar to the herdsmen overseeing the pigs? What are the primary motivations of each?
5. What are the storms or situations in your life that have seemed insurmountable or overwhelming? If you have cried out to Jesus in those times how have you seen him respond?

MATTHEW 9.18-34

WEEK 4 | COMPASSION OF THE KING

For she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. v.21-22

Jesus shows his great compassion for the long suffering, the grief stricken, and the blind. A ruler with authority over people was powerless to save his own daughter. He places his faith for her life in the heart and hands of Jesus. Traveling to the home, a woman afflicted with a blood ailment believes reaching out to Jesus will end her dozen years of pain. Both have faith in the ability and willingness of Jesus to heal and save. Jesus miraculously cures the woman and returns the ruler's daughter to life. The news of great works of Jesus cannot be contained. As news spreads two blind men hear and believe if Jesus can raise a girl from the dead he is able to restore their sight. Many are in need of Jesus' healing, salvation and compassion. We can take great hope knowing Jesus healing one does not limit his ability to save others. Our faith should grow as our eyes are opened to the inexhaustible compassion of our king.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. How does the ruler present his petition to Jesus? What does this show about the heart attitude and belief of those seeking help and healing from Jesus?
3. The woman with the discharge of blood does not approach Jesus directly or even verbally. How has her faith made her well?
4. Read **John 11.32-44**. What do these verses teach us about the depth of compassion Jesus has for the grief stricken?
5. What is the reaction to the blind men given sight by Jesus? How have you responded to the healing works Jesus has done in your life?

MATTHEW 9.35-10.15

WEEK 5 | THE LABORERS ARE FEW

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." v. 36-38

The view of the world that Jesus models for us is compassion. We should not look to wage a war with people over various issues. We should not view the culture with an: us versus them mentality. Instead, we should see all people in the world as *harassed and helpless*. All people are in need of a shepherd to guide them through the reality of sin and brokenness. All people need a savior. The world is not simply a battleground on which to win a culture war, but a great garden with souls that need to be harvested. As Jesus sends out His disciples, He sends them out with this mission in mind: call the sheep back to the shepherd. Many will ignore you. Some will ridicule you. The mission doesn't change. All people need to be called into loving relationship with their Father God.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Why does Jesus tell His disciples to *pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest*, instead of just giving them marching orders? What is the importance of prayer to mission?
3. How does the view of the world as *sheep without a shepherd* help us to understand all of the chaos of the world?
4. Read **2 Corinthians 5.11-21**. How does Paul define our mission to a broken world? What does it mean to live out *the ministry of reconciliation*?
5. Do you see yourself as a laborer for the harvest? What does your labor look like?

MATTHEW 10.16-25

WEEK 6 | THE APOSTLES ARE WARNED

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. v. 16

The response to the gospel is a mixed bag. The same story that is life to one person is insulting to another. When insulted, people will respond with anger, abuse, and hatred. Jesus warns His disciples that they are going to be persecuted *and you will be hated by all for my name's sake*. His encouragement to them is to be *wise as serpents and innocent as doves*. Jesus teaches them to be both wise and discerning, while also being peaceful and innocent. This balance of peace and power, careful yet bold, wise but willing to be taken advantage of, is the struggle of living out the Christian life. In all of this, we must be careful not to become simply serpents: strategizing in every situation and trusting our own strength. Nor are we to be simply doves: so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good. Instead, we are called to persevere, to keep striving for the glory of God, no matter what situation we are placed in.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What does it look like to be *wise as serpents? Innocent as doves?*
3. Jesus tells them: *do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour (10.19)*. How should we understand this in relation to being wise as serpents?
4. Read **1 Corinthians 4.1-5**. How does this view of self help us to live well in a world of persecution? What does it mean for being serpents/doves?
5. Have you experienced persecution in the name of Jesus Christ? What did this look like? How did you respond?

MATTHEW 10.26-33

WEEK 7 | THE APOSTLES ARE COMFORTED

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. v. 26-27

It is easy to be overcome by what is right in front of you. When we focus on what is right in front of us, we can easily miss out on the truth. In this twisted world, the truth is always buried under a few feet of irony, sarcasm, and lies. The encouragement that Jesus gives to His disciples is that what they can't always see; the truth that stays hidden, is on their side. While the tide often seems against us, and God seems to be losing this battle or that one, the truth is, he is securely in control of the world, down to the hairs on our heads. We can handle the gospel fearlessly, because there is nothing that can be done to take away the only thing that really matters: our relationship to God. One day, it will all be revealed, and what is right before us will be the TRUTH.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. How does Jesus describe the sovereignty of God? Does this take away our freedom? How do these verses clarify this paradox?
3. Why is it so hard to hold on to the eternal truth of Jesus in the daily grind of life? What helps us with this?
4. Watch the Youtube video for the song **Farther Along** by Josh Garrels: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IctD9l4F-ag> How does this capture the essences of these verses? How does knowing that one day Jesus will be revealed fully to all people help us in the day to day struggle of life?
5. In our culture, what does it look like to take what is whispered by God and to proclaim it from the housetops? What opportunities for this do you have in your life?

MATTHEW 10.34-11.1

WEEK 8 | THE APOSTLES ARE INSTRUCTED

And whoever 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. v. 38-39

The gospel creates a shift in our life. This shift is not only evident in the 180 degree changes (death to life, pursuit of sin to holiness); it also shows itself in priority changes. When we are presented with the profound eternal goodness of being in relationship with God, it changes how we look at all other relationships. Even the deepest relationships that we have take a back seat to our relationship with God; we become willing to stand for Jesus, even against our family if need be. We also see a priority shift in who we pursue relationship with. As Christians, our life is no longer about surrounding ourselves with people who give us what we want, but people who we can support (and who can support us) on the mission of bringing glory to God. The gospel does not just separate the world into good and bad things, but it gives us a means to be able to prioritize what is best, and to let all other things, even good things, submit to Jesus.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What does Jesus mean when He says He has come to bring a sword? How is this different from your understanding of Jesus?
3. What is the reward system that Jesus lays out in **v.40-42**? What does this have to do with priorities and sacrifice?
4. Read **Revelation 19.11-16**. How does this description of Jesus' second coming match with His description in Matthew 10? What does this prioritize in our life?
5. What part of your life needs to be reoriented in relation to Jesus the judge? What good things need to be set aside or submitted to His mission in this world?

MATTHEW 11.2-24

WEEK 9 | DOUBT IN THE FACE OF PROOF

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." v. 4-6

We all doubt. In all of our lives there are times and circumstances that make us revisit what we believe. As John sits in prison, he has his moment of doubt. He sends a messenger to Jesus to ask the question directly: are you the one? Jesus gives John the answer, then turns around and teaches that John was part of the proof (as the coming of Elijah) without ever knowing it. In the same way, we are people with insufficient faith, who are being used to powerfully profess the truth of Jesus to the world. Rather than getting caught up in how to be better or what we need to do to be used by God, we need to simply pursue Him. We need to want to know Him so badly that we are willing to confront the difficult question: are you really the ONE? Out of this, God can make the world see through us.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What does Jesus use to prove that He is the Messiah? What proof has He provided you in your doubt?
3. What accounts for the difference between Jesus' response to John's doubt and His response to the doubt of the cities (**v.20-24**)?
4. Read **Isaiah 8.11-15**. What should our response to doubt be? What is God's promise?
5. What aspects of the Bible cause you the most doubt? Where do you go to work this out? Based on this scripture, what are some practical steps to combatting doubt?

MATTHEW 11.25-30

WEEK 10 | THE KEY TO BELIEF

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. v. 28-30

Jesus makes two things very clear about our salvation: without His active work of revelation we could not be saved, and God specifically set up salvation as something that could not be found apart from this. This is a difficult truth about ourselves, as well as about God. It leads us to numerous questions about those whom Jesus does not choose. Jesus teaches this truth, not to give us clues toward a mystery we are supposed to fully understand, but to make it clear that salvation belongs to the Lord. He is speaking to those who are His, making sure that we understand the relationship that we have. The truth of God revealed in His loving, effective grace on the hearts of His people, gives us a God that we can go to in our pain and struggle. He is not a God who expects us to maintain perfection in order to stay in His 'good graces,' but a God who gives us the grace we need daily.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What does it mean that: *you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding*? How does this make you feel about God?
3. How do these verses describe the believer? How is this different than how you think of yourself?
4. Read **1 John 5.1-5**. How is the light burden of Jesus described here? How does Christian living produce an easy yoke (free us from the weight of life)?
5. Our default in life is to fix what is wrong with us. How does the reality of grace change the way you can approach growth and maturity in the faith?

MATTHEW 12.1-21

WEEK 11 | LORD OF THE SABBATH

I tell you, something greater than the temple is here...For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. v. 6-8

Much of the Jews' antagonism toward Jesus centered on their view of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was peculiarly important to the Jew. Just as circumcision marked him as a son of Abraham, so the Jew's practice of the Sabbath evidenced their relationship with God's law. The Sabbath was the 4th commandment given to Moses. The Jews had created hundreds of laws to protect them from breaking this commandment. Intended as a gift to bless men, the Jews turned it into a law to curse them. The Jews are only concerned with external performance. Jesus challenges their interpretation of Scripture by declaring His ministry to be greater than temples, and Himself greater than the Law. Instead of embracing the "rest" found in Him, the Jews plan His destruction.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Look up the word "Sabbath" in a concordance. According to the Old Testament, what does obeying the Sabbath require?
3. Are the Sabbath laws binding today? Why or why not?
4. The Pharisees tried to keep the Sabbath by restricting what a person could do on that day. The gospel helps us avoid this sterile approach to worship. God's law changes from something that condemns to something that blesses. What are your current Sabbath rhythms? What are some ways you could implement a Sabbath rest?
5. His Sabbath observances, and authoritative claims, were hindrances to the Jews following Jesus. What things are most likely to keep people who understand the Gospel from believing in Jesus?"

MATTHEW 12.22-37

WEEK 12 | THE BLASPHEMY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. v. 31

The heart of this passage focuses on the true identity of Jesus as evidenced by His power to heal. It is most remembered, however, for Jesus' revelation of an "unforgivable sin". As scholars argue over defining it, Christians worry over accidentally committing it. Meanwhile, any practical application of Jesus' teaching is lost in the pursuit of something that God clearly didn't want us to understand. Just as no one ever rejects Jesus unintentionally, no one ever ascribes the power of the Holy Spirit to Satan accidentally. What Jesus does want us to be careful to do is to weigh our words carefully—especially when ascribing things to God or Satan. Our words, according to Jesus, show the condition of our hearts. That is why Jesus can say that words will condemn us or justify us, since they reveal more about our hearts than about what we are talking about.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Read Leviticus 24.10-6. According to this story, what is blasphemy? What does it mean to blaspheme God in this way?
3. What do you think is the unforgiveable sin? Why is the unforgiveable sin unforgiveable? Can a Christian commit the unforgivable sin?
4. Discuss the core difference between a Christian and a Non-Christian? What AND who accounts for the existence of this difference? How does the analogy of the trees help to strengthen this truth?
5. What is a careless word and what do you think it means when Jesus says, "people will give an account for every careless word they speak." How does that make you feel?

MATTHEW 12.38-50

WEEK 13 | THE DEMAND OF A SIGN

...An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign of the prophet of Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. v. 39-40

The Scribes and Pharisees ask for a sign. In essence, they are asking for proof that Jesus is who He says He is—challenging His authority. Even though Jesus has healed and even raised the dead at this point, skepticism remains. Skepticism is what Jesus says marks his generation. Though Jesus refuses to give a sign, he promises to produce a future sign which will prove Him to be greater than Jonah and wiser than Solomon. He also warns those who are questioning Him about their impending judgment should not they not choose to listen to Him. Through a parable, he cautions them about any attempt at a half-hearted response to His authority. Any feigned repentance will only serve to make them twice the children of the devil they already were. Jesus has no time for strangers, friends, or even family who make requests without making commitment.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Knowing Jesus has already performed many miracles, what is the real reason the Scribes and Pharisees are asking for a sign?
3. Who was Jonah? How is Jesus the better Jonah? Who is Solomon? How is Jesus the better Solomon? Why does Jesus use these examples?
4. Why do you think Jesus responds to His family the way that He does? Who does Jesus identify as His true family?
5. Much like Jesus, we live in a generation full of skeptics. What signs do the people of today's culture demand as proof of Christianity's legitimacy or Jesus' authority? What sign does Jesus give?

MATTHEW 13.1-23

WEEK 14 | THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. V.16-17

Jesus frequently uses parables in his teaching ministry to convey large concepts into concise stories. For those who seek to follow Jesus these parables illuminate their understanding of the King and his kingdom. For others with no relationship with Jesus they will only increase confusion and harden hearts. The parable of the sower shows many will hear the gospel of the kingdom preached and proclaimed. However, as seed is widely sown on a variety of ground, the gospel is met with a variety of responses dependent on the condition of the heart the message lands on. For some the enemy steals what has been given, some have hard hearts that prevent the truth to take deep root, others become more captivated with the riches of the world than glory of the kingdom, while some with fertile hearts have the message go down deep where it grows and produces abundant fruit. Ultimately there are only two types of ground and two types of hearts, those who receive the message and bear fruit and those that do not.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What does Jesus say is his purpose in teaching with parables? What does this teach us about the compatibility of God's role and individual's responsibility in receiving or rejecting the gospel?
3. How does the evil one and a hostile environment prevent gospel penetration and growth?
4. Read **1 Cor 2:12-16**. What distinction is made between those who understand the word of God and those who rely on human wisdom? What assurance is given to the "spiritual person?"
5. In what ways have individual trials, concerns, or worldly pursuits prevented the gospel from sinking deeper into your heart and life? What is currently hindering you from bearing more fruit?

MATTHEW 13.24-30,34-43; 47-50

WEEK 15 | THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM COME

He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. V.37-40

Jesus explains the world is a field where two types of plants from different seed grow side by side. Good seed sown by Jesus and his gospel produce children of the kingdom who grow to life giving wheat fit for harvest. The others are weeds sown in by the devil. They will have to be separated from the wheat at the time of harvest. The evil one's seed do not produce life but only bring death and will be thrown in to fiery furnace. This picture of final judgment and the end of the age is both vivid and sobering for the "sons of the evil one", as Jesus description twice includes fire, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Good cannot dwell with evil, for kingdom of God to remain good it must be inhabited by children of the Father and separated from the work and children of the enemy. Christians should humbly and faithfully engage the world with the good news that children of the king are adopted by faith in the saving work of the Son.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Discuss the role of angels in the work of separating the evil and the righteous.
3. Verse 41-42 say causes of sin and lawbreakers will be gathered and cast into the furnace, how does this conflict with the sentiment "God hates the sin, not the sinner?"
4. Read **Daniel 12:1-3**. What is promised in this description of the end of the age? How can this give hope and assurance?
5. How should this picture of eternal judgment for the wicked and bright glory for the righteous motivate us to share the gospel with all people? How does God provide righteousness for sinners?

MATTHEW 13.31-33; 44-46; 51-52

WEEK 16 | THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM OF POWER

...the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (V.45-46)

Through short parables, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed tree, leaven, a treasure hidden in a field, and a fine pearl. On the surface, Jesus' stories seem disconnected from one another. In truth, they reveal different aspects of the Kingdom and its power. The first two parables speak about the far reaching influence of the Kingdom. Even though it begins as something small and weak, God grows it into something powerful and far-reaching. God builds on a small and seemingly insignificant scale, made most evident in the ignoble crucifixion of a Galilean peasant that leads to the glorious resurrection of the Son of God. The second two parables seem to be teaching the same thing—that the kingdom of heaven is like the discovery of something wonderful. Both show that, when found, the Kingdom of God eclipses the power of anything else might have over us. When the Kingdom of God is “discovered”, it becomes supreme in our lives. This is not a choice as much as it is a natural response.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. What do the parables about the mustard seed and leaven teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven? How does the “smallness” of God's Kingdom impact your view of “seeking the Kingdom first”?
3. How can thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven make you joyful now and in the future? What is the difference between just giving Jesus your life and just giving Him your afterlife?
4. What is the most powerful earthly treasure that fights to rule your heart? What would it mean for you to value the Kingdom of Heaven like the man who found the “Great Pearl”?
5. Why do you think Jesus concluded His seven parables with a question: “Have you understood all these things?”

MATTHEW 13.53-58

WEEK 17 | THE REACTION TO JESUS

And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household. And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (V.57-58)

For most of his life, Jesus worked and lived in Nazareth. Throughout His ministry, Jesus made his home in Capernaum, but Nazareth was always his hometown. At about the age of 30, Jesus had left to begin his ministry. In a very short time, Jesus had become "famous" throughout the Holy Land. Now, he returned home to bless those who knew Him best. They were astonished by His wisdom and power--the "Carpenter's Son" had grown up. But instead a parade of appreciation to honor their Home-town hero, Jesus was met with a pageant of opposition. His teaching elicited admiration, but their interest in Jesus never extended beyond the flesh. Their knowledge of his youth proved to be a stumbling-block to their faith. His fellow-villagers, even His own family, refused to receive Him as a prophet because they had known Him as an impoverished uneducated carpenter with brothers and sisters. In their own way, they discriminated against a prophet that didn't meet their expectations. Jesus was unable to minister to hometown, not for a lack of power, but a lack of belief.

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you? Where were you most encouraged, intrigued, challenged?
2. Why do you think Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth?
3. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, and lived in Capernaum. Each of these cities represented a different time of mission in His life. Share your Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Capernaum.
4. Read Matthew 21.22 and James 1.6. What do you think is the relationship between our faith and the presence of Jesus' "mighty works" in our lives?
5. Does familiarity breed contempt? How might the knowledge of one's personal history cause some of those close to us to doubt the genuineness of our faith? How should we respond to this?

Appendix 1: THE SABBATH

SABBATH [säb´əth] (Heb. *šabbāt*; Gk. *sabbaton*).† The seventh day of the week, observed as a day of rest in Israelite and Jewish religion since earliest times. Inasmuch as every new day was considered to begin with sunset, the Sabbath begins with sunset of Friday evening (Neh. 13:19). Indications of an origin of the Sabbath outside Israel have often been sought. Canaanite seven-day periods are attested, but they were not a regularly observed measure of time and so have only a distant, if any, relation to the origin of the Israelite Sabbath. In Babylonia the day of the full moon (Akk. *šapattū*) was considered particularly auspicious. The binding of Israel's observance to a mathematical calculation, every seventh day, rather than to observance of lunar phases helped to exclude worship of heavenly bodies as deities. But new moon and Sabbath are mentioned together as days for religious gatherings (Isa. 1:13; Ezek. 46:1), feasting (Hos. 2:11 [MT 13]), and cessation of work (Amos 8:5) and as days especially propitious for seeking divine aid (2 Kgs. 4:23). In Babylonia every seventh day was regarded as an inauspicious day, but Israel's Sabbath was not so regarded; rather, it was a day of rest and religious assembly. A Kenite origin for the Sabbath has been suggested on a number of grounds, but this is far from certain. Indeed, all that can be said with certainty about the origin of Sabbath observance is that it is apparently as old as Israel's religion itself.

The Sabbath regulations of the Old Testament are intended mainly to reinforce the provision of that day as a day of rest (cf. Heb. *šābat* “stop”). No work is to be done or allowed on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:10; 23:12; Deut. 25:13–14). The prohibition of work allows no distinction between seasons; even in harvest time the Sabbath is to be observed (Exod. 34:21). No burdens are to be carried or loaded onto animals on that day (Neh. 13:15; Jer. 17:21–22). Food to be eaten on the Sabbath is to be prepared the day before, just as the manna for the Sabbath was gathered on the preceding day (Exod. 16:5, 23–30). No food may be bought from Gentiles (Neh. 10:31; 13:16, 20–21) nor a fire kindled on the Sabbath (Exod. 35:3). The penalty for an individual breaking the Sabbath was death (31:14–15; Num. 15:32–36). **For the whole nation, Sabbath-breaking was one of the offenses that led to exile (Neh. 9:13–14; Jer. 17:24–27; Ezek. 20:23–24).** **The Sabbath is to be both a sign of and a time for remembering the distinct relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel (Exod.**

31:13; Ezek. 20:20). Because of the command that slaves not be put to work on that day, it is a reminder of Israel's enslavement in Egypt and subsequent deliverance by God (Deut. 5:15). In particular, God's creation of the world in six days and his resting on the seventh is to be called to mind (Gen. 2:2–3; Exod. 20:11; 31:17). The Sabbath is to be a time when the worshippers of God are gathered (Lev. 23:3). The tabernacle's Bread of the Presence was to be set on its table on the Sabbath (24:8; 1 Chr. 9:32), and special sacrifices were made in the temple (Num. 28:9–10; Ezek. 46:4–5). In the synagogues the Sabbath became a time for teaching directed to the whole community (cf. Mark 6:2; Luke. 6:6; 13:10; Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21).

All of the annual festivals were to be observed according to the principles of the Sabbath (Lev. 23) The abandonment of the land by those taken into exile under God's judgment is portrayed as "sabbaths" of the land (Lev 26:34–35; 2 Chr. 36:21; cf. Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10); thus the extension of the Sabbath principle present in the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee (Lev. 25) becomes in retrospect a metaphor for both judgment and hope. An aspect of the eschatological hopes of the last chapters of Isaiah is the restoration of Sabbath-observance and its extension to all peoples in accord with the universalization of the worship of Israel's God (Isa. 56:2, 4–7; 58:13–14; 66:23; cf. Lam. 2:6).

In postbiblical Judaism the Sabbath regulations have been elaborated, again with a view to reinforcing the provision of a day of rest, the violation of which could only have dire consequences. (These regulations may be suspended, however, where the saving of a life is at stake.) The definition of forbidden activities developed largely on the basis of thirty-nine such classes of work listed in Mishnah Šabb. vii.2. One controversial restriction was the refusal to fight if an enemy attacked on a Sabbath (1 Macc. 2:32–41; 9:43–49; 2 Macc. 6:11; 15:1–5). A SABBATH DAY'S JOURNEY, the distance one could travel out of town on the Sabbath (cf. Matt. 24:20; Acts 1:12), came to be specified as 2000 cubits (900 m. [1000 yd.]); but journeys twice as long were permitted if prior to the Sabbath enough food was deposited at a point within a "Sabbath day's journey," by which provision this point became a temporary "home" from which the permitted distance was computed. Such regulations are not felt to be restrictions of freedom, but rather that which specifies and allows the beauty of a time of rest, tranquillity, and worship.

The controversies in which Jesus was involved with regard to the Sabbath all hinged on his authority as a teacher over against the Pharisees' interpreters of the Torah (Matt. 12:1–8; John 5:8–18; 7:21–24; ch. 9) or on the appropriateness of redemptive acts normally proscribed as work on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:9–14 par.; Luke 13:10–16; 14:1–6). The early Christian community probably kept the Sabbath as did other Jews (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56). But with the spread of the Christian faith among Gentiles, the

Sabbath commandments were interpreted eschatologically (cf. Heb. 4:1–10) and increasingly removed from Christian practice. **Paul appears to have been particularly concerned about Gentile Christian misinterpretation of the Sabbath laws as a form of asceticism (Col. 2:16–23; cf. Gal. 4:9–10).** The emerging Christian observance of worship on the first day of the week (cf. John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), although based on the Jewish division of time into seven-day periods, was not interpreted as Sabbath observance on a different day; the Old Testament Sabbath regulations were not applied to Sunday until the fourth century A.D.

Bibliography. N.-E.A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath*. SBL Dissertation 7 (Missoula: 1972); S. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: 1977); R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: 1965) 2:475–483.¹

¹ Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (897–898). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Appendix 2: UNDERSTANDING PARABLES

The Meaning of “Parable” The usual definition of a parable as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning” will not suffice for understanding Jesus’ parables. Nor are parables merely comparisons or illustrations of what Jesus wanted to say. The situation is much more complex with regard to the biblical meaning of the word “parable.” In fact, one must distinguish between three uses of the word “parable” in biblical studies.

First, one should be aware that the Greek word for parable and its Hebrew counterpart are both broad terms and can be used for anything from a proverb to a full-blown allegory, including a riddle, a dark saying, an illustration, a contrast, or a story. For example, the Greek word for parable is used in Luke 4:23 with reference to the saying “physician, heal yourself” and most translations render it as “proverb.” In Mark 3:23 “parables” is used with reference to the riddles Jesus asks the scribes, such as “How can Satan cast out Satan?” Similarly, Mark 13:28 uses “parable” of a simple illustration. In Luke 18:2–5 the unjust judge is *contrasted* with God, who brings justice quickly. If one compares the Hebrew OT and the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the OT), the word for parable is used most frequently with reference to a proverb or dark saying. The broad meaning of “parable,” then, can refer to any of these methods used to stimulate thought.

Second, “parable” can be used of any story with two levels of meaning (literal and figurative) that functions as religious and ethical speech.

Third, “parable” can be used technically in modern studies to distinguish it from other types of stories, such as similitudes, exemplary stories, and allegories. In this case a parable is a fictitious story that narrates a particular event and is usually told in the past tense (e.g., the parable of the lost son). A similitude, however, is a comparison that relates a typical or recurring event in real life and is usually told in the present tense (e.g., Mt 13:31–32). An exemplary story is not a comparison at all; rather, it presents character traits as either positive or negative examples to be imitated or avoided. Usually four exemplary stories are identified: the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–35), the rich fool (12:16–20), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:10–13).

Allegory is the most difficult to define and has caused considerable debate. Usually allegory is defined as “a series of related metaphors.” A metaphor is an implied comparison that does not use “like” or “as.” This definition is used broadly, but it is not entirely satisfactory for two reasons: (1) It does not indicate whether obscurity is an essential element in allegory. Some view allegory as needing to be decoded and as being understandable only to a select few. If, however, the allegory uses customary metaphors that all could understand, it would not be obscure.

(2) It does not specify how much of the story is important as related metaphors. If there were only two or three related metaphors, would the story be an allegory? At the other extreme, do minor details in the story (such as the three levels of harvest in the parable of the sower) have significance? An example of an allegory would be the parable of the sower.

This raises the problem of the difference between a parable and an allegory—a frequently debated issue. On definitions one and two above, allegory is included in parable. But on definition three, a distinction is made between them because a parable is not a series of related metaphors. The details of the story of the lost son (the swine, the far country, etc.) do not stand for something else as they would if they were in an allegory but rather convey in dramatic terms the depths to which the son had sunk. However, a parable is *not* thereby limited to one point of comparison between the story and the fact being portrayed. There may be several items that need to be mentioned from a particular parable. The parable of the lost son emphasizes the rejoicing that takes place at repentance (note the repetition of this theme in Lk 15:24, 32), but the receptivity of the father obviously parallels the grace of God and the younger and elder sons reflect sinners and religious authorities, respectively. The distinction between parable and allegory is vague at best and will vary, depending on what definitions are assigned the terms. One should note that what can be said about parable usually can also be said about allegory.

The Purpose of Parables The purpose of parables and a description of their characteristics will assist understanding. The parables focus on God and his kingdom and in doing so reveal what kind of God he is, by what principles he works, and what he expects of humanity. Because of the focus on the kingdom, some of the parables reveal many aspects of Jesus’ mission as well (note the parable of the wicked tenants in Mt 21:33–41).

The following characteristics of parables should be observed: (1) Parables are usually concise and symmetrical. Items are presented in twos or threes with an economy of words. Unnecessary people, motives, and details are usually omitted. (2) The features in the story are taken from everyday life, and the metaphors used are frequently common enough that they set up a context for understanding. For example, the discussion of an owner and his vineyard would naturally make hearers think of God and his people because of the OT use of those images. (3) Even though the parables speak in terms of everyday life, often they contain elements of surprise or hyperbole (an exaggeration used as a figure of speech). The parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–35) introduces a Samaritan in the story where one would probably expect a layperson. The parable of

the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23–34) puts the debt of the first servant at \$10 million, an unbelievable sum in that day. (4) Parables require their hearers to pass judgment on the events of the story and, having done so, to realize that they must make a similar judgment in their own lives. The classic example is the parable of Nathan to David (2 Sm 12:1–7), where David judges the man in the story as worthy of death and then is told that he is the man. Because they force one to decide, to come to a moment of truth, the parables force their hearers to live in the present without resting on the laurels of the past or waiting for the future. The parables are the result of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than abstractions, and they teach that truth in such a compelling manner that the hearer cannot escape it.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PARABLES

Interpreting the parables is not easy, but certain guidelines can be presented that will avoid past errors and make sane interpretation possible.

1. Analyze the parable thoroughly. Note the characters and movement of the story, its climax, and the repetition of key words or ideas. If it appears in more than one Gospel, do a comparative analysis of the various accounts to note both similarities and differences.
2. Listen to the parable without any preconceptions as to its form or its meaning. Attempt to hear the parable as if sitting at the feet of Jesus without knowing the parable, its meaning, and Christian theology. While it is impossible for a modern reader to become a first-century Jewish hearer, it is imperative that a parable be interpreted in its original context and in the ways its author originally intended it to be understood.
3. Look for help in the surrounding context, but realize that the original context for many of the parables has not been preserved. Often the parables appear where they do in the Gospels because of the arrangement of the Gospel writers.
4. Notice features in the parable that reflect the life and thinking of the first-century world. An understanding of cultural and religious factors, and an awareness of the OT ideas reflected in a parable, will greatly assist in its

interpretation.

5. Note how the parable fits into the purpose and plan of the entire book. If the parable is present in the other Gospels, note its location and how it has been shaped to fit into the purpose of each Gospel writer.
6. Determine as explicitly as possible the message of the parable in the teaching of Jesus. There may be several points that need to be made in a given parable, as was indicated above for the parable of the lost son. There may be legitimate secondary features in the parable, but be careful not to push the story too far. One should exercise caution since it is easy to violate a parable's intention. No one would want to suggest that God has tormentors on the basis of the parable of the unforgiving servant (see Mt 18:34); rather, this verse points up the seriousness of the sin and its judgment. However, some people wrongly overemphasize minor features of other parables. If one will interpret the parable as a whole—in keeping with its original intention—such errors will be minimized.
7. Note where the teaching of the parable conforms to the teaching of Jesus elsewhere. Jesus' nonparabolic teaching may provide the key for, or strengthen, the interpretation of a parable.
8. Give due emphasis to the "rule of end stress." Usually the climax and the most important part of a parable comes at its conclusion. Consequently, the focus of the interpretation should be there as well. Often, the end of the parable will include the theme of reversal. As elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus, his statement on a given topic is often the exact reverse of what others say or expect. Note Matthew 10:39: "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it" (NLT). The parable of the workers in the vineyard tells of those who receive less than they expected and closes with a classic reversal statement: "the last shall be first and the first last" (Mt 20:16; cf. 19:30). Note the reversal in Matthew 21:31 at the end of the parable of the two sons (21:28–30). After the religious authorities had made a judgment on the basis of the parable, the

reversal is accomplished as they are told that the tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the kingdom of God before them (vv 31–32).

9. Determine what principles are present in the parable that reveal the nature of God, his kingdom, the way he deals with humanity, or what he expects of humanity.

The Reason Jesus Taught in Parables There is little doubt that Jesus taught in parables because they are both interesting and compelling and therefore are one of the most effective means of communicating. When one reads Mark 4:10–12, however, it seems that Jesus taught in parables in order to keep people from understanding so that they would not turn and be forgiven. It seems as well that there is a mystery that is given to the *in* group and that the *out* group is prohibited from learning. Herein is the meaning of the term “mystery.” Rather than being that which is not known or understood, as the word is used today, the biblical use of this word is usually for that which has been revealed by God and would not have been known had God not revealed it. The content of the mystery is not explained here, but from Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom elsewhere, it probably refers to the fact that the kingdom is present in Jesus’ own words and actions.

The other factor crucial for understanding this passage is that the word “parable” in biblical usage has a broad meaning referring to any striking speech or dark saying intended to stimulate thought. Jesus did not spoon-feed his hearers; rather, he taught in such a way as to bring about a response, and where there was a response, he gave additional teaching. Consequently, it is not merely that parables are interesting, poetic, and arresting (as important as those characteristics are). In addition, parables stimulate thought and bring about response—if hardness of heart does not prevent it. It is as if Jesus were saying, “If you cannot hear what I am saying, I will reveal my thought in parables.” Where there is response to this initial teaching, additional information is given.²

² Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (989–990). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Appendix 2: The Bible on Hell

[What Does the Bible Actually Teach about Hell?](http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/whatabouthell.html) by Greg Johnson
<http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/whatabouthell.html>

I had never been so insulted in all my life as the day in eleventh grade American lit. class when we had to read a Puritan sermon by Jonathan Edwards titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” I took offense at the (apparently) obvious scare-tactics Edwards used, warning his audience about the terrors of hell. He told his hearers that we were like tiny spiders being held over a fire, and that God needed only to relax his grip upon us and at once we would fall into the fires beneath us. I didn’t see how a God of love could send *anyone* to hell, and didn’t appreciate Edwards saying otherwise. Understand—I wasn’t a Christian at the time—that would take another year and a half. But I remember getting really, really angry reading this sermon. It was only after I came to know Jesus Christ that I realized that Edwards wasn’t saying anything new. He was getting his message from Jesus. Indeed, over half the references to hell in the Bible are from the lips of ‘gentle’ Jesus! Jesus, with all his kindness and mercy toward sinners, was something of a ‘hellfire and brimstone’ preacher. Witness these words from the Savior, telling us to fear God:

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. —Luke 12:5

The biblical teachings about hell are under attack today—not from outside the church, but from within. Christians today want to be God’s Public Relations Agency, and they’re afraid an eternal hell makes God look bad. Why not just ignore hell, not teach about it, not preach it, not mention it in our evangelism or witness? If hell makes God look intolerant, then why not get rid of hell? Several Christian leaders have suggested replacing the notion of hell as eternal punishment with a notion of annihilation. The idea goes like this: hell is just a cessation of human existence. You don’t go someplace to be punished, you just sort of ‘stop.’ Another path some take is to suggest that people have a second chance after death. These approaches are *not* options for bible-believing Christians.

Or, if not that, why not ‘spin’ hell in such a way that it sounds better than eternal conscious punishment? It goes like this. We’re talking with a seeker and they’re troubled about the thought of hell. But we don’t humbly agree and say, “Yeah, it’s a terrible thought, but a real one. God

is a holy God, and will not tolerate evil. The thought of God's wrath should sober us all and cause us to seek him." No. We're God's PR agency, so we say, "Oh, don't worry about that. Hell is just eternal separation from God, that's all."

That's not how the Bible describes hell. Think about it. What does a sinner want? To get away from God, of course! And the thought of an eternity without ever having to deal with God is actually good news to a lot of ears! It may seem horrible to me, but not to someone who's playing games with the God of the universe! Why do we want to make hell sound like a good thing? It's supposed to sound horrible. We don't need to market it to make it sound better than it will be! Our job is to honestly carry the message God has given us—results are up to God. But the good news about Jesus saving sinners is only good news against the backdrop of the hell we all deserve. Sick people don't go to the doctor until they realize they're sick. Hell is what Jesus told us to let us know how severe our sin disease is. And then he went to the cross to provide the cure.

- **Hell is final.** There is no second chance after death. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).
- **Hell is everlasting.** It never stops. It is "eternal" (Daniel 12:2) and "everlasting" (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and the smoke of their burning goes up "forever and ever" (Revelation 14:11). We moderns may miss this image, since we don't use fire on a daily basis. As long as the fuel remains, the smoke continues to rise. When the fuel is used up, the smoke stops rising. In hell people are burned, but the smoke keeps rising forever. They burn, but never fully come to an end. Such torment is called "the second death" (Revelation 21:8), where they are forever "outside" the gates of heaven (Revelation 22:15).
- **Hell is conscious.** No sleeping here, where "there is no rest day or night" (Revelation 14:11). Notice the rich man's pleadings in Luke 16:19-31. Hell's victims are conscious.
- **Hell is punishment.** It's not "just what happens" to people. It is punishment at the hands of God. It is God's contempt of people (Daniel 12:2), it is being "condemned" by God, like in a court (John 5:29). It is God's just "payback" for sins (2 Thessalonians 1:6), when Jesus "will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel.... They will be punished." (v.8-9).
- **Hell is painful.** Jesus described it as "the fiery furnace" (Matthew 13:40-42), "the eternal fire" (Matthew 25:41), "the darkness," "outside" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Hell is "the

blackest darkness" (Jude 13). Revelation calls it "the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Whether hot or cold, bright or dark, all these images are images of extreme suffering.

- **People will be condemned to hell at the Second Coming** and Day of Judgment. The sentence of hell is given at Jesus' return (2 Thessalonians 1:7, also Matthew 25:31).
- **People suffer in hell even while they await** the Second Coming and Judgment Day. "The Lord knows how to... hold the unrighteous for the Day of Judgment, while continuing their punishment" (2 Peter 2:9). We also see this in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), where the rich man was undergoing punishment in hell after his death while his brothers still lived. This is a parable, so it can't be pressed too far, but Jesus' parables were taken from real-life situations, including the situation of dying and being held in punishment while awaiting the Day of Judgment.
- **God is in hell and punishes people there.** The guilty "will be tormented in burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever" (Revelation 14:10-11). The Lamb in Revelation is Jesus. Hell is not so much eternal separation from God as it is the eternal presence of God in unmitigated wrath and fury. Hell is separation from God in the sense of being separated from his blessings and fellowship (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Hell is where we must "drink the wine of God's fury which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath" (Revelation 14:10).
- **Hell is both physical and spiritual.** It follows the resurrection of the dead (John 5:28-29), so those who suffer in hell will suffer bodily as well as in spirit. Jesus said it was "better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:30). Hell will be a place for our bodies as well as a condition of our souls. Beware those who make hell sound too ethereal and spiritual.
- **Hell is real.** This isn't just language the Bible uses to get a response out of us. Jesus warns us about it because it really does exist and really is our destiny. He loves us enough to warn us in advance.
- **Everyone goes to hell.** Jesus Christ and those "in Christ" are the only exceptions. All who "do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" are sent to hell (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Those who turn to Jesus are saved. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal

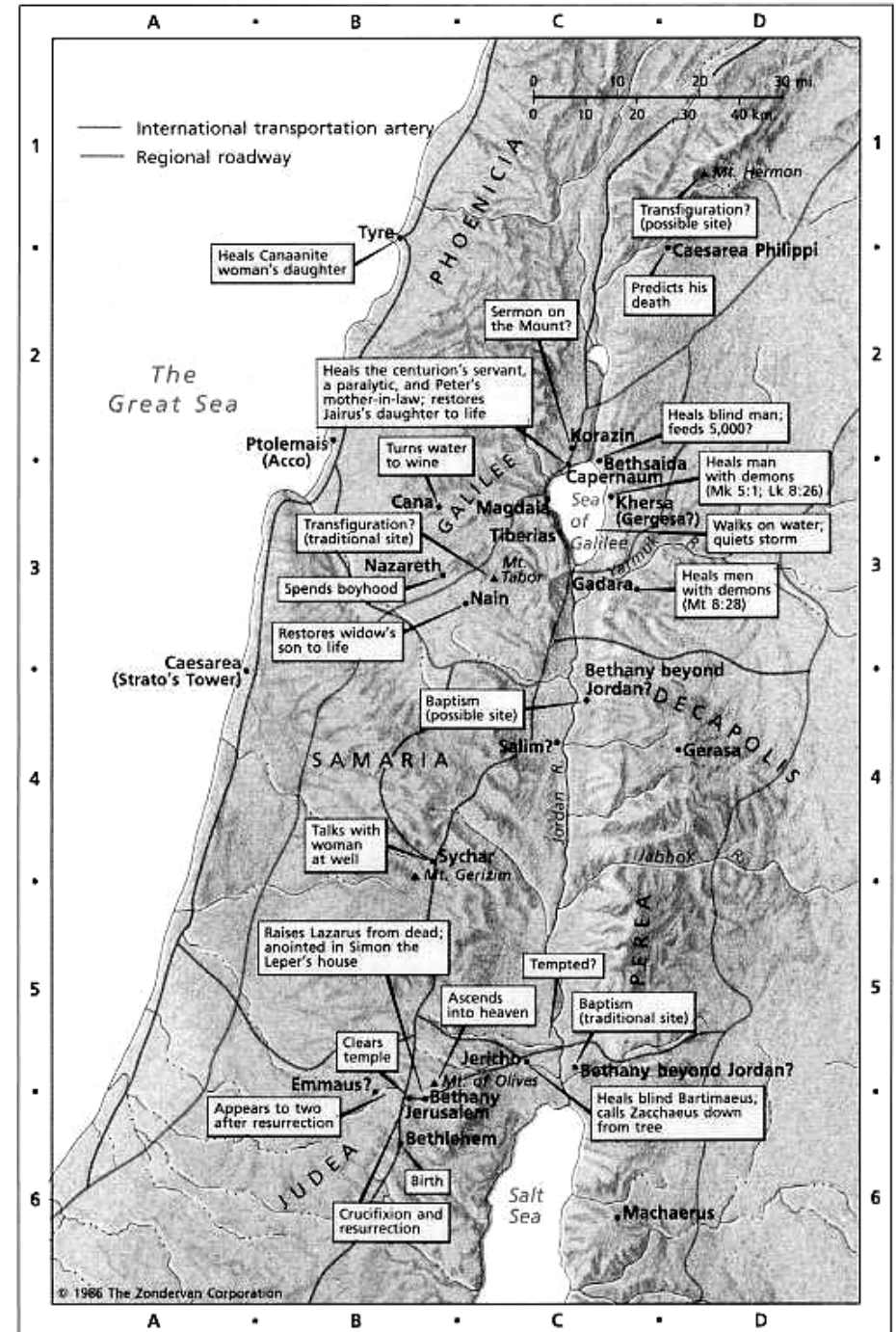
life.... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already" (John 3:16, 18).

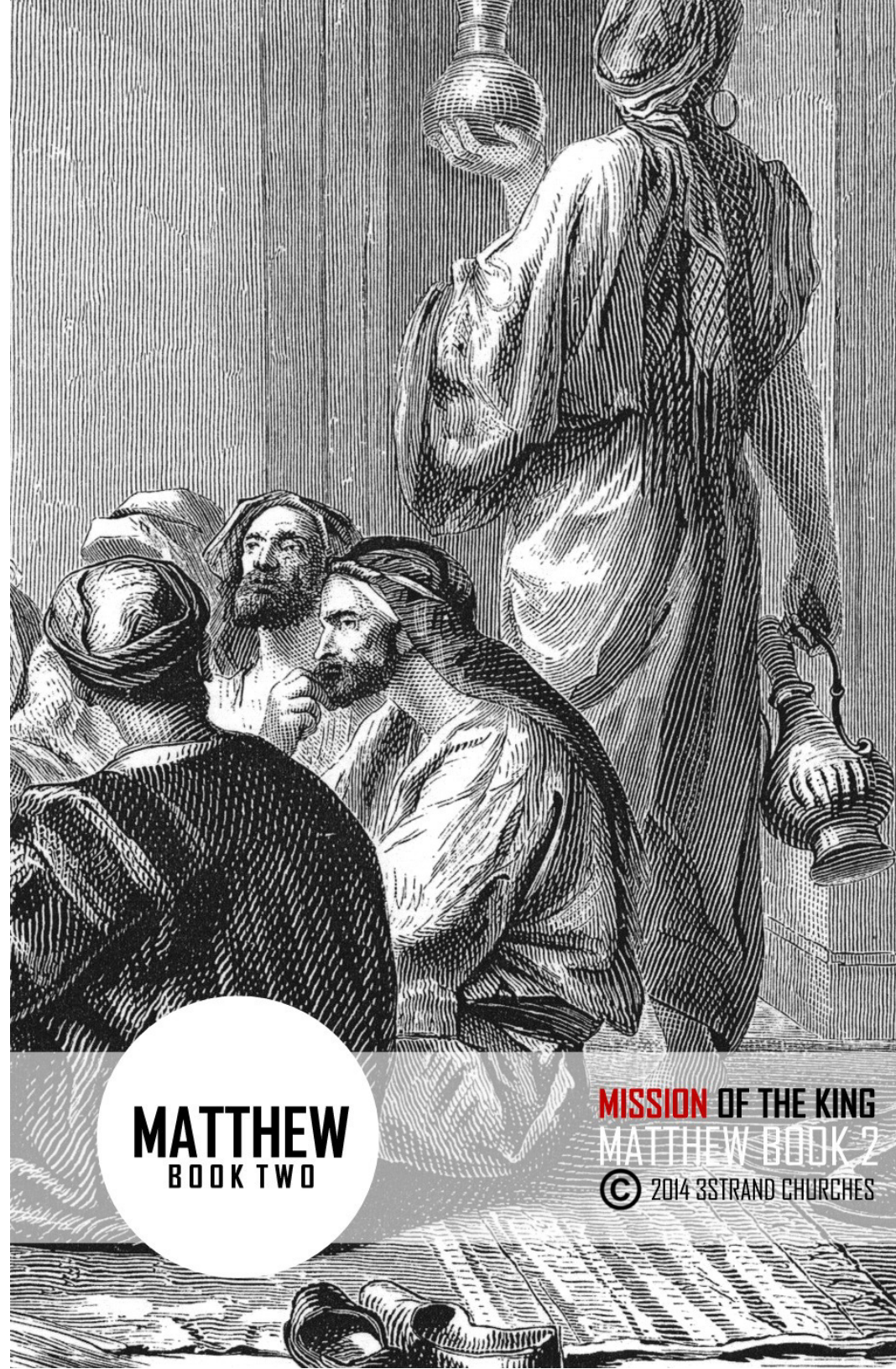
Have you heard the story of the Good Policeman?

The Good Policeman was walking down Main Street one day when he saw a little old lady with a walker trying to cross the street. As he watched the little old lady, he saw a large Buick fly past him and come to a screeching halt next to the little old lady. Three young men hopped out of the car, laughing. One of them pushed the old lady to the ground, while another started kicking her in the abdomen, then the legs, then the face. Another of the men smashed his heel into the old woman's face while she screamed in pain. Even from a distance, the Good Policeman could hear bones crack. Finally, one of the young men did the unthinkable. He pulled a knife out of his belt and slit the woman's throat. But the Good Policeman witnessed these events. So as the men walked back toward their vehicle, he rushed up to them and thrust his hand out in front of them and said, "Hi. I'm the Good Policeman. And I want you to know that I LOVE you."

What's wrong with the story? Is it a 'good' policeman? Of course not! A good policeman would have run up to the men, arrested them, and taken them to court to be punished! This is not a good policeman, but an evil one! If he were good, his goodness would *require* the guilty to be *punished!* Yet we expect God to be like the Good Policeman—all love and mercy and grace, with no punishment, no justice, no vengeance, no anger, no wrath. We expect him to see our sin and rebellion and just say, "I love you!" God *cannot* be good *unless* he punishes evil. The difficult question is not why God condemns sinners to hell, but why he *doesn't* condemn *all* sinners to hell! For that, we have to understand the cross, where Jesus was punished *in our place*, so that all who seek him might stand before God blameless, the punishment for their sins already paid in full by our willing scapegoat Jesus.

Appendix 4: Map of Jesus' Ministry





MATTHEW
BOOK TWO

MISSION OF THE KING
MATTHEW BOOK 2
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