

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Session III

Last Week's Questions

My question for this week relates to Matthew 7:21-23. I've always struggled with this verse (it seems so harsh especially verse 23). My question is what are some practical ways we can better discern what God's will for us is when making day to day decisions?

At this point, Jesus' warning must be seen in the context of verse 22: "When the day comes..." Jesus' admonition is concerned with the 'day of judgment' of the End-Time. And the warning is that simply saying that one is a follower of Jesus is not enough. It must be borne up with acts of piety (almsgiving, etc.), which he has just been teaching.

Jesus gives greater detailed path to discipleship in Matthew 25:31-46 (care for the hungry and thirsty, cloth the naked, care for the sick, etc.). Our attitude toward others and their needs are going to be a benchmark of faithfulness.

An After-thought to Session I

We need to remember that, in general, when the Christian scriptures were being recorded, it was for the most part tumultuous times. The populace of the Roman empire, both Jews and Jewish-Christians experienced persecution primarily under Nero (54-68 C.E.), Domitian (81-96 C.E.), and Trajan (98-117 C.E.). Also, the Great Jewish Revolt (66-70 C.E.), in which an estimated one million Jews died, both at the hands of the Romans as well as Jewish Zealots (there was infighting between Jewish leadership and the Zealots during the Great Revolt). In fact, the Zealots killed many Jews who were willing to make concessions to the Romans.

There was also a mind-frame of an impending End-Time. Both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature was widespread: 170 B.C.E. (1 Enoch) set the stage for Christian era writings: early first century C.E. (Apocalypse of Abraham and Apocalypse of Moses), late first century C.E. (4 Ezra), early second century C.E. (2 & 3 Baruch, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter). That's just to name a few.

Even St. Paul writing to the Thessalonians (50-52 C.E.) believed the End-Time was near—"And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

This sort of environment definitely frames the recording of Jesus' words.

Introduction

In the last session we ended with Matthew 7:28-29 "When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching. For he was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes."

In our readings this week Matthew is demonstrating that Jesus is not only powerful in word—as in the Sermon on the Mount—but that he is powerful in deeds as well: healings and miracles. And just as his words and teaching were in accord with the Hebrew scriptures, these acts are all conducted in the same context.

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Jesus the Healer Read Matthew 8:1-17

In this section, Jesus performs three healings supporting teachings about prayer and faith, as well as fulfillment of prophesy.

The encounter with the leper: the leper approaches Jesus with the same respect as the magi in the birth narrative. The leper offers homage, demonstrating faith in Jesus' ability and authority to heal. This can even be seen as a prayer request: (“if you are willing” rings of “your will be done”). Then to further the teaching “I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets”, the leper is instructed to abide by the law found in Leviticus 14, to present himself as “clean” (purified) to the priests so as to re-enter society.

The encounter with the Roman Centurion and the long distance healing: we see in Jesus his ability to do what only God can do. This is illustrated not simply by healing the servant without even seeing them, let alone never touching them, but also as part of a prophecy fulfillment. The Centurion is a gentile, but still Jesus responds to his request, based solely on the supplicant's faith. “I say to you that many from East and West will come and recline with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. (8:11)” is a fulfillment quote referring to Isaiah 2:2-4, 25:6.

Factoid: unlike the Hebrew word *Adonai* (LORD) the Greek word *kyrios* (κύριος) can mean: lord, sir, or master, depending upon the context.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law, as well all the others brought to him that evening, bears up yet another fulfillment quotation again from Isaiah 53:4. We also must see in this quotation a pointing to the passion.

More Acts of Power Read Matthew 8:18-9:8

Just as the last section showed Jesus as a healer, this section shows a more formidable power over: storms, demons, and sin. The setting begins with Jesus still in the Jewish north-western part of the territory of Galilee—the house of Peter's mother-in-law was in Capernaum. The story then moves to the east-south-east gentile territory of Decapolis.

In the area around Capernaum, a scribe seeks out Jesus offering to become a disciple. To the first Jesus dissuades him by telling him that he will have to give up his home and everything to follow him. Then, someone who has been following Jesus—a disciple—is deterred by Jesus'



admonition that Jesus' ministry takes precedent over even solemn obligations.

While crossing a portion of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples encounter a storm which is severe enough to worry even fishermen. Storms in the Hebrew scripture symbolize the power of chaos and evil against God. In response, Jesus responds as did God in the Psalms: *"Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed"* (Ps. 107:28-29).

The question—really to be seen by Matthew's readers as a statement—of the disciples (*What kind of man is this?*) offers a realization to Matthew's Jewish audience that Jesus is more than just an itinerant rabbi.

Upon arriving in the gentile territory—on the other side— he encounters two men possessed of demons. Matthew has recalled Jesus' power over nature, now he moves onto the forces of evil—demonic forces—of which only God has authority.

But first, knowing of penchant for the welfare of pigs by some in this study group, let me offer that to Matthew's readers, a destruction of a herd of pigs would have seemed somewhat humorous—pigs were unclean animals. To Matthew's readers the loss of a herd of pigs would be something like the destruction of rats or mice to us.

Factoid: When pigs live high on the hog, they run the risk of going into hock.

The importance of this segment of Matthew's gospel account is that Jewish readers would recognize that the binding and defeat of demonic forces was to be an event of the End-Time. The acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God emphasizes that even demons recognize his supreme authority.

After returning back across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, Matthew relates an event that at first appears to be another healing scenario—which in part it is—but it becomes much more.

It should be noted that it was commonly believed that sickness was caused by demons or by one's own sins. By declaring that the paralytic's sins were forgiven may be a 'nod' to the latter belief. However, and more importantly, for Matthew the forgiving of the paralytic's sins places the emphasis of Jesus' power.

Some of the scribes believe that Jesus has blasphemed, not because he spoke the divine name—which was the technical definition of blasphemy—but because Jesus has usurped God's prerogative of forgiving the sins of others.

One by one—storm at sea, demons, disease and sin—are defeated by one who is capable of deeds that in the Hebrew scriptures are usually assigned to divine power. The stories about his exploits lead us to ask: "What kind of man is this?"

Interlude Read Matthew 9:9-17

This short section appears to be a brief interlude between cycles of miracle stories. Nevertheless, it introduces four matters: 1) another follower is added, 2) a further defining of Jesus' mission, 3) times of fasting, and 4) a parable concerning old and new.

The new disciple added is a person named Matthew. As I mentioned in the first session, there is no indication that this person is the author of this particular gospel account. The importance isn't the name, but rather that he was a tax collector. Tax collectors were usually seen as Roman collaborators and made their living by overcharging people. Jesus calls one such person, and he follows, leaving behind his former life.

This 'calling' also gives opportunity to the Pharisees to comment on Jesus' character through the people with whom he chooses to associate. First off, "sinners" is an all-inclusive term meaning not just immoral persons, but would also include those who did not practice fully all religious rituals—such as peasants unable to devote time to the rituals.

It's also important to note that they were coming to be with Jesus. He calls one to follow, but many come to follow. His final word on this is from the prophet Hosea: "*For what I desire is mercy (some manuscripts say 'steadfast love'), not sacrifices, knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.* (Hosea 6:6)"

When the followers of John, the Baptist comment about the rules of fasting—most likely about weekly days of personal fasting—Jesus offers two parables. The first specifically answers that during Jesus' physical presence on earth, it is to be an appropriate time for joy. Predicting that there will be a time that he will no longer physically walk the earth.

The second parable transitions into teaching about the old traditions and a new way of understanding those traditions. This parable hints at the fact that Jesus has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets—that old can be preserved by the new. This would also include new interpretation of *Torah* that are offered by Jesus.

More Healings **Read Matthew 9:18-34**

In this section, Matthew tells of healings that are also related in Mark's gospel account, although here, in a much more abbreviated way. Four miracle stories of healing: 1) an official's daughter, 2) a woman with a bleeding issue, 3) two blind men, and 4) a mute man possessed by a demon.

In the first three instances, the emphasis is on faith in Jesus' ability to perform the miracle. The official pays homage to Jesus (emulating the magi, as well as the leper back in chapter 8) and clearly states that his daughter is dead—indicating that he expects a substantial healing. As further proof of her death, the mention of *flute-players and a crowd making a din* is in keeping with rabbinic writings (Ketubot 4:4) that at least two flute players and one wailing woman are required duties for a burial. Although Jesus says nothing about the official's faith, it is apparent that he has great faith.

The healing of the woman that is inserted into the first healing (Mark recalled it the same way), is a demonstration of the woman's faith that simply touching Jesus would bring her health.

The story of the two blind men reinforces faith in Jesus' power and authority through their use of the title '*Son of David*' when first addressing him, their following him, and their response to his question of faith.

Again, these healing are abbreviated but bring to the forefront the issue of necessary faith. The final story here, however, is to open the door, once again, to the condemnation of Jesus by the

Pharisees. This public act is done to the amazement of the people, but the Pharisees are not amazed, they are indignant and cast aspersions on his character (*By the prince of demons he casts out demons*).

Matthew's recounting of these and other stories are in a way, setting the stage for the passion (end story) as well as the End-Time.

Setting the Stage **Read Matthew 9:35-10:4**

This section is very much in keeping with Matthew's vision of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures. The envisioning of Israel as "*lost sheep*" is rooted in many texts (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16; Ezekiel 34:5; Zechariah 13:7). Here Jesus emphasizes a need for a shepherd and his willingness to be that shepherd.

The illustration of a great harvest and the need for workers gives Matthew the opportunity to introduce, by name, all twelve apostles. I suppose I could go into all of the names and why they might differ from gospel author to gospel author, but the important thing here is that mere followers of Jesus (disciples) up to this point, now become apostles—those 'sent out' with the authority and power to do Jesus' mission and ministry.

It is interesting to note that in a familiar Jewish tradition the names of the twelve are grouped in pairs. The last two are for me the most interesting: Simon, the Cananean (Luke calls him Simon Zelotes—Simon the zealous or possibly, Simon the Zealot) and Judas Iscariot (Iscariot=*ish keriot*, man from Keriot—a place known to be a region for rebels).

Recall from my 'after-thought' at the beginning of this session, that it was the zealots who were perhaps the reason Jerusalem fell so quickly to the Romans because of their in-fighting with the leadership of Judaism. Religious fanaticism can be very dangerous and destructive.

We will see some of this tension develop during the Passion.

Summary

In this session we have seen Jesus as preacher and healer, the good shepherd and the sharing of Jesus' power with the apostles in order that they may carry out Jesus mission. But the main theme is always Israel: the lack of leadership and the mission as a 'restored Israel'.

End Session III