



GO AND TELL

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

ON DISCIPLESHIP



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Chapter 1

Week beginning 11-14 January 2010

Discipleship is a journey with God where we follow the example of Jesus. Jesus came to the world and compelled all the believers to follow him. In Him and through him there are salvation, forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

What is the meaning of discipleship?

In the Late Latin the word for disciple is *discipulus* meaning pupil. The Greek word ***mathetes*** is a derivative of *manthano* “to learn, to be instructed,” a person who learns from another by instruction, whether formal or informal—“disciple, pupil.” In Luke 6:40 we get the phrase “no pupil is greater than his teacher; but every pupil, when he has completed his training, will be like his teacher”. There is also another Greek word that sounds similar *matheteuo* which means to be a follower or a disciple of someone, in the sense of adhering to the teachings or instructions of a leader and in promoting the cause of such a leader—“to follow, to be a disciple of”. In the New Testament ***mathetes*** denotes the men who have attached themselves to Jesus as their Master. The Gospel of Luke especially proves that in early Christian usage *mathetes* was the common term for the disciples of Jesus. He found the word as a fixed term in all the sources which he used, but other than Matthew, Mark and John he stop using the term after chapter 22:45. The term appears again only from Acts 6:1 onwards, and here it refers, not specifically to the personal disciples of Jesus, but to all Christians. It is regularly used in this sense in Acts. A fundamental mark of the disciples of Jesus in the tradition is that they are called by Him to discipleship. This aspect dominates all the Gospel accounts of the way in which they began to follow Jesus. Although in the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 5:1 ff there is no formal call, Peter and Andrew simply obeyed Jesus when they left all and followed Him. In this matter the tradition is quite unambiguous. The same is also true of the Gospel of John.

IMPORTANT NOTE: IT IS WIDELY AGREED AMONG SCHOLARS THAT THE AUTHOR OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF ACTS BECAUSE BOTH ARE ADDRESSED TO THE SAME PERSON THEOPHILUS AND IN ACTS 1:1 THE AUTHOR IS REFERING TO HIS “FORMER BOOK”.

Usually when we go on a journey we do a few things:

1. We decide with whom and where we are going;
2. We prepare for the trip
3. We plan for the unexpected
4. We start the journey with prayer
5. During the journey there are ground rules – love, sacrifice, and forgiveness.

Questions:

How would you define discipleship or being a disciple?

How do you usually prepare yourself for a journey?

Have you ever thought of yourself, being a Christian on a journey with God?

What do you find challenging or even problematic on this journey?

What do you want to change in 2010 with regard to being on this journey (in comparison to your journey in 2009)?

Your friends/companions:

Your family:

Preparing for the journey:

Your ground rules:

Handling the unexpected:

As Christians we are on a journey with God. We will focus in the next weeks on:

1. Our decision to travel with God. We must learn to “know “who Jesus was!
2. God chose us and others as his disciples to journey with him;
3. Our preparation for the trip – we must ensure that we learn from the teachings of His Word;
4. Our endurance for the unexpected – we must trust the Lord and remain hopeful that He will help us!
5. Prayer. We must start every journey with prayer;
6. Our observance to the ground rules – love, sacrifice, and forgiveness!

Chapter 2

Week beginning 18-21 January 2010

Discipleship is about following Jesus. Who was Jesus?

Matthew 1:1-17 *The Genealogy of Jesus*

1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:
² Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, ⁷ Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, ⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jeconiah^a and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. ¹² After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. ¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.^{b 1}

^a That is, Jehoiachin; also in verse 12

^b Or *Messiah*. "The Christ" (Greek) and "the Messiah" (Hebrew) both mean "the Anointed One."

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Mt 1:1-18

Background information:

Every now and again, when we read through the Bible, we come across stories/information that do not make a lot of sense for us today. The reason for this is the fact that the Bible was written very long ago, in a country far away from Scotland, by people who had different circumstances than we have today, spoke a different language and were faced with totally different issues. But none of this makes the Bible either unimportant or inaccessible for us today – I think that if we take the time to take a look at the social-historic background of the Bible, we will realize that these ancient texts still have a message for our lives today. It is when we take a look at what the texts initially meant, that we get a very good idea of what it can mean for us today. And that is our aim, to take a look at the “story behind the story” of the Bible...

The genealogy of Jesus:

One of the things we find hard to understand when reading the Bible is the purpose of genealogies. What on earth can the purpose of a list of names be? I mean, we read the Bible to get a message from it, but what kind of a message can a genealogy have for us today? Most people argue like this, and consequently *never* read the genealogies. But keeping in mind what I said earlier, it might not come as a surprise to you that just like everything else in the Bible, the genealogies have a purpose too. Even though a list of names might look like a waste of space for us today, it had a very important purpose in Biblical times: A genealogy had a similar function to that of a CV today.

A CV is a piece of paper that states *who* you are, *where* you come from and *what* you have achieved so far in your life. And every single person who has ever applied for a job knows just how important a CV is – because whatever you write in your CV, will determine what your future is going to look like. Therefore we only write good things on our CVs, things that we achieved and are proud of. Nobody will ever include a list of their failures and shortcomings in a CV, because that will have the opposite effect of what you want to achieve when you hand in a CV somewhere.

If the purpose of a genealogy, like that of a CV, is to say who you are and where you come from, it makes a lot of sense that Matthew starts his Gospel this way – what

easier way is there to introduce the person you are going to write a book about than to read his “CV”? In those days the whole known world was divided between Jews and heathens – people who believed in God and people who didn’t believe in God. And after Jesus rose from the dead, a new group of people came into existence: Christians. All the Jews and heathens who believed in Jesus, were called Christians. The author of the Gospel of Matthew was most probably a Jew who became a Christian. We can conclude this on the grounds of the many times he refers to the Old Testament in the Gospel. He makes it very clear that it was predicted in the Old Testament that a Saviour was going to be born from the lineage of David, and that *Jesus* is this saviour. That is why he starts the genealogy by saying that Jesus was a descendant of David, who was also a descendant of Abraham, because Abraham as the first person with whom God sealed his covenant. The genealogy is divided in 3 parts: in verse 17 we read that there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the exile in Babylon and 14 from then to the birth of the messiah. But if you take the trouble to actually count the generations, you will realize that only the first group really consists of 14 generations. In the second group 14 generations are mentioned, but in reality 3 names are left out. And in the third group only 13 generations are mentioned. But in those days facts were not nearly as important as the reason you said something, and the author’s *purpose* was to indicate that the history of Israel could be divided in 3 equally long time frames:

- A good time, from Abraham to David.
- A bad time, from David to the Babylonian exile.
- A good time, from the exile until the birth of Christ.

The typical pattern of the genealogy, namely “this guy the father of this guy, and this guy the father of this guy”, is interrupted when it comes to Joseph, which clearly shows that the author wanted to emphasize this part: Joseph is *not* the father of Jesus, he is the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born. In other words, the author wants to make it clear that it is not Joseph, but God, who is the father of Jesus. Something else that is very interesting about this genealogy is the fact that apart from Mary, 4 other women are mentioned. And that is something which never happened in Biblical times.

Women were seen as the weaker gender, a woman was seen as just one more of a man’s possessions – not worth much more than his donkey or coat. And just like you

do not mention negative things in your CV today, women were not mentioned in genealogies. It might still have been understandable if these women were people who played a significant role in the history of Israel, but none of them were important at all. As a matter of fact, they all had dark secrets:

- Tamar (verse 3) disguised herself as a prostitute and offered herself to her father-in-law (Gen 38:1-30).
- Rahab (verse 5) was the prostitute who sheltered Joshua's men when they came to spy on Jericho (Josh 2).
- Ruth (verse 5) was a Moabite (*not* an Israelite) who married an Israelite (Ruth).
- Bathsheba (verse 6) was the woman David committed adultery with (2 Sam 11).

The message:

If you read between the lines, you will realize that Matthew had a very clear message with this genealogy, namely that God looks at us differently than other people do. Jesus, the Son of God, the most important person ever to live, had women who were sinners and impostors in his genealogy. In the eyes of the people who lived in those days, Jesus' "CV" must have looked pretty pathetic – but the message is clear: God does not mind who you are, where you come from or even what you have achieved in life. The only thing that matters to God is what is in your heart, *not* what you can write on a piece of paper about yourself! Four (sinful) women, who were not even important enough to mention in those days, were included in Jesus' genealogy. Even though they were not important in the eyes of the community, they were important enough in the eyes of God to be included in the direct lineage of the Saviour of the world. God had a purpose with each of their lives. And just like that God has a purpose with each one of us too – regardless of what the rest of the world thinks of us...

Questions and discussion points:

Have you ever read a genealogy in the Bible before?

What does this genealogy mean to you?

Practical issues

How will this genealogy help you as a disciple to travel with God?

Have you ever felt not worthy enough or too sinful to travel with God?

How do you feel now after studying the “CV” of Jesus?

Chapter 3

Week beginning 25-28 January 2010

God chose you as his disciple?

Luke 5:1-11

5 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,^a with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God,² he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down^b the nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Background:

Mark's briefer account of the call of Jesus' first disciples concentrates on the basic fact that the right response to the message of the kingdom of God is instant obedience to the summons to follow Jesus. Luke's longer account suggests that the

^a That is, Sea of Galilee

^b The Greek verb is plural.

call took place only after Jesus had won the friendship of Simon and shown his power to him. Simon, as an experienced fisherman, knew that there was little likelihood of a catch, since the best fishing was done by night in the deep water. (During the daytime they fished in the shallow water.) Nevertheless, he was already sufficiently impressed by Jesus to obey his command. When the full revelation of Jesus' power came to him, he was overcome by a deep sense of fear and unworthiness in the presence of somebody who demonstrated heavenly power and was thus shown to be a holy person. Simon was not necessarily especially sinful, but he felt the sense of fear which anybody ought to have in the presence of the divine (see Jdg. 13:21–22). Jesus, however, told him not to be afraid (*compare* 1:13, 30) and gave him a call to discipleship in words that were suggested by Simon's present occupation. All the attention is focused on Simon as the leader of the Twelve: we are left to infer Andrew's presence from v 6. Luke did not mention Andrew (cf. Mark 1:16), but the plural leaves room for him. He may have omitted mentioning Andrew in order to focus the readers' attention on the central figure—Simon Peter. Luke did not even mention any of the other men, such as James and John (5:10), for the same reason. The following references to Simon in 5:4–5, 8–10 continues to emphasize his importance. Like Moses' experience as a shepherd, David's as a commander and Joseph's as an administrator, the background of these disciples as fishermen can provide them with a perspective that will help them for their new task. Nets would collect things

Something interesting:

Simon answered, "Master." This title (Greek *epistatēs*) was a favorite of Luke and was used only by him in the NT (*compare* 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49; 17:13). Whereas the title "teacher" in Luke was used of Jesus only by strangers, "Master" was used only by Jesus' followers and reveals better his authority and might. Luke also avoided completely the use of the title "Rabbi" for Jesus.

We've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. This is not to be understood as a reply of disobedience, for the use of the title "Master" and the next statement in this verse reveal Simon's obedience. In light of his previous experience in 4:38–41, Simon agreed to do something that at face value appears foolish. This statement and the next heighten the following miracle.

other than edible fish, thus requiring cleaning. Edible fish in the inland “Sea” of Galilee (the Lake of Gennesaret) today include varieties of carp. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus says that the lake of Galilee held several kinds of fish. The term “Gennesaret” refers to a fertile, heavily populated area at the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum lies at the lake’s northern tip. The district’s name was at times extended to the lake so that it could be called the Lake of Gennesaret. In light of the setting, this description serves primarily a geographical purpose rather than a theological one. The shore of the lake functioned acoustically like an amphitheater; withdrawing a little from the crowd and addressing them from the boat thus would have made Jesus much easier to hear. Simon Peter’s obedience is exemplary; a fisherman might trust a rabbi’s teaching on religious matters but need not do so in his own field of expertise, fishing. The fishermen had labored with a dragnet at night, which should have caught them many more fish than Jesus’ instructions in 5:5. Sources suggest that fish were more easily caught at night than in the day in the lake of Galilee; they would be sold in the morning. Jesus’ multiplication of food and of creatures has Old Testament precedent (see Exodus 16:13; 2 Kings 4:1–7, 42–44). Because the overhead cost of equipment was high, fishermen often worked together in cooperatives; families would sometimes work together to increase their profits. Other fishing cooperatives are known from ancient Palestine, so it is not unusual for Simon and Andrew to be in business with the family of Zebedee (5:10). Men working from more than one boat could let down larger nets than those working from only one; fish could then be emptied onto the boat or the nets hauled ashore. The fact that Simon Peter fell at Jesus’ knees was an appropriate posture in a theophany (the appearance of a God in a visible form to a human being) when one encountered the Lord. Objections have been raised that this would not have been physically possible to do in a boat, but the recent discovery in the Sea of Galilee of a boat twenty-six and a half feet long and seven and a half feet wide dating from Jesus’ day has refuted this. Luke provided at this point the full name by which Simon is known to the readers of his Gospel because this event

marks the call of the great apostolic leader. His reaction is quite dramatic when he says: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man". In the presence of this theophany Peter responded much like Isaiah did (see Isa 6:5). The request is not to be taken literally, for where would Peter have expected Jesus to go? Rather it is idiomatic for "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner" or "Forgive me" or something like, "What is a Holy One like you doing with a sinner like me?" Peter's sense of his own sinfulness was not due to disobedience in Luke 5:5a but to a general unworthiness. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid." Fear is a normal reaction to the experience of God's glory. These words of reassurance were frequently part of a theophany. They brought the assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

Message:

The striking message of the passage is Jesus' words to the fishermen and their reaction:

"You will catch men". Some argue that the fishing metaphor is a poor one because of what fishermen do to the fish they catch, whereas a shepherd metaphor would be much more positive (compare Mark 6:34). The fishing analogy can be used negatively as Jer 16:16; Amos 4:2 indicate. However, this metaphor should not be pressed beyond the one basic point of analogy, namely, that just as fishermen catch fish, so Peter would catch people for his Lord. Is this metaphor of fishing for disciples directed only to Peter in this passage? In Mark 1:17 it is addressed to Simon and Andrew, and the implication is that when James and John left their nets (1:19–20), they did so to follow Jesus and to be fishers of men as well (compare Matt 4:18–22). That Luke spoke of "their" leaving everything and following Jesus in the next verse implies that James and John also were included in the call to be fishers of men. If Luke had sought to apply this metaphor to Peter alone, he would have had to make this clearer to his readers, for they would have interpreted this passage in light of their knowledge of the tradition (cf. Luke 1:4) such as found in Mark.

"So they ... left everything and followed him". Whereas Mark 1:20 has "left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him" and Matt 4:22 has "immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him," Luke pointed out that they left "everything." The term "followed" is frequently used to denote Christian discipleship in Luke. For Luke everyone who is a Christian is called to "follow Jesus,"

both apostles and non-apostles. The particular kind of calling may vary, but all are called to the same commitment. The ability to follow Jesus assumes the forgiveness that enables one to follow. This is evident from Luke 5:27–32, where Levi followed Jesus (5:27–28), for 5:32 implies that Levi was one of the tax collectors and sinners who repented and thus received the forgiveness of sins (1:77; 3:3). Fishermen made a better-than-average income (even if they had had a bad night—5:5), so leaving their job is an act of radical commitment that they would expect to adversely affect them economically. Luke used this incident as a paradigm to show what it means to be a Christian. Being a Christian involves following Jesus and leaving everything!

Questions and discussion points:

Why did the fishermen decided to follow Jesus since He did not call them explicitly?

Have you ever thought of discipleship as being such a radical choice?

How would you define discipleship today?

Practical issues

How could you apply the “following” of the first disciples to your own personal life?

What makes it very challenging for you personally to follow Jesus?

Chapter 4

Week beginning 8-11 February 2010

The teachings of Jesus

Matthew 5:1- 16

The Beatitudes

5 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

¹³ “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.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Background information:

In Matthew’s Gospel there are a few things to remember to understand each text within the wider context. He writes his Gospel to predominantly Jewish converts to Christianity. They knew the law by heart and to them David, Moses, the prophets and the Old Testament were very important. In our reading Jesus goes up a mountain almost like Moses who also went up the Mountain Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Many have seen Matthew’s portrait of Jesus, therefore, as one of a new Moses or new lawgiver. As subsequent exposition will make clear, however, Jesus is not proclaiming a new law but announcing what he believes is the legitimate interpretation of God’s will as contained in the Torah/law. The Greek reads literally *the mountain*, but Matthew uses this expression (*to oros*; “a mountainside”) elsewhere to refer more generally to *the hill country* that dominated the skyline surrounding Capernaum. The traditional site on the northeast shore of Galilee, known as the Mount of Beatitudes, at least gives a good acoustical illustration of how a speaker could address a large crowd on a plateau in the hills overlooking the lakeside and be heard by thousands at once. Luke refers to Jesus’ speaking on a “level place,” but since Jesus has been in the mountains, Luke scarcely contradicts Matthew. Both writers envisage a plateau in a hilly area. Sitting was the common posture for teaching. “His disciples” seems to presume that he has already called more than the four described in 4:18–22. Matthew does not give the names of all twelve until 10:2–4, but 10:1 makes clear they had already been called. As noted above, identifying the disciples as Jesus’ audience is crucial for recognizing the ethics of the sermon as applying to those already committed to Jesus as a group of his followers trying to live together in community. But great crowds also form an

important part of Jesus' audience. They too will learn what genuine discipleship involves as they consider the possibility of commitment to Jesus. The Beatitudes, as they have traditionally been called from the Latin word for "blessings," are a common biblical form in both Testaments (see also Ps 1:1; Prov 3:13; Dan 12:12; Matt 11:6; Acts 20:35; Rev 1:3). The word "blessed" refers to those who are and/or will be *happy, fortunate, full of peace* or as those who are "to be congratulated" because of God's response to their behavior or situation. In the first and last Beatitudes, Jesus declares God's kingdom to be present for those who are blessed. In the intervening verses he refers to future consolation. The Beatitudes form an appropriate introduction to Jesus' sermon as they remind his disciples that God blesses them before he makes demands on them (the body of the sermon). The same sequence appeared at Sinai. God redeemed his people from Egypt and reminded them of his blessings before giving them his law. Matthew records eight blessings followed by a generalizing summary, whereas Luke presents four blessings, the summary, and four parallel woes. Most scholars assume that only those sayings found in both Gospels are authentic and that each Evangelist has created and embellished his sources.

Let us explain the terms:

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

"Poor in spirit," as a virtue, must refer not to a poor quality of faith but to the acknowledgment of one's spiritual powerlessness and bankruptcy apart from Christ. Both Matthew and Luke picture "those who because of sustained economic privation and social distress have confidence only in God." This interpretation coincides with Paul's observation in Corinth that most who were becoming Christians came from the poorer classes of society (1 Cor 1:26–29). It is consistent with the experience of a majority of Jesus' own followers who came from the poor *am-ha-aretz* ("people of the land"), and it fits in with the fact that in many periods of world history including our own, the gospel has spread fastest among those who have had the fewest possessions to stand in the way of whole-hearted commitment to God.

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

“Mourn” remains unqualified and parallels Luke’s “weep” (Luke 6:21). In light of v. 3 and a probable allusion to Isa 61:2–3, however, we should again think of both spiritual and social concerns. Mourning includes grief caused by both personal sin and loss and social evil and oppression. God will comfort now in part and fully in the future.

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

A “meek” person is not a shy or a retiring person as we often think of when we use the word but one who is *humble, gentle, and not aggressive*. Nevertheless, in the ancient Greco-Roman world, such humility was no more valued than in our world today. Inheriting the earth as future compensation suggests that the meekness in view also included a lack of earthly possessions. Most poor people in Israel did not own their own land and were subject to the whims of oppressive landlords. The future reward echoes Ps 37:11 but generalizes the promise of inheriting the land of Israel to include all of the earth.

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

“Hunger and thirst for righteousness” explains Luke’s “hunger” (Luke 6:21). For the poor, “righteousness” would include having their basic needs for food met, but it goes on to include a desire to see God’s standards established and obeyed in every area of life. Again, God promises that his purposes will be accomplished and that his justice will eventually reign (compare Isa 55:1).

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

“Merciful” embraces the characteristics of being generous, forgiving others, having compassion for the suffering, and providing healing of every kind. The link between our mercy and God’s mercy anticipates 6:12, 14–15. Like vv. 3–6 this Beatitude echoes a key prophetic theme (compare Mic 6:8). In light of Exod 34:6, mercy may be God’s most fundamental attribute.

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

Purity in heart refers to moral uprightness and not just ritual cleanliness. The Pauline theme of the impossibility of perfect purity in this life should not be imported here. Rather, as with “righteousness” in general for Matthew, what Jesus requires of his disciples is a life-style characterized by pleasing God. The “pure in heart” exhibit a single-minded devotion to God that stems from the internal cleansing created by following Jesus. This Beatitude closely parallels Ps 24:3–4.

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

As with the “merciful” of v. 7, “peacemakers” focus on interpersonal relationships. Those who work for *shālôm* (peace in Hebrew; wholeness and harmony rather than strife and discord in all aspects of life) and who reconcile others to God and each other will “be called sons of God.” Others will identify them as God’s true ambassadors, as those who are being conformed to his likeness.

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

All of these characteristics which Jesus labels as blessed are usually not welcomed in the world at large. Hostility may well arise against Jesus’ followers, but even persecuted people are seen by Christ as fortunate. This persecution, however, must be the result of righteous living and not due to individual sin or tactlessness (compare 1 Pet 3:14; 4:14–15).

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

These verses repeat, amplify, and personalize v. 10 by shifting from third-person to second-person address. “Because of me” provides another key qualification. As in v. 10, the only persecution that is blessed is that which stems from allegiance to Jesus and living in conformity with his standards. Because this life is just a fraction of all eternity, we can and must rejoice even in persecution. The joy commanded here, as elsewhere in Scripture is not an emotion but an attitude. “Reward” (more literally *wages*) is more a promise of “future recompense for a present condition of persecution and reproach” than a reward for piety. There is no comparison here

between those with a lesser reward and a greater reward. So the reward should be thought of as heaven itself and not some particular status in the life to come. Matthew is the one Gospel to emphasize most the changed life that must flow from commitment to Christ.

“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.

In light of the countercultural perspectives expressed in the Beatitudes, it would be easy to assume that Jesus was calling his followers to a separatist, exclusive lifestyle. Here Jesus proclaims precisely the opposite. Christians must act in society as agents of redemption. Of the numerous things to which salt could refer in antiquity, its use as a preservative in food was probably its most basic function. Jesus thus calls his disciples to arrest corruption and prevent moral decay in their world. One must avoid assuming that all possible uses of salt were in view here. We may today think of salt primarily as a spice giving flavor; but given the amount of salt needed to preserve meat without refrigeration, it is not likely that many ancient Jews considered salt primarily as enhancing taste. “Loses its saltiness” reads more literally “is defiled.” This is not the scientifically impossible notion of salt becoming flavorless but rather the common problem in the ancient world of salt being mixed with various impure substances and therefore becoming worthless as a preservative.

“To be thrown out and trampled by men” neither affirms nor denies anything about “eternal security.” Rather, as Luke 14:35 makes even clearer, this phrase refers to the world’s response to Christians if they do not function as they should. Believers who fail to arrest corruption become worthless as agents of change and redemption.

“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.

Of the various possible uses of light, Jesus obviously has in mind the bringing of illumination through the revelation of God’s will for his people. Since Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5), so also his followers should reflect that light. Like lights from a city illuminating the dark countryside or a lamp inside a house providing light for all within it, Christians must let their good works shine before the rest of the

world so that others may praise God. The good works are most naturally seen as the “fruits in keeping with repentance” of 3:8. This verse does not contradict 6:1 because there the motive for good behavior in public is self-glorification rather than bringing glory to God.

The meaning:

In Matthew 5 to 7 Jesus prepares his disciples for the task of following him. It is astonishing that Jesus was thinking of real life situations and how they ought to behave as his followers. In these chapters He also addresses real life moral questions such as divorce, murder, keeping the law, adultery, oaths, revenge, charity, prayer, fasting, and worries and judging others. Jesus is telling them that this journey with him is not going to be easy but they will be blessed by his presence and peace. But they must be an example to everyone. They are like salt that must make a difference wherever they are. People should be able to see from a distance that they are the followers of Jesus just like a city on a hill. It is something that they cannot hide.

Questions and discussion points:

Which of the list of beatitudes do you find challenging or problematic and why?

Have you ever been persecuted or falsely accused because of something that you did morally right?

How would you apply the images of being the “salt of the earth” and the “light to the world” to your own following of Jesus?

Practical issues

Are you a peacemaker?

How do you react to other people’s criticism of your following of Jesus?

Chapter 5

Week beginning 15-18 February 2010

Listening to the Word of God

Mark 4 *The Parable of the Sower*

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"^a

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things

^a Isaiah 6:9,10

come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

Background:

The statement about the purpose of the parables (4:10–12) explains why so many people are unreceptive to the gospel as it is taught in the parable of the soils. The parable of the soils itself illustrates, first, God’s lavish offer of salvation and, second, the mixed reception of that offer. Unlike the other Markan parables, this one is not introduced with the formula “the kingdom of God is like.” It doubtless describes, however, reactions to Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom. It also differs from the others in that it alone is accompanied by an explanation. The references to the lake, the large crowd, and the boat reach back to 3:7–12. The parable begins and ends (v. 9) with an warning to listen thoughtfully, which shows that the meaning of parables is not always self-evident. This feature does not occur in the same parable in Matthew or Luke (see Matt 13:1–9 & Luke 8:4–8). The parable tells us what is known about ancient Palestinian agriculture. Unlike the modern method, the seed was sown first and then plowed under. The sower held it in an apron with one hand and it was sown with the other. It was inevitable that some would fall upon the hardened path through the field, some where the soil was too shallow, and some among thorns as well as on good ground. The stones and thistles that to this day infest Palestinian fields are legendary. Only one element in the parable is unusual, the superabundant harvest in v. 8. Because of the primitive agricultural methods, an average harvest in ancient Palestine was probably no more than seven

The background to this passage is

Isaiah 6:9-10:

He said, “Go and tell this people:

“Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’

¹⁰ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes.^a Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

or eight times the amount of seed sown, and a good harvest probably was about ten. As indicated in the comments on v. 3, the command to hear suggests that some do not hear and understand parables as Jesus emphasizes in verses 12-13. The key to the meaning seems to be in v. 8. The emphasis is not on the sowing because the seed is the same in each instance. More emphasis is placed on the different kinds of soil, and even without the explanation in vv. 13–20 one could conclude that the parable describes the different ways in which the gospel is received. Without the explanation, however, one could also conclude that the main point is the abundance of the harvest (note v. 8). Despite opposition, setback, loss, and rejection, the reign of God is like a superabundant harvest. Jesus' message is clear. If they embrace his words with endurance and without distraction from the world they will inherit the kingdom of God. Judaism recognized Satan as the ultimate accuser and tempter; by mentioning him, Jesus immediately notifies his disciples of the seriousness of forgetting his word. Other rabbis also taught that forgetting a teaching of Scripture was a serious offense, but they would have resented a teacher who claimed unique authority for his own message. Judaism valued its heroes of the past who had refused to compromise God's word, even in the face of death. Jesus' description of renunciation of their faith when persecuted for the message of the kingdom thus would evoke the disciples' discomfort and self-examination. The fruitful "seeds" presumably spread the word and multiply. Jesus is telling them to meet the challenges with endurance.

Message:

Karl Barth a famous theologian once said that the Bible is not *per se* the word of God. It rather *becomes* the Word of God when people read it, listen to it and do what it says! I think this is exactly the point Jesus is making with this parable. If we do not

read God's Word and make it our own, our journeys will become treacherous. We need to read the Bible as often as we can. We need to listen to it with open ears and accepting attitudes. We need to make a special note in our diaries for enough time to read, ponder, and reflect on God's Word. God's words will help you to endure in any circumstances that may occur on your journey with the Lord.

Questions and discussion points:

How often do you read your Bible?

How do you read it, with Bible notes daily or as it appears?

What do you find challenging when reading your Bible?

Practical issues

Do the sermons help you to understand the Bible passage better?

What is your favourite Bible book and why?

Do you “listen” to God when you read your Bible?

Do you talk about the Bible and its contents when you are with friends?

Chapter 6

Week beginning 22-25 February 2010

Prayer

Matthew 6

⁵“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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one. ^a ¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins,
your Father will not forgive your sins.

^a Or *from evil*; some late manuscripts *one, / for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Something interesting:

Greek prayers piled up as many titles of the deity addressed as possible, hoping to secure his or her attention. Pagan prayers typically reminded the deity of favours done or sacrifices offered, attempting to get a response from the god on contractual grounds. Judaism recognized that God knew everything; the issue here is thus not Jesus' hearers' doctrine but their hearts. Jewish people saw God differently than Greeks saw their gods (even though even monotheistic (one God) faith was not always what it should have been). In Judaism, God was a Father who delighted in meeting the needs of his people; Judaism also recognized that God knew all a person's thoughts. Jesus predicates effective prayer on a relationship of intimacy, not a business partnership model, which was closer to the one followed by ancient paganism.

Introduction

Jesus gave his disciples an example of praying in Mathew 6:9-13. The Lord's Prayer was given as a lesson in prayer. As such this simple model surpasses all precepts about prayer. It is a prayer given by Jesus to his followers. It is found in different versions in Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. The version in Matthew is longer, consisting of an address and seven petitions. It is embedded in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29), where Jesus instructs his followers (5:3-16) in doing the 'greater' righteousness (5:20), which means to be wholehearted in doing God's will as interpreted by Jesus (5:48; 7:21). Jesus recites the Lord's Prayer, which is devoid of the 'empty phrases' and 'many words' that characterize the prayers of the Gentiles (6:7). In Luke, the Lord's Prayer appears in a section that one scholar has termed a 'catechism of prayer'. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem in the company of his disciples. Having observed Jesus at prayer, one of his disciples asks him to teach them to pray, just as John the Baptist taught his disciples (11:1). In response, Jesus recites the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4). This version, perhaps closer to the original, is shorter than the one in Matthew, consisting of an address and only five petitions. It, too, is a model prayer, but one intended for habitual use by the disciples (11:2a).

What do the words really mean?

“Kingdom of heaven” is another way (Matthew’s usual way) of saying “kingdom of God.” “Heaven” was a standard Jewish way of saying “God” (as in Lk 15:21).

Our father which art in heaven

In the OT and intertestamental Jewish literature, God is described variously as the Father of his covenant people, Israel, of the Davidic king, of righteous Israelites, and as the one who will act in the future to deliver his people. When Jesus addresses God as Father in the Gospels, however, he gives expression to his awareness of his own unique filial relationship to God (Mark 14:36). The Greek “Father” (*pater*) probably translates the Aramaic *Abba*. Use of this intimate term for God was virtually unparalleled in first-century Judaism. Christians should consider God as accessible as the most loving human parent. (“Father” should not be read as implying that God has gender or sexuality.) The phrase “in heaven” balances this intimacy with an affirmation of God’s sovereignty and majesty. The Lord’s Prayer is not simply a private utterance. The intimacy Christians may have with their Heavenly Father is balanced also with insistence on reverence in the clause “hallowed be your name.” “Name” refers to one’s person, character, and authority. All that God stands for should be treated as holy and honoured because of his utter perfection and goodness. Jesus the Son gave his children the privilege of calling God “Our Father.” The words, ‘who art in heaven,’ found only in Matthew, characterize God as the heavenly Father of the disciples in contradistinction to their earthly fathers. More importantly, ‘heaven’ is also seen as that indeterminate place from which God exercises his Rule and, through Jesus, fulfils his purposes on earth. Jewish people commonly addressed God as “Our heavenly Father” when they prayed, although such intimate titles as “Abba” were rare.

Something interesting:

One standard Jewish prayer of the day (the “Kaddish”) proclaimed, “Exalted and hallowed be his ... name ... and may his kingdom come speedily and soon.” Jewish prayers recognized that God’s name would be “hallowed,” or “sanctified,” “shown holy,” in the time of the end, when his kingdom would come (Is 5:16; 29:23; Ezek 36:23; 38:23; 39:7, 27; cf. Zech 14:9). In the present God’s people could consecrate his name by living rightly - if they lived wrongly, they would “profane” his name, or bring it into disrepute among the nations (see Ex 20:7; Jer 34:16; 44:25–26; Ezek 13:19; 20:14; Amos 2:7).

Hallowed be *thy* name.

God's 'name' is synonymous with God himself; the first petition invokes God to make his holiness manifest to the world by ushering in the final day of salvation. To concretize this, the disciples pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' and, 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Here, God is called upon, as part and parcel of his holiness, to establish his kingly Rule in splendour over all nations and (in Matthew) to exercise his will here on earth with as much freedom from opposition as he presently exercises it in the sphere of his heavenly abode.

***Thy* kingdom come.**

"*Thy* kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" expresses the desire that the acknowledgment of God's reign and the accomplishment of his purposes take place in this world even as they already do in God's throne room. The first half of the prayer thus focuses exclusively on God and his agenda as believers adore, worship, and submit to his will before they introduce their own personal petitions.

***Thy* will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven.**

God's will is manifested in his rule over heaven and earth. To be faithful to God's will means to live accordingly to his commands.

Give us this day our *daily* bread.

The petition for bread is a request for the necessities of life. Traditionally translated (in Matthew), 'Give us this day our daily bread,' it is more accurately rendered, 'Give us today our bread for the morrow.' At the basis of this petition is the notion that the disciples pray for the necessities of life that they require 'today' in view of the fact that 'tomorrow' God's splendid Kingdom will come. It is also worth noting that the prayer makes request for our needs and not our greed. This verse alludes to God's provision of "daily bread" (manna) for his people in the wilderness after he first redeemed them. Prayers for God to supply one's basic needs—of which bread and water are the ultimate examples—were common in the ancient world (see Prov 30:8).

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Jewish teaching regarded sins as "debts" before God; the same Aramaic word could be used for both. Biblical law required the periodic forgiveness of monetary debtors (in the seventh and fiftieth years), so the illustration of forgiving debts would have been a graphic one. The principle of forgiveness that Jesus states here seems to be that only people of grace know how to accept grace. Forgiveness is like a coin: It is a

single unit with two sides. The attitude which enables us to accept forgiveness is the same attitude which compels us to extend it. If we are unable to forgive others, our hardness will prevent us from accepting God's forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts" renders the Greek literally.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

"Lead us not into temptation" does not imply "don't bring us to the place of temptation" or "don't allow us to be tempted." God's Spirit has already done both of these with Jesus (4:1). Nor does the clause imply "don't tempt us" because God has promised never to do that anyway. Rather, in light of the probable Aramaic underlying Jesus' prayer, these words seem best taken as "don't let us succumb to temptation" (see Mark 14:38) or "don't abandon us to temptation." The Oriental naturally thought of evil in the concrete, just as we think of it in the abstract. For this reason the Authorized rendering "from evil" is more real to us. The evil deprecated is moral, not physical.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

It is generally called the doxology. Here, the disciples praise God for the unmerited privilege of knowing him as Father and assert their confidence that he will give an ear to their petition.

Amen.

This Hebrew word means firm, and hence also faithful. It is found singly and sometimes particularly at the end of prayers, to confirm the words and invoke the fulfilment of them. It is used in token of being bound by an oath. In the primitive churches it was common for the general audience to say "Amen" at the close of the prayer (1 Cor. 14:16). The promises of God are Amen; i.e., they are all true and sure.

What does the Lord's Prayer mean for us today?

The foundation of prayer is personal relationship with God as our Father. This model prayer teaches us how to relate to Him. Recognition of Him as "in heaven" and "hallowed" (set apart and holy) puts us in the proper frame of mind as we come to Him. It reminds us that we are to be holy because of who He is. "Your kingdom come" is more than an eschatological hope. It is an expression of our willingness to submit to His will, now, that He might rule in our lives. The request for "daily bread" expresses both dependence on Him and confidence in Him. We trust God so much that we ask only for "daily" bread—not great wealth. "Forgive us" expresses our awareness that we fall short in all things and must rely on a constant flow of God's grace—and the last phrase expresses willingness to relate to others as God relates to us. The final request "not to be led into testing" is recognition of intrinsic helplessness. But this is balanced by the joyful recognition that our Father is able to

deliver us when testing does come, for He is greater than evil. This Lord's Prayer is not so much a formula to be repeated as it is a revelation of the attitude with which we approach God as Father: an attitude of awe, submission, dependence, and complete confidence in His "Father-love." The final words, "Hallowed be thy name," "Thy kingdom come," and "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," constitute a prayer for the final victory of God over the devil, sin, and death. It is possible that they were also understood by the early Christians to be a petition for God's rule in their lives in the here and now.

Questions and discussion points:

How do you apply "give us our daily bread" in your own life?

Have you ever thought of what God's will is for your own life?

Practical issues

How often do you pray?

Why do you pray?

What do you think of the following statement: "Prayer is a vital part of following God/discipleship"?
