



The Summit
Green Campus of Canton Baptist Temple

Resources for Your Life

The Gospel of Matthew
78 Sessions

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Resource Guide

This resource was compiled from the personal Bible study and blog entries created by Tom Hogsed, pastor of the Summit in Green. You can find the original blog entries at www.tomhogsed.com.

The **introduction** to this book has been written so the reader has a better understanding of the Biblical author, his purpose in writing, and important points to understand before reading.

Following the introduction, each new page represents a **verse by verse overview** of the Scripture passage. The best way to study is to first read the Scripture verses from your Bible relying on the Holy Spirit to provide understanding and then to support your understanding with the commentary written below.

At the end of each Scripture commentary, there is a short **prayer** written so the reader can personally apply what has been discovered; however, it is suggested that you also pray from your heart in response to God's Word.

Feel free to make your own personal notes in your Bible, on this page, or even in a journal.

If this resource has helped you or you have further questions, please send an e-mail to tomhogsed@gmail.com.

Introduction to Matthew

Matthew, also known as Levi, was a former tax collector who had abandoned everything to follow Jesus Christ (Luke 5:27-32). It is clear that Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote this gospel prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and most conservative scholars would place the date of its' writing somewhere between AD 50-60. His writing leans heavily toward a Jewish readership and Matthew seeks to show them throughout that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah and that they could experience a relationship with God through Him. Matthew also knew that the Jews who desired a relationship with God would experience much guilt at the realization that they had crucified the Messiah, so he spent time writing to encourage them. With some 50 direct quotations from the Old Testament and nearly 75 references to Old Testament events, Matthew was passionate about proving to the Jewish nation that Jesus Christ was their awaited Messiah and was worthy of their faith. His carefully chosen words (inspired by the Holy Spirit) rightfully connected the Messiah of promise with the earthly Christ.

Also significant in Matthew's gospel are Jesus' teaching ministry (Matthew 5-7, Matthew 10, Matthew 13, Matthew 23, Matthew 24-25), His conflict with so-called religious leaders, and the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

Matthew 1:1-25

Matthew welcomes his Jewish readers with the genealogy of Jesus Christ and provides a fairly detailed ancestry, which connects Him to the two great covenants in the Old Testament: the Davidic (2 Samuel 7) and the Abrahamic (Genesis 12; 15). The Davidic covenant promised that a king from the line of David would rule forever (see also 1 Chronicles 17:1-15) and the Abrahamic covenant promises God's people a seed (Messiah, deliverer), a land, a nation, and divine blessing/protection. Matthew desired to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of these covenants, so he began his gospel by tracing Jesus' lineage. By providing this genealogy, Matthew addressed an important issue for the Jews and anyone who claimed to be their king.

Not only did Matthew provide details concerning Jesus' ancestry, but also details surrounding His birth. It seems that Joseph, Jesus' legal father, discovered that his soon-to-be wife, Mary, was with child (1:18). Although Matthew mentions that this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Joseph was not aware of this fact and determined to privately separate himself from Mary (1:19); however, an angel intervened and through a dream revealed to Joseph that this child being carried by Mary was conceived of the Holy Ghost (1:20). Furthermore, the angel informed Joseph that this child would be named Jesus, meaning Savior, and was being sent to "save His people from their sins" (1:21). The angel told Joseph that the birth of this child would be the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words, "...the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, God with us" (1:22-23; see also Isaiah 7:14). The words of the angel brought comfort to Joseph so he listened to and obeyed his words (1:24-25). Jesus the Messiah had finally come to earth and would eventually provide the necessary sacrifice to bring forgiveness of sin!

Dear God, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to save us from sin.

Matthew 2:1-23

Matthew has already provided details concerning Jesus' ancestry (1:1-17) and the events surrounding His birth (1:18-25) in an effort to uphold Him as the promised Messiah of history and the One sent to deliver people from sin (1:21). In the second chapter, Matthew continues tracing the early years of Jesus by recounting the visit of the wise men (2:1-12), Jesus' family fleeing to Egypt (2:13-15), Herod's attempt to kill Jesus (2:16-18), and Jesus' family returning to Nazareth after the death of Herod (2:19-23).

Following the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and during the rule of Herod, wise men (known also as Magi, who were possibly magicians or astrologers) from the East visited Jerusalem inquiring about the birthplace of the king of the Jews (2:1-2). These men had seen the star in the East and were coming to worship this newborn king; however, when Herod found out about the so-called birth of the Messiah, he attempted to find out where He was so that He could eliminate this threat to his kingship (2:3-6). In an effort to destroy Jesus, Herod secretly asked the wise men to reveal the Child's location so that he could "worship Him also" (3:7-8). The wise men departed and found the place of the young child and worshiped Him as the long-awaited Messiah (2:9-11). They presented Him with gifts fit for a king - gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Before they departed, they were warned in a dream not to reveal to Herod the location of the Child, which was God's divine intervention in protecting His only Son who would save people from their sin (2:12). Joseph, Jesus' legal father, also received a dream which informed him to take his family and flee to Egypt because Herod was seeking to destroy Him (2:13). Joseph obeyed and they escaped to Egypt (2:14). The wise men never returned to Herod to reveal the Child's location, so he decided to take matters into his own hands by demanding that all male children two and under be put to death (2:16-18). Ultimately, Herod's plan did not work because Jesus experienced divine protection and eventually, Herod died (2:19). Following Herod's death, Joseph received another dream informing him to return with his family to Israel and they settled down in a place called Nazareth (2:20-23).

Dear God, it is amazing to read about Your protection over the One who would eventually pay for the sins of the world. May I worship Him as the chosen One of God!

Matthew 3:1-17

Matthew's gospel account begins with the early years of Jesus (Matthew 1-2) and quickly fast forwards to the beginning of His earthly ministry. The writer has already established that Jesus Christ was the divinely promised Messiah for the Jews and, ultimately, for the world; He was sent to the world by God the Father to forgive and save mankind from sin (1:21). In Matthew 3, the readers are introduced to John the Baptist, who is known as the "forerunner" of Jesus Christ. In a secular sense, a forerunner was an individual who would travel ahead of the king to remove any obstacles which would delay the king's journey. In a spiritual sense, John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ, meaning that he was preparing the hearts of the people before the arrival of the King; in this case, John the Baptist challenged people to turn from sin (repent) so that their hearts would be ready when Jesus arrived (3:1-5). In order to outwardly demonstrate the cleansing of the heart from sin, John baptized people in water (3:6). His practice of water baptism is the basis of the name, John the Baptist.

The preaching of John the Baptist conflicted with the teaching of religious leaders, who taught a system of works righteousness and believed that they were automatically part of God's family because they were descendants of Abraham and therefore worthy of God's acceptance (3:7-10). John's message was that all are sinners in need of forgiveness and without repentance, God's judgment awaited them (3:11-12). After Matthew reveals the conflict between the religious leaders and John the Baptist, the reader is introduced to Jesus the Messiah who comes to the Jordan River to be baptized of John (3:13). John resisted the thought of baptizing Jesus because He was without sin and baptism symbolized a cleansing from sin (3:14); however, Jesus chose to be baptized so that He could identify Himself with those for whom He had come to save. Jesus' baptism was a necessary part of fulfilling righteousness for sinners (3:15). After He was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and God the Father spoke from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:16-17). The triune God is beautifully pictured at this event. It is through this event that we also see Jesus, the sinless Son of God, identifying with sinners and entering into public ministry so that He might "save His people from their sin" (Matthew 1:21).

Dear God, it is comforting to know that You sent Your Son, Jesus, to identify with sinners so that he might forgive sin and bring hope.

Matthew 4:1-11

Immediately following one of the highlights of Jesus' life (His baptism), He experiences one of the lowest points in His life. Matthew writes that "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (4:1). Adding to the severity of the temptation was the fact that Jesus fasted 40 days and nights before His encounter with Satan, which obviously brought Him to an extreme state of hunger (4:2). The tempter, Satan, brought three specific temptations against Jesus (4:3; 4:5-6; 4:8-9) and each one was designed to cause Jesus to ignore the plan of God the Father by using the divine power He had willingly set aside to become like man (Philippians 2:7). At the heart of every temptation is the desire to act independent of God, so in order to resist, Jesus had to be more desirous for God's way than the ways of the devil. At the beginning of human history, Adam and Eve failed miserably at this and chose to live independently of God and their disobedience ultimately threw the entire human race into sin (Romans 5:12). Jesus also faced this same direct pressure from Satan, but He successfully resisted each time through remembrance of and perfect obedience to God's words (4:4; 4:7; 4:10). At the core of resisting temptation is seeing God's ways as good and worthy to be obeyed. If we cannot find worth or relevance in God's way of living, we will never be able to resist temptation. Paul provides great comfort to the church at Corinth regarding temptation when he writes, "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure" (1 Corinthians 10:13, NLT). God's presence accompanies those who are His and He has equipped them to handle any temptation which comes their way.

Dear God, I look to Jesus as my example of resisting temptation and I pray for the strength to also resist when I am confronted with evil.

Matthew 4:12-25

Matthew has been following some major points in the life of Jesus, whom He passionately believed was the long-awaited Messiah. He was primarily writing to a Jewish audience in order to prove that Jesus Christ was God's Son and therefore worthy of their worship. In the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, the writer extensively covered the genealogy of Jesus right back to David and ultimately, Abraham (1:1-17).

Matthew also recounted the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ (1:18-25), including the visit of the wise men and His family's escape from the hands of Herod, who was attempting to exterminate Jesus (2:1-23). Although Matthew skips most of the narrative of Jesus' youth, He introduces his readers to John the Baptist who prepared the hearts of the people for the arrival of the Messiah (3:1-11). Matthew documents Jesus' baptism (3:13-17) and His face to face encounter with Satan, who unsuccessfully tempted Him in the wilderness (4:1-11).

After His baptism and temptation, Jesus begins His public ministry in Galilee where he preaches, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:12-17). Jesus' message was identical to the one John preached (3:1-2) and was a call for people to turn from their sin and embrace the forgiveness of God. When Jesus referred to the "kingdom of heaven," he was pointing to a present rule of God in the heart of those who repent, but He also had a future kingdom in mind. In the midst of His public ministry, Jesus called out several disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew (later James and John), who left their jobs as fishermen in order to follow Jesus (4:18-22). Jesus promised them that if they followed, He would make them "fishers of men." Making them fishers of men meant that He would equip them to "catch" men through the preaching of truth and persuading them to repent and have faith in Jesus. Ultimately, Jesus invested in these disciples because they would be the ones to carry on the message long after Jesus had died, resurrected, and ascended into heaven. These men would ensure that the message of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ would be passed to the next generation. Every generation has men and women who faithfully proclaim this same message to ensure that everyone has the privilege to experience the life-changing message of Jesus Christ.

Dear God, make me a fisher of men.

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew brings Jesus' ministry alive by documenting some of His sermons and in Matthew 5:1-7:29, Jesus' sermon on the mount is detailed for the reader. This sermon is one of the most famous in all of Scripture. The words of Jesus in this passage are an effort to define true righteousness as opposed to the external, works-based righteousness of the Pharisees (so-called religious leaders); in fact, Jesus says in Matthew 5:20, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus taught His disciples that true righteousness begins in the heart and not with the external works of the flesh. Paul also wrote to the Romans, "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:5); therefore, righteousness stems from God and then flows to the heart of man. Righteousness cannot be earned or manufactured through good works, as the religious leaders taught, but it is only through faith in God that true righteousness and lasting life change is discovered.

When Jesus saw the multitudes which had gathered to see Him (4:23-25), He went up onto a mountain and called His disciples to Him (5:1). He first teaches them (5:2) regarding the character of those who have true faith and righteousness. These characteristics are often referred to as the beatitudes (5:3-12), meaning that they are the attitudes of true faith. The world finds satisfaction in pleasure and material things, while those with true faith exhibit satisfaction through their character, which is produced by the Holy Spirit. Here is a brief description of each of the beatitudes:

Poor in Spirit (5:3) - a recognition of my utter need of God

Mourn (5:4) - a deep sorrow over my sin

Meek (5:5) - self-control even in difficult circumstances

Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness (5:6) - seeking the righteousness of God instead of attempting to earn it

Merciful (5:7) - not seeking revenge or having compassion on the undeserving

Pure in Heart (5:8) - an internal cleansing of the heart

Peacemakers (5:9) - striving for togetherness instead of strife

Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake (5:10-12) - a willingness to suffer hardship for doing good

These attitudes can only be realized when a person has true faith and righteousness from God, apart from his own works.

Dear God, produce these attitudes in me so that I might reflect true faith and righteousness.

Matthew 5:13-20

Matthew documents one of Jesus' most famous sermons in all of Scripture, the sermon on the mount. Jesus has already taught those gathered regarding the character of those who have true faith and righteousness (Matthew 5:1-12). These characteristics are known as the beatitudes, meaning that they are the attitudes manifest in the lives of those who have true faith. The religious culture of Jesus' day upheld a superficial religion simply based on a person's outward actions without taking a person's heart into consideration. Jesus placed a strong emphasis on the heart, which reveals the true person.

Jesus knew that if the people listening would demonstrate the attitudes of true faith, they would have a major impact on the culture around them. With this in mind, Jesus taught them that they should be "salt" and "light" to the world. Salt creates thirst. In a spiritual sense, Jesus called His followers the salt of the earth because their message and distinct lifestyle would create a thirst in others to walk in the same direction (5:13). However, if Jesus' followers failed to demonstrate true faith through their actions and attitudes, they would become useless, something that Jesus obviously warned against. When Jesus called His followers the "light of the world," (5:14-15) He was challenging them to allow their actions and attitudes (good works) to bring glory and fame to God (5:16).

Jesus' message was very distinct from the message of the religious leaders. The religious leaders prided themselves in their obedience to the Old Testament law and even the man-made laws they had added, but Jesus wanted them to realize that true religion begins with the heart and then moves to the hands and feet. The religious leaders had confused this. Jesus had not come to create a competing system with the law, as the religious leaders had accused Him, but His eventual death and resurrection would provide the righteousness necessary for believers to obey God's commands and enable them to live in the power of the Holy Spirit (5:17-20).

Dear God, help others to be drawn to You by the way I live my life.

Matthew 5:21-37

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus had been bringing distinction between the teachings of the religious leaders of the day and what God truly expected from His followers. The religious leaders were teaching a works based righteousness that encouraged people to find value in their outward efforts; however, Jesus taught them that having a pure heart would lead to right actions. The heart and actions cannot be separated.

To bring clarity to this issue, Jesus illustrated the importance of having a pure heart AND proper actions. Jesus makes the connection between the heart and actions by looking at a couple issues: murder/hatred (5:21-26), adultery/lust (5:27-30), divorce (5:31-32), and making promises (5:33-37). The religious leaders viewed murder as sin (5:21), but Jesus took this issue one step further by exposing hatred as the heart condition which leads a person to murder (5:22). Many people were taking pride in the fact that they had never murdered someone, but hatred or unjustified anger toward another is an internal sin which has the potential to lead to an external, sinful action. Jesus challenged His followers to confess any areas of anger or hatred before coming to worship God (5:23-26).

Many of the religious leaders thought highly of themselves because they had never committed adultery (5:27), but Jesus equated lust (an internal sin) with adultery, which is the outward manifestation of lust (5:28). The only way to combat outward sin is by changing the heart (5:29-30). Jesus also examined another issue being abused by the religious leaders – divorce (5:31-32). They taught that divorce could take place when a husband felt it was necessary or when a major offense took place; however, Jesus reminded them that a marriage could only be dissolved when sexual immorality has occurred. Marriage is a serious commitment made before God and should not be taken lightly. Jesus also exposes the religious leaders' soft view of making promises in the name of God (5:33-37). When they could not fulfill a promise or an oath, they would justify it. Again, this was an issue of the heart. Jesus wanted His followers to keep their promises, especially if they had used His name to guarantee it.

Guarding our heart is imperative in our relationship with God, but if we focus all our attention on the external, we will not see long-term victory. The writer of Proverbs says it like this, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). What a person believes in their heart will eventually be revealed in their actions.

Dear God, I give You control of my heart.

Matthew 5:38-42

Jesus is speaking to His disciples about the importance of their heart and is warning them about the teachings of the so called religious crowd (scribes and Pharisees) of the day. The "religious" people emphasized conformity to rules rather than conformity of the heart; they were simply interested in the outward actions instead of attitudes of the heart, which drive actions. These were the people who said that hatred is permissible as long as you never murder (5:21-26). They also prided themselves in the fact that they had never committed adultery, but Jesus said the standard is not just outward actions, but also the heart, making lust just as wrong as adultery (5:27-30). In this particular passage, Jesus addresses how the scribes and Pharisees had taken the Old Testament law out of context and used it to their own advantage. They knew the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21) designed laws as to how punishment was to be carried out in matters of personal disagreements; however, they were using these laws to condone personal revenge on someone else. This Old Testament law was termed *lex talionis* and was established in order to make sure the punishment fit the crime, not go beyond it. Jesus tells his followers that the law was never meant to permit people to take matters into their own hands and administer punishment on wrongdoers (5:38-39a); however, Jesus wanted them to give up their rights, not claim them. Jesus desired followers who were humble and not always looking to make sure that everything is fair. He addressed a couple areas where a disciple should give up his rights: matters of personal attack (v.39), matters of lawsuit (v.40), matters of personal gain (v.41), and matters of personal property (v.42). The interesting thing about Jesus asking His followers to give up their rights and be humble is that it is against who we are. Whenever someone does something wrong to us, takes advantage of us, or falsely accuses us we immediately want to get revenge. But, Jesus says that His true disciples are willing to give up their personal feelings in order to make peace.

Dear God, Help me to be willing to give up my rights and personal feelings when someone offends or takes advantage of me. Help me to react with humility and gentleness as I commit the situation to you. May I not take matters into my own hands and seek to harm someone else because of what they've done to me.

Matthew 5:43-48

After Jesus has just told His followers to never seek personal retaliation on others, He takes it a little further. You see, Jesus did not bring anything different than what was taught in the Old Testament, He just clarified the standard. He was interested in making sure people understood that it isn't just important to look good on the outside, but also to be certain that a person's heart matched their actions. It is so easy for someone to fool everyone into thinking that they are righteous by their outward actions, but in reality their heart is far from God - the outward is just a show, an act! Jesus wants our hearts more than anything and in these verses He raises the standard of love. Apparently the religious crowd of that day had no problem loving their own friends. Leviticus 19:18 proclaimed that a person should love their neighbor as themselves. Jesus also repeated this as the second great commandment (Matthew 22:39), but the scribes and Pharisees had added their own take on this commandment. In verse 43 Jesus addresses what they had heard from the religious people - love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Jesus begins to unfold the real meaning of loving your neighbor. Loving others is not only about embracing your friends and family, but also those who you would typically push away because of something they've said or done to you. Jesus says it like this..."love your enemies." He defines how we can love our enemies: encourage those who cut you down, do good to those who dislike you, and pray for people who take advantage and mock you. That is a high standard! It comes so natural for me to love those closest to me, but only with God's help can I love those who treat me like dirt. God knows that we need Him to enable us to love even our enemies and we must surrender to Him. Jesus was careful to point out that even the worst people of society love their friends, but only His followers would demonstrate love to those who hated them (vv.46-47). After all, God demonstrated His love to us even when we were undeserving of His forgiveness (Romans 5:8) and He will not accept any less from us. How about the person in your family who has become your enemy? How about the friend at school who stabbed you in the back? How about the fellow employee at work who let you down? How about the person who has differing political views? How about the murderer and the child molester? How about the person who hates you more than anyone else? Jesus says to love your enemy...not just by saying it, but also by blessing them, doing good to them, and praying for them.

Dear God, it comes so easy for me to love those who are my friends but I need your help in embracing those who are my enemies. I realize that You love me even though I continually sin against You. Help me to forgive those who may not deserve it as well as bless, do good, and pray for my enemies.

Matthew 6:1-4

After challenging His disciples about loving their enemies, He questions a person's motivation for doing good things. Ephesians 2:10 reminds Christians that they have been given a relationship with God so they might do good works. Although works do not earn the right for salvation, they are proof that a person is trusting in the substitutionary death of Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ always leads to good works. God expects us to show kindness toward others; however, the religious people of Jesus' day were only interested in doing charitable deeds so others could see them. The scribes and Pharisees were not motivated to do good because of their love for God, but so their peers would think they were spiritual. Jesus gives a very strong commandment to His disciples telling them to abstain from doing charitable things only for the recognition of others (v.1). The illustration used here is that of a person placing money into the offering (alms). The so called religious people were making a spectacle out of giving money to God and made sure that everyone was watching as they gave. Although the illustration is specific, the application is broad. How many times do you do good just to be recognized? Do you sing so others will think you are an amazing Christian? Are you involved in ministry only to be disappointed when nobody recognizes your effort? Do you give money to your church and discuss with others what you've given? Jesus despises those whose motivation is to be seen. The followers of Christ are expected to be different...when they do something good, careful measures should be taken to assure it is in secret. If a disciple is only motivated to please God, Jesus promises a reward (v.4) because God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17). Commit today to good works for the sole purpose of bringing recognition to God, not yourself.

Dear God, help me to do good works for You acknowledging that You alone are my audience. May I never do things for show or to make others think I am spiritual. Guard my heart and mind against pride and keep me humble.

Matthew 6:5-15

Prayer is a difficult subject to address because most Christians believe it is very fundamental to the Christian life, but most people (including myself) don't practice it like they should. Jesus thought prayer was pretty important and so did the religious people of His day; however, their approach was very distinct. The scribes and Pharisees (Jesus called them hypocrites) prayed only to be seen by others...it was a way to make people think that you were really close to God (v.5). They also prayed using a lot of words thinking that they would be heard because of long, drawn out prayers (v.7). Jesus viewed prayer much differently. First, He says to pray in private (v.6). Praying in private has much more to do than just being alone, it is an attitude which evidences dependence on God for all a person's needs. In verse 7, Jesus criticizes the hypocrites for their thoughtless prayers, so another element of prayer is that it comes from the heart. Again, throughout Matthew 5 Jesus has been more concerned about a person's heart than about outward actions. Then Jesus demonstrates a sample prayer, not so it can be repeated word for word but so we can gather some important guidelines when we pray. Verse 9 models praise to God for who He is. Verse 10 challenges us to pray for God's will to be fulfilled. Verse 11 challenges us to pray for God's provision for the day at hand. Verse 12 commands us to seek forgiveness from God for our wrongdoings. Verse 13a tells us to pray for protection against giving into temptation. Verse 13b desires that we acknowledge that all power comes from God and all glory goes to God. Verses 14-15 are a reminder that God wants us to approach Him in prayer with a clean heart. He encourages us to search our heart and see if there is anyone whom we have not forgiven - if there is, we must first take care of that situation before God will forgive us. We must remember that Jesus is not giving us a formula to pray, but some instructions on what it means to pray. In context with the rest of His teachings in this passage, Jesus wants us to pray from our heart. It is so easy to fall into the habit of praying because it is what we are supposed to do instead of praying because it is what our heart desires. God does not want thoughtless, mindless words but He genuinely seeks those whose heart is seeking after His heart. When our heart is privately submitted to God in prayer, He will reward us openly (v.6). This means that God will bring into reality what our heart desires. Make a commitment today to spend time praying to God each day...not just a set aside time, but a constant awareness of God's presence with you. When something good happens, recognize it is from God. When something bad happens, realize you need the Lord's strength. When you need to make a choice, seek wisdom from God (James 1:5). When someone else needs God's help, pray that He will intervene.

Dear God, teach me to pray.

Matthew 6:16-18

Okay...I have to admit that I haven't done what we are about to talk about very many times. There have been a few occasions where I've fasted, so I'm not sharing out of a heart of experience but from biblical truth. May this challenge me to be more regular in fasting. First and foremost we must stray away from the current text to define fasting because Jesus does not describe it for us here, but only assumes we will do it. So, what is fasting? Fasting has always been associated with giving up food for a certain period of time in order to devote oneself to focused attention on a particular matter. Psalm 35:13 presents a scenario of fasting when David appears to be in a desperate dilemma with an opposing power who had betrayed a covenant. In Psalm 35:1-10 David lays out his situation and the sorrow of his soul as a result of his trial. David begins to talk to God about the situation and reveals a time when his accusers were in trouble and he responded with fasting and prayer and now they were turning their backs on him. Setting aside David's circumstances, he described the essence of fasting - when a heart is desperate for God to respond, he will give up things that sustain him in order to get God's attention. There are times throughout the Bible when people fast: times of punishment for sin (Joel 2:12), times when friends are in trouble (Psalm 35:13), times of personal afflictions (2 Samuel 12:16), times of danger (Esther 4:16), times of temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), and a few other things. Back to our passage...Jesus says that when you fast because of a desperate situation, do it privately and not so others will think you are spiritual. In fact, Jesus says to carry on with life as normal when you are fasting so as not to bring any attention to yourself (vv.17-18). Jesus doesn't want us to do things for show or so that others think we have this special connection with God. He wants us to be humble realizing that Christianity is not some public spectacle to see who can do the most good stuff, but rather about a humble heart that is desperate for God to respond. I'm not sure if Jesus' point was to communicate (in this passage) the ins and outs of fasting, but to keep driving home that the heart is more important than an outward show! How do you view the Christian life? Are all your actions carefully calculated to make sure others see your "spirituality"? If so, you've got it all wrong! It's not about dressing right, listening to the right kind of music, being seen at every church event, talking the spiritual talk, and all the other games we play with God. You see, God knows our heart and although we can fool others into thinking we are something, God knows who we really are...every part of us! So, quit trying to fool others. Get honest before God and surrender your heart to Him - that's what He wants! He doesn't care about all of our feeble attempts to make ourselves look good before others, He only cares about the condition of our heart.

Dear God, search my heart and make sure that I am not seeking to fool others by my spiritual actions. May my heart truly act out of a life that is surrendered to Your ways!

Matthew 6:19-34

I feel that I am very materialistic. For some reason, I have a hard time being satisfied with what I have. Don't get me wrong - I feel blessed to have what I have and I realize that God has been good to my family, but sometimes these feelings of dissatisfaction creep back into my heart. It is something that I have to guard against the rest of my life. It seems like people in Jesus' day struggled with the same thing...knowing the difference between needs and wants. He begins His teaching on wealth with a bold statement - Don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth (v.19)! Now He didn't condemn money, but using it in the wrong way. When a person acquires money so he can have more stuff, he has failed to realize that money/possessions are temporary and can be stolen or broken. Then Jesus makes another huge statement - whatever you treasure reveals what your heart loves (v.21). Jesus has been talking a lot about the heart and goes to the extreme of saying that where most of your money goes is a good indicator of what your heart loves. On the other hand, Jesus says to lay up treasures in heaven. What does this mean? It simply means to use your resources (money, home, car, possessions, etc.) in order to bring attention to God (bring Him glory). He is not talking about some prideful waving of money and possessions so that others will think that God has blessed you, but rather a loose grip on what you have to be used for God's glory. Use your car to bring someone to church. Use your home to entertain and encourage others. Use your money to give to missionaries across the globe who is spreading the Gospel. Jesus warned His followers not to be like the religious crowd who coveted money and possessions (vv.22-24). Their covetousness was a result of their corrupt and selfish heart. Jesus goes on to encourage His disciples to not worry about the basic needs of life because He will provide those things (vv.25-32). Matthew 6 closes with two verses that really sum up His teaching on wealth - be concerned first about bringing the attention of others to God and He will provide everything you need. What an amazing promise. Most of us have everything we need so let's start focusing on how we can use what God has given us to bring Him more glory.

Dear God, thank you for providing all my needs now help me to use the wealth you've given me to cause others to worship You also.

Matthew 7:1-6

This is the kind of passage where Jesus wants His disciples to be real with themselves. All of us have a natural tendency to compare ourselves to others, especially those who struggle through their Christian life. We say things like "I would never do what they are doing" or inwardly we may think "I must be more spiritual than they are." But Jesus is demanding honesty from His followers helping them to understand that no one has it all figured out and no one is above sin or weakness. With this in mind, Jesus says judge not. Jesus doesn't want believers to compare themselves to others for the purpose of finding themselves better. Jesus is not condemning every type of judging, in fact, just a few verses later He challenges His followers to discern between true and false teaching (vv.15-20); however, He does condemn the kind of judgment that is arrogant and prideful. Verse 1 warns that whatever standard you hold someone else to will be the same standard by which you also will be judged. In other words, you think you are perfect while at the same time pointing out the weaknesses in others. Then Jesus poses a question, as only He can do. Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye (vv.3-4)? The imagery is humorous - a guy with a 2x4 sticking out of his eye has the audacity to point out (or sit in judgment) of a speck in someone else's eye. Jesus then calls a person who would do this a hypocrite, which means actor or one who plays a part that is not really himself. Instead of judging others, we should closely examine ourselves first. I'm sure that taking care of our own sin and weaknesses will not leave any time to sit in judgment of others. We need to learn that we are no better than anyone else. All of us have known or unknown things in our lives that need to be sorted out. Let's quit thinking that we're "all that" and other people need to catch up with where we are. Have a humble view of yourself and remember that if you do anything good, it is because of God, not you. Let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we are righteous. Take off your mask of spirituality for long enough to see who you really are.

God, help me to never sit in judgment of another person, but rather allow me to focus on the things that need to be changed in my own life. Keep me humble and broken before You recognizing that the only righteousness I have comes from You.

Matthew 7:7-11

I've heard these verses my whole life, but for some reason they have not impacted me in the way they should. If I understand these verses literally, without trying to draw my own conclusions and conditions, these verses are declaring that persistence in prayer results in answers from God. Let me get a little technical. The words *ask*, *seek*, and *knock* are in the present imperative (Greek language), which means a continuous or repeated action. Literally these verses say "keep on asking, seeking, and knocking." Jesus is referring to a constant attitude of prayer about a certain matter (vv.7-8). He promises that the result of continuous asking will be receiving. The result of continual seeking will be finding. The result of repeated knocking will be that the door will be opened. Wow! It seems like Jesus is saying that the main key to getting God to respond is persistence (never quitting). Then Jesus explains why God responds to continuous prayer - He loves to give good things to those who ask (v.11). Verses 9-10 reveal God's character to us by asking two questions...if a son asks his father for bread will he give him a stone and if a son asks for a fish will he give him a snake? The assumed answer is NO! A good father would never give his son something opposite of what he asks. Then Jesus says something totally profound - If earthly (evil, sinful) fathers know how to give good gifts, then how much more will God (good, perfect) give to those who ask Him (v.11). I need to let that settle in my mind... Maybe the reason I don't receive things is because I don't ask in the first place or maybe because I give up too soon. What is it today that you desire from God more than anything...I mean what do you really want God to do? Start by asking, start by seeking, start by knocking. If God doesn't respond today, maybe He'll respond tomorrow. If He doesn't respond tomorrow then I need to keep asking until He intervenes. God promises to give good gifts to those who ask, so I'm going to start today realizing that every good gift and perfect gift comes from above (James 1:17). God is the provider of all that is good, I just need to show that I really desire it and He'll answer. It really comes down to this - do you believe God is making a promise to His children in Matthew 7:7-11? If you do, then you KNOW that He has promised to answer. Don't give up and don't lose heart! Meditate on these verses for a few minutes...

Dear God, today I am asking that You.... You've promised to answer and I'll keep asking, seeking, and knocking until You follow through with what You've promised!

Matthew 7:12

In our society people talk all the time about living by the rules of life. I've often wondered what are the rules and who makes them, but I believe Jesus gives something simple yet profound which should characterize our daily life. We call it the golden rule because it brings richness (not financial, but fullness) into the hearts of those who practice it. Jesus demands that His followers do to others what they want done to them; furthermore, He says that this rule defines the Law and the Prophets. Doing to others what we desire them to do to us sums up the entire Old Testament. When you examine just the ten commandments, you'll find many of them have to do with human relationships. Honor your father and mother (Exodus 20:12) - treat your parents the way you want to be treated when you are a parent. Don't kill (Exodus 20:13) - have respect for the life of others as you would want others to have respect for you. Don't commit adultery (Exodus 20:14) - be faithful to your wife as you would want her to be faithful to you. Don't steal (Exodus 20:15) - value the possessions of others as you would want them to value your things. Don't lie (Exodus 20:16) - tell the truth to others as you would want others to be honest with you. What if all of us spent our life practicing the golden rule? We wouldn't gossip about others because we don't want to be talked about. We would not be bitter against someone else because we don't want them to be angry with us. We would share with others who have needs because when we are in need we want others to do the same for us. How about this...someone shared the Gospel with you, so why not pass it on to someone else? Someone is praying for you by name, so why not pray for someone else? People have spent time investing in your life, so why not give your time to others? Humanly speaking, we don't practice the golden rule. We will never be able to do it on our own. In fact, Isaiah 64:6 reveals that even our best efforts to do good are like filthy rags. So what needs to happen. Romans 4:5 concludes that works do not bring righteousness, but faith in the One (Jesus Christ) who forgave all of our sin through His death and resurrection. Romans 6:18 says that when we have been set free from sin, we become slaves to righteousness. Even then, it's still not about us, it's it about what God can do through us. Commit today to treating others the way you would like others to be treated.

Dear God, enable me to treat others with respect and value knowing that the way I treat others will affect the way they treat me. I need Your help.

Matthew 7:13-29

As Jesus closes out the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7), he draws a final application to what He has been communicating to His listeners. Throughout His talk He has been trying to distinguish between the righteousness of the "religious crowd" (self-righteous, based on works) and true righteousness (humility, based on grace or unmerited favor). The religious people created a system of rules and regulations designed to gain favor with God ultimately leading to heaven; however, Jesus shattered their thinking by setting up a righteousness impossible to humanly attain. His intention was not to frustrate people, but provide solid answers for a relationship with God. Some people look at these verses and are disenchanted with such a limited view of salvation, but after careful examination we can be thankful to God that the way to Him is not confusing. Jesus presents several illustrations of His ultimate point. First, He speaks of two gates (7:13-14). These gates represent ways to enter God's kingdom. The narrow gate is difficult to enter because it requires accepting the truth about Jesus Christ and repentance of sin. This gate leads to the kingdom of God. There is also the wide gate. Contrasted with the narrow gate, the wide gate is opened by many but leads to destruction (hell). In case that offends you, remember that Jesus is not trying to be narrow minded, but providing solid answers for how people can enter His kingdom. The second illustration speaks of two types of teaching (7:15-20). Jesus warns of false prophets who seem to have the truth, but are really wolves in sheep's clothing (v.15). The only way to distinguish between true and false teachers is to examine whether their life reflects the truth of God's word. The false teachers teach an erroneous way to God's kingdom. The third illustration speaks of two final destinations (7:21-23). Those headed for destruction are convinced that their good works will guarantee them a place in God's kingdom, but in reality only those who do God's will (acknowledge the truth of Jesus Christ and repent of sin) have a place in the kingdom of God. Jesus' final illustration speaks of two types of foundations or builders (7:24-27). A wise man builds his foundation on the truth while the foolish man builds his foundation on his own works. Jesus wants those who are listening to understand that there is only one way into His kingdom - repentance and faith in God's grace, which was demonstrated by His death, burial, and resurrection. Again, if you think that Jesus is being narrow minded about who can have a place in His kingdom, you must remember Jesus said that those who come to Him, He will not turn away (John 6:37). He is throwing the door wide open and welcoming anyone who is willing to repent (turn away) of their sin and trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Do you need to enter that door today? Are you trusting in your own works or are you willing to admit your need for another way? Jesus declared Himself as the ONLY way to God (John 14:6)...are you willing to walk down His way?

Dear God, thank You for providing the way to heaven through Your Son, Jesus Christ. I'm glad it doesn't depend on me because I fall so short. Help me to not just accept the truth about Jesus Christ but also demonstrate through my works.

Matthew 8:1-4

Jesus finishes an incredible message about the importance of the heart and as He leaves the mountain many people follow Him. There was something about Jesus that drew people to Him and I'm not sure that it is any big secret...people knew Jesus cared about them. The "religious crowd" only cared about whether or not everyone was following their rules, but Jesus obviously didn't care about conformity to a man-made set of rules. Although in our modern day this religious crowd doesn't exist in name, they do exist in practice. There are people in churches (or outside the church) all over the world who carefully scrutinize every move other Christians make and are quick to point out when someone doesn't do things the way they think it should be done. They are more interested in following the rules than following Christ. Don't get me wrong...there are rules, but rules without a relationship lead to rebellion. Jesus earned the right to speak truth into the lives of these people because they knew He cared about them. He wasn't concerned about gaining a following of disciples who knew and followed the rules, but molding committed individuals who kept the rules because they knew the heart behind them. You see, it wasn't a control issue with Jesus. He was not interested in developing puppets who would jump at His every command, but He desired (more than anything) that people would passionately love God and love others. Jesus demonstrates this principle through His actions...a leper appears from the crowd who had followed Him down from the mountain. You have to understand that lepers in that day were sort of like people with AIDS in our day. No one wanted to be around them - they were outcasts. The unwritten rules of Jesus' day said to stay away from lepers, but Jesus didn't care about the rules - He cared about people. This leper told Jesus that he knew He could heal him if it was in His plan (8:2). Mark writes that Jesus was "moved with compassion" and healed the leper. Do I have that same compassion for people?

Dear God, help me react with compassion toward others. Help me to forget about the "rules" in order to demonstrate the love of Christ to those who need You.

Matthew 8:5-13

Jesus enters the city of Capernaum and encounters a centurion (Roman military officer) who commanded many soldiers. This situation was very different from most that we have record of because the man approaching Jesus did not need anything for himself, but for his servant. It appears that this officer's servant was lying at home paralyzed and was in great pain (8:6). Jesus informs the officer that He will come and heal the servant. Enough said...you would think that the officer would be fine with that, but he says some things that evidence his tremendous faith in the power of Jesus. The officer feels that he is not worthy to have Jesus in his home, so he asks Jesus just to speak the word knowing that He did not need to be physically present to heal the man. He obviously understood that Jesus was God and possessed the power to speak something into existence and it would be done (8:9). When Jesus hears the officer's expression of trust, He declares that He has never found greater faith in Israel (8:10). Jesus tells the man to return to his servant and he will find him healed (v.13). What strikes me here is that this particular situation did not warrant a long drawn out explanation of the problem. The military officer gets right to the point with Jesus and from his heart shares what he needs Jesus to do. The centurion knew that Jesus possessed all power and could simply respond by a word. I really need to approach God in the same manner...realizing that He can simply speak something and it will be done. I'm not talking about a genie in a bottle, but someone who sees God as able to intervene in any circumstance with just the sound of His voice. What is it that I need God to do in my life or someone else's life? Ask Him because He certainly possesses all power and can change any situation.

Dear God, I need to hear Your voice today because this is happening in my life. Please respond and evidence Your power to me and I'll be careful to give You the glory that You deserve.

Matthew 8:14-22

Jesus enters Peter's house finding his mother-in-law sick with a high fever. Immediately Jesus touched her hand and she was made well (8:14-15). During the evening of that same day, many brought the demon possessed and sick to be healed by Jesus (8:16). Scripture reveals that Jesus took the time to heal each one and ultimately fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 53:4-5 which declares that "He himself took our infirmities and bore our sickness." Jesus had a greater purpose for healing the sick and afflicted than just providing a better quality of life; He was passionate about abolishing the real problem behind sickness and death - sin. When Jesus healed people it symbolized His power over sin and death. His soon death on the cross and resurrection would finally provide the necessary atonement for the sin of mankind. As Jesus looked around Him and saw the great multitudes of people, He commanded that they depart to the other side of the lake (8:18). A scribe, who was an interpreter of the Old Testament law, approaches Jesus declaring that he would follow Him wherever He goes (8:19). Jesus replies that following Him is hard (8:20). Then one of Jesus' disciples says before He will follow, he must bury his father. The man's father was not dead yet, but this is the way people in this day would say "let me wait until my father dies so I can receive my inheritance." This disciple was admitting that he wanted to experience what life had to offer him before he could follow. The man wasn't trying to be selfish, but he was just stating that he still had other things that were important to him. Jesus responds to this man by saying "follow me and let the dead bury their own dead." This is Jesus' way of saying follow me and don't worry about other worldly things. Jesus certainly was not making death seem trite. Since the man's father was not even dead yet, Jesus wanted to show this man that he was putting following Christ on hold to wait for what the world could offer him. Jesus demands total commitment. Have I put God on hold until certain things work out? Have I put God on hold until I've reached MY goals in life? Jesus wants us to follow Him now.

Dear God, help me to follow You now. May I not be distracted by what the world may potentially offer me. Help me to understand that following You is hard, but ultimately it is worth it!

Matthew 8:23-27

So far in Matthew, the author has detailed a lot of interaction between Jesus and the people, as well as Jesus confronting the religious crowd. These verses are really the first glimpse that we see where Jesus interacts with His disciples. One would assume that the initial story of Jesus with His disciples would be a story of faith and commitment to the One whom they had seen heal the sick, confront hypocrisy, and speak with authority; however, this is not the picture we get. Instead we stumble upon a scene of Jesus and His closest followers pushing out into the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly and without warning, a huge storm rises up in the sea and Scripture indicates that the waves were so big that they were overwhelming the boat. I'm not sure about you, but this would freak me out...mostly because I would feel totally out of control. There is something about us that hates to be out of control of a situation. If that is you, you'll be able to relate with the response of the disciples to the storm. Jesus is asleep in the boat and His followers wake Him up saying that they are going to die (8:25). Any normal person would have jumped out of bed and would have also been alarmed at the current danger. But, Jesus responds to their fear by saying why are you scared. The disciples must have looked at Him like "we're about to die and You are yelling at us." Jesus wasn't trying to make them feel guilty, He wanted them to understand that they didn't have to be fearful because He had control over everything. The disciples had witnessed Jesus healing the sick and diseased, but when it came to them, they had a lack of faith that Jesus could intervene in this situation. He didn't just want them to experience His power by observing what He did for others, but also by personal experience. They needed to believe Jesus was God and could step in at any moment. Jesus calms the storm (8:26) and the disciples marveled that He was able to do this. Jesus was God and just like He calmed the storm in the sea, He can also calm the storm in your life. I'm not saying that He will always take it away, but He'll give you the strength to maintain focus during the trial. The same Jesus Who calmed the storm is the same Jesus Who died on the cross for our sin and desires a personal relationship with you.

Dear God, You are God and I trust that You can intervene in the trials of my life. Give me the strength to know You are there and even calm the storm. Thank You for what You can do.

Matthew 8:28-34

We don't talk a lot about the spiritual activity that goes on around us everyday mostly because we cannot see it. What I mean is that we cannot personally see the work of demons or angels, but we can see the results of their work (good or bad). The Bible teaches that there are angels from God and demons who follow Satan and these beings fight against each other for good or evil. In these verses Jesus evidences that He has absolute reign and authority over the spiritual realm. When Jesus arrives at the other side of the Sea of Galilee He enters a city called Gergesenes (Gadarenes) where He was met by two demon-possessed men (8:28). These demons, speaking through the men, immediately recognized Jesus and even called Him the Son of God (8:29). They were concerned that Jesus would send them to eternal punishment before it was their time to go, so they begged Him to allow them to go into the herd of pigs that was nearby (they knew Jesus would cast them out of the two men). Jesus answered their request and sent them into the herd, but the herd ran off the cliff and died in the sea (8:32). Why is this account necessary. I believe it is mostly because God wants us to understand that He possesses all power, even over Satan and his demons. Every day there is a battle going on for your heart. God wants you to follow Him and truth and Satan wants you to follow his ways. Even though demons cannot possess those who are believers, they certainly attempt to influence you with their work. They try to make the world look appealing and worth your time, but God wants you to recognize that the life He offers is more abundant than you could ever imagine. Today, please realize that God has all power over the spiritual realm and even though they are battling for your attention, God has made it possible to resist the temptations of the devil (1 Corinthians 10:13). Commit today to serve the One who loves you and sent His only Son to die on the cross for you.

Dear God, help me not to fear the spiritual realm, but may I understand that You have the power over it. Help me to follow Your ways.

Matthew 9:1-13

Jesus is asked to leave the community where He had cast the demons out of the swine, so He got back into the boat departing to Capernaum. When He arrived people brought Him a paralyzed man whom He healed (9:2-8). Obviously the religious crowd did not like Jesus claims to be God so they became very angry. As Jesus passes from this situation He encounters Matthew (Levi) who was sitting at the tax office (9:9). Tax collectors were despised and essentially outcasts because they used money for personal gain and also for Rome. The Jewish people felt that tax collectors were traitors so they looked down on them. However, Jesus reaches out to Matthew and asks him to follow Him (be His disciple). Matthew instantaneously drops everything to follow Christ. The scene shifts to Matthew's home where he had invited many of his friends to eat together with Jesus and His disciples (9:10). Of course the Pharisees were there to add their commentary on what they thought about Jesus eating and interacting with tax collectors as well as sinners. Being cowards, the Pharisees approach Jesus' disciples to ask them why Jesus was eating with the outcasts. When Jesus heard of their complaints, He responded by saying that people who are well don't need a doctor, but those who are sick (9:12). Furthermore, He explains that His mission was not to call the righteous, but sinners to turn from their sin (9:13). Jesus was ultimately attacking the Pharisees attitude of pride and invincibility. The Pharisees thought they were righteous because they adhered to their created system of rules for spirituality, but Jesus knew their hearts were full of wickedness and selfish motives. Jesus came for the weak, strung out, and the people who knew they needed help, not those who thought they had life and righteousness all figured out. Through this account we learn that the most important thing about coming to God is humility. Without admitting your need for God, you cannot go any further in a relationship with God. Every day we must wake up and acknowledge that we cannot make it without God. We need His help.

Dear God, I admit that I am not the person I should be. I want to rely on You for my ability to do right and good because I know that I cannot accomplish it on my own.

Matthew 9:14-17

Disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees come to Jesus asking why His disciples did not fast. Jesus responds by using an illustration of marriage (specifically the bridegroom) and states that there is no need for mourning when the bridegroom is present, but only when he is gone (9:15). In the days when the bridegroom (Jesus) is gone, His followers will then fast. Jesus knew that He would soon die for the sins of mankind and after His death the disciples would be persecuted; however, since Jesus dwelt with them now there was no need to fast in mourning. Jesus wanted His followers to understand that things would change, especially in relationship to the Old Covenant (ceremonial fastings and other rituals). The moral law would never be done away with, but many of the ceremonies would be abolished because they symbolized what Jesus Christ fulfilled. Jesus was ultimately warning the Pharisees that rituals such as fasting had no connection with salvation (Gospel). We have to remember that the Pharisees found their security in outward obedience while Christ demanded obedience from the heart. Examine your heart today and make sure that you are following Him because you love Him, not because you want to impress Him.

Dear God, examine my heart and help my actions reflect my heart. May I do things for You because I love You, not because I am trying to earn Your favor.

Matthew 9:18-38

Jesus has already shown that He possesses all power and can intervene in any circumstance of life. He had demonstrated healings and miraculous signs which pointed to the fact that He was the Messiah, the One who was sent to save mankind from their sin. In these verses, Jesus evidences an amazing string of healings and concludes by giving a command to His disciples (9:36-38). I want to begin by sharing the command that Jesus gave and conclude with what caused Him to give this direction to His followers. In verse 37 Jesus said that the harvest (of souls) is plentiful, but there was not enough people to tell them about the hope. Jesus commanded the disciples to pray for the Lord to send people to harvest these souls (9:38). Jesus knew there were many people who needed hope and He wanted to do something about it. Over the last few days He had encountered a woman who was desperate for God to intervene in her health issues (9:20-22), a scared parent whose child was about to die (9:23-26), two blind men who needed Jesus to restore their sight (9:27-31), and a man afflicted by a demon needed a change of life (9:32-34). Verse 35 tells us that Jesus continued preaching, teaching, and healing in the surrounding cities and His exposure to the people caused Him to have great compassion for them (9:36). Furthermore, He said that they appeared as sheep having no shepherd, in other words they were wondering aimlessly without direction. What caused Jesus to react like this? Jesus was with the people and understood their needs - He knew they needed hope! I think this is profound. Oh that we would be so involved with people that we reach out to meet their needs.

Dear God, show me the needs of others and help me respond with hope.

Matthew 10:1-42

It is in these verses that we find the record of Jesus choosing His twelve disciples who would assist Him in spreading the message of hope through a relationship with God (10:1-4). Then, Jesus gives some specific instructions to His newly chosen disciples. These commands were as follows: deliver the message of hope to the Jewish people (10:5-8), trust God to provide for your needs (10:9-15), and be prepared for opposition to the message you are spreading (10:16-42). Jesus spends the majority of His time preparing them for the persecution that would soon face them. I find this interesting because Jesus wanted them to be aware that following Him would never be easy. He warned them that there would be false teachers who would accuse them of spreading an erroneous message, but they were to be wise yet harmless (10:16). He also told them not to worry about how they would respond to their false accusers, but that God would speak through them (10:20). However, Jesus also alerted them to the fact that their own family and friends may disown them (10:32-37). What Jesus was trying to explain is that there is a high cost for following Him. He is asking them to be willing to give up their life for His sake in order that the Gospel might be proclaimed. Jesus promises that a person who finds his life will lose it, but a disciple who loses his life will ultimately find it (10:39). Although many people will never give up their physical life through death, we should be willing to surrender our life to be used by God for His purposes. Paul puts it like this...present your bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Have I put my own desires and passions to death so that I might live my life for God?

Dear God, I surrender my life to You so that it can be used to bring attention to You.

Matthew 11:1-15

Have you ever experienced doubt and confusion as a result of some circumstance that took place in your life? We all have. Doubt is a natural result of our reasoning conflicting with reality...we have a different picture of how things should be. In this passage we get a glimpse of John the Baptist who was the forerunner of Jesus Christ and ultimately called people to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah (the One who would save people from their sin) through repentance. However, most people viewed the Messiah as someone who would set up this new kingdom in the current world and "clean up" the mess that had been made. It seems that John the Baptist viewed Jesus in the same light. He thought Jesus would establish a righteous kingdom ruled by goodness and truth, but he did not have the full understanding of the future kingdom. So, when John finds himself stuck in prison he found himself questioning Jesus' plans. This questioning should not be interpreted as rebellion or frustration with the person of God, but a struggle between what he thought should be happening and what was in reality happening. John sends two of his disciples to Jesus (11:2) and inquires if He is really the Coming One and Jesus responds to their inquiries by demonstrating many miracles in their presence (11:4-6). I find it amazing that Jesus didn't give them a straight answer but instead personally manifested His power to them. They obviously left with no doubt that Jesus was truly the Coming One. Jesus then turns to the people who were around Him and praises John for his faithfulness. Jesus did not condemn John for his confusion or doubt. I believe that God also understands when we doubt His purposes and plans in the circumstances of life. Our doubt should never turn to bitterness or rebellion, but should simply lead us to a greater understanding that God sees the beginning from the end. John only saw things from his perspective, but God knew that His only Son had to die in order to satisfy the punishment for sin. Where John only had a partial understanding of God's plan, we can look back and fully understand why God did what He did. Are you doubting God's purpose in some circumstance of your life? Maybe you'll never fully understand all the answers, but God sees the whole picture. Since you cannot make sense out of things, take comfort in the fact that there is Someone (God) working through every situation who understands everything.

Dear God, I am experiencing doubt, but help me understand that Your plan is greater than what I can comprehend. Provide the strength to handle my doubt and the trust to leave it in Your hands.

Matthew 11:16-30

Have you ever been rejected? I'm sure in some way we've all experienced the pain of rejection. Jesus can truly identify with our pain. Jesus came to die and take away the sins of mankind through cruel torture on the cross; however, many people did not believe that He was the Chosen One. Matthew details the many people who rejected Jesus and the saddest commentary is that where He spent the most time and performed the most miracles were the people who rejected who He was (11:20-24). Judgment would be greater on those who witnessed the power of Christ, yet turned their back on His message. In response to this great rejection, Jesus praises His Father for giving Him those who were open and receptive of His message of repentance. The "religious crowd" denounced Jesus' message because they believed that salvation was resolved within themselves and their good works, but Jesus exposed the sinfulness of the human heart declaring that apart from Him there is no salvation. At the end of these verses Jesus says something that is so key...He extends an invitation to those who were weak, tired, and realized that their works were not getting them anywhere. Jesus says *come to Me* (11:28). Those who come to Him in humility recognizing that they don't have it all figured out and are broken because of their sin will be the ones whom Jesus will give rest...rest from their efforts to try to impress God. There is such a compassionate side to God's words where He is reaching out to those who are hurting and desire to put their life back together. Jesus wants us to come to Him, but we must first reach out in an attitude of humility. God rejects pride, but extends His mercy to the humble. The same invitation goes out to you...Go to God those who are weak and frustrated because of their sinful condition and He will provide rest...

Dear God, I accept your invitation for rest because I realize who I really am. Please provide mercy and grace so that I may bring honor to You.

Matthew 12:1-21

The Pharisees keep popping up in the ministry of Jesus. It always seems to me that they follow Jesus and His disciples so they can catch them doing something that they don't think is right...it's almost like they are religious stalkers! There are two incidents mentioned in this passage that center on the Pharisee's idea of what can and can't be done on the Sabbath. Remember they had added 39 of their own laws to the "keeping the Sabbath day holy" law. These extra laws were not given by God but were created by "religious men" who viewed spirituality as something that you do rather than somebody that you are. In the first so-called violation, the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of eating from the grain fields because they were hungry (12:1-8). The Pharisees point out to Jesus that it is not lawful for His disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, but Jesus draws their attention to two Old Testament illustrations when men did something contrary to ceremonial law. David and his men were hungry so he entered the temple of God and ate the bread which was only lawful for the priests to eat (1 Samuel 21:4-6). Jesus also said that the priests would be in violation of Pharisaical law because they worked on the Sabbath (12:5). God never intended for His ceremonial laws to be bondage to His people. Jesus leaves this situation and enters the synagogue on the Sabbath where He meets a man with a withered hand (12:9-13). The Pharisees pose a question to Jesus about whether or not it is permissible to heal on the Sabbath (they wanted to accuse Him). He responds by explaining the value of a person and then heals the man's hand (12:12-13). Jesus didn't care about their religious rules, He cared about people! In great disgust, the Pharisees leave and Jesus withdraws in order to avoid more conflict. Crowds of people follow Him from the synagogue because they knew He cared about them. Jesus healed all of the people who needed it (12:15). We should care more about people than adhering to a religious system we've created in our mind. Keep in mind that Jesus never brought the moral law into question, but only things that pertained to the ceremonial law. He does not want us to find our spirituality in the rituals but in carrying out the moral law, which centers on loving God and loving others.

Dear God, help me to love You and love others. May I not find comfort in simply obeying rules, but in caring about the needs of others.

Matthew 12:22-50

The Pharisees are on the prowl again and this time they get personal. Up to this point they had primarily gone after Jesus for operating outside the list of rules they had set up, but now they were attacking the very thought of Jesus being God. A demon possessed man is brought to Jesus and He heals him. The Pharisees get wind of what has happened and say among themselves that Jesus casts out demons with the help of Satan (12:22-24). Knowing their thoughts, Jesus informs them that if it were of Satan they would not work against Satan's power by casting out demons (12:25-30). He was basically saying that what they said didn't make sense. Then, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter - the Pharisees didn't want to believe that Jesus was the Son of David (the Messiah). They knew Jesus was the Messiah, but if they believed in Him their entire system would have to change and they didn't want to do this. At the heart of the conflict was that the Pharisees had seen and witnessed Jesus' power, but chose to reject Him (12:31-37). Jesus responds to their unbelief with condemnation on the real problem - their hearts were wicked (12:38-45) and because their hearts were evil, their actions would be also. Jesus wanted people to know that when a person truly follows Him, things change - actions, attitudes, and speech. Those who belong to God are those who have been saved by grace and their life demonstrates the decision to follow Him (12:46-50). How about me? Since I've been saved by grace am I demonstrating a life pleasing to Him?

Dear God, enable me to do good through the power of Your Spirit who lives within me.

Matthew 13:1-23

Matthew gives the first parable (of his gospel) which Jesus describes as teaching that allows the follower of Christ to understand the mysteries of God, but hides the meaning from those who do not believe (13:10-17). Jesus often spoke in parables in order to communicate a spiritual truth to His disciples, but disguise the application from unbelievers. This first of Matthew's teachings is known as the parable of the sower. A sower goes out to sow seed - some of the seed falls on the path that surrounded the fields and the birds devoured the seed (13:4). Some of the seed falls on stony ground and where it quickly grew but soon died because there were no roots (13:5-6). Other seed fell among thorns which choked away the life of the seed (13:7). However, some of the seed fell on good ground yielded a crop - some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty (13:8). In this parable, the sower is God and the seed is the gospel (or the way to God). The seed falling on the path represents the person who hears the gospel, but is distracted by Satan (13:18-19). The seed which falls on stony illustrates a person who hears the gospel, understands it, but abandons it when trials come (13:20-21). The seed among the thorns symbolizes a professing Christian who hears the gospel but loves the world more than God (13:22). So far, all of these people mentioned, who have heard the gospel, are not genuine believers but professing Christians. They have not truly repented of their sins. Verse 23 reveals that a true Christian will hear, understand, and bear fruit as a result of the gospel, some a lot of fruit and some a little bit of fruit. The key is that their life has shown evidence of repentance. Throughout God's word, faith and works always go hand in hand. Good works never bring true faith, but true faith in the gospel will ALWAYS result in good works (love for God and obedience to His word). It doesn't mean a person is perfect, but their life is demonstrating good works for God's glory. If your life is not producing good works, maybe you should check to see if you have ever truly repented and turned to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Dear God, help me to demonstrate that Your gospel has fallen on good ground by producing good works in my life.

Matthew 13:24-43

This parable creates a stir within the church because Jesus implies something that is very alarming. The parable of the wheat and tares is an illustration where a man, who is Jesus according to verse 37, sows good seed (the gospel) in His field (vv.24,38-world) but at night an enemy (vv.25,39-Satan) comes and plants tares (false converts) in the same field. Tares are really weeds that look similar to wheat but as the tare grows it becomes evident that it was only disguised as wheat. Jesus is saying there are false converts who disguise themselves as Christians, but are really children of the devil. After the servants of the owner (probably angels) discover these weeds amongst the wheat, they report to the owner and he tells them that an enemy has done this (13:26-28). The servants ask what they should do with the tares and the owner tells them to wait until the harvest, which is the final judgment, where all false converts will be eternally punished (13:29-30,40-42). So, what is the message? The implication is very clear especially since Jesus had been conflicting with the Pharisees prior to this time. Satan has fooled the so-called religious people into thinking that they are in a right relationship with God because of their good works on the outside; however, Jesus wanted His followers to understand that these people are false converts. The scribes and Pharisees thought they had it all figured out but in reality their judgment would come in the future when they stood before God and He will ultimately separate Himself from them for all eternity. Notice Jesus said that He would not separate the true and false converts until the final judgment (13:30). This means that within our churches today there are many who profess Christ, but they have never truly repented and turned to Jesus Christ for salvation. The ultimate proof of salvation is love for God and obedience to His word. Satan has tried to destroy the church by mingling true and false converts. Guard your heart against those who profess Christ but have no regard for God's commandments.

Dear God, help me to be discerning of those within the body of Christ who are not wholeheartedly surrendered to You.

Matthew 13:44-58

These verses cover many different descriptions of the kingdom of God, but Jesus' teachings are very brief and to the point. The first two parables He gives in this passage are the parable of the hidden treasure (13:44) and the pearl of great price (13:45-46). Both of these represent the extreme value of eternal salvation and is evidenced in the person's willingness to sell all that he has in order to inherit salvation. In the hidden treasure parable you have a man who finds treasure in a field (entrance into the kingdom of God) and responds by selling everything he has in order to buy the field. In the pearl of great price, a merchant finds a very costly pearl and reacts by selling everything he has in order to purchase it. Jesus is saying that salvation, and ultimately entrance into the kingdom of God, is so priceless that we should be willing to abandon everything we have in order to inherit it. Jesus is not proposing a works based salvation, but is outlining the cost of salvation. At the core of salvation is the willingness on the part of the receiver to reject all of his efforts and turn to the One who is able to rescue his soul. The third teaching in this passage is the parable of the dragnet and is similar to the wheat and the tares (13:24-30,36-43). A net is cast into the sea and many kinds of fish are brought to the surface (13:47-50). The good fish were kept (genuine believers) and the bad fish (those who reject Jesus Christ) are cast into everlasting punishment at the final judgment. Jesus also gives the parable of the householder (13:51-53). This teaching represents Jesus upholding the importance of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Neither one canceled out the other, but revealed greater insight of the law. Finally, Jesus finished speaking parables and returned to His hometown of Nazareth (13:54-58). He taught in the synagogue and the people were amazed by His teaching, wisdom, and mighty works; however, they were offended and rejected Him as the Messiah. So Jesus chose not to do any of His mighty works there. This is a sad commentary. Jesus had faithfully taught the truth, but His own people rejected Him. Ever felt rejected? We tend to feel discouraged when we proclaim the truth, but people disregard what we are saying. Don't lose heart. Be faithful in speaking the truth to your friends, family, and others even when they don't accept what you have to say.

Dear God, assist me in being faithful to the truth, but help me not to be disheartened when others reject me.

Matthew 14:1-12

Herod, ruler of Galilee, catches wind about all the things Jesus has been doing and thinks John the Baptist (who was already dead) is risen. Matthew then recounts the horrific death of John the Baptist. Apparently Herod had put John in prison at the request of Herodias, who was his brother Philip's wife. John had spoken up against an incestuous relationship which Herodias was involved in with Herod, which was a violation of Leviticus 18:16. John was a man who was not afraid to stand up for truth and did not fear what other people would think of him. Ultimately, John was imprisoned for his stance (14:4-5). The situation compounds when Herod's birthday roles around and he promises his daughter he would give her whatever she wanted (14:7). Having been prompted by her mother, Herodias, the daughter asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter (14:8). Herod follows through with his promise and has John beheaded in prison (14:9-11). Standing up for the truth can cost us. I'm not saying that everyone who upholds the truth will be beheaded, but it does have consequences. In our society, telling the truth or standing against sin can cost friendships, popularity, as well as many other results. How willing are you to stand for the truth? Would you confront someone if they were in the wrong? Would you keep quiet about something you know was sin?

Dear God, help me to stand for the truth no matter the cost.

Matthew 14:13-21

In these verses we find an amazing account of one of Jesus' greatest miracles. I don't believe this miracle is great because of what He did, but why He did it. Jesus receives news of the John the Baptist's death so in response He departs by boat to be by Himself (14:13); however, the multitude of people (which seemed to follow Jesus) found out where Jesus had retreated and followed Him on foot. These people were obviously curious about Jesus' ministry and were willing to travel great distances to see Him. As Jesus is in this deserted place, the crowds of people catch up with Him and although Jesus is broken about John's death, He looks out across the thousands of people and is moved with compassion (14:14). Each of the four gospels recounts this story and Mark points out that Jesus was moved with compassion because the people looked like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). The main reason Jesus is moved with compassion is because the crowds of people appeared lost, broken, desperate, and in need of spiritual guidance. Jesus responds by healing the sick who were within the crowd and as it approached evening the disciples asked Jesus to send away the people so they could buy food (14:15). The people had been there all day and were extremely hungry, but no one appeared to care because they were enthralled with Jesus. Jesus commanded the disciples to get the people something to eat to which they responded that there was not enough food to go around (14:16-17). The five loaves of bread and two fishes were brought to Jesus. He blessed the food and the disciples began taking the food from Jesus to give to the multitudes (14:19). After it was said and done, 5000 men had been fed (thousands more when you consider the women and children) and there were twelve baskets of fragments left over (14:20). Jesus had miraculously multiplied the small amount of food and everyone ate. The point of the story is not necessarily the multiplication of the food, but the compassion which drove Jesus to respond to a need. Do you know someone with a need? Have you responded to that need? As Jesus was moved with compassion by the needs of the people, may we also take action to meet the needs of others.

Dear God, bring the needs of others to my attention so I can respond with the love of God toward them.

Matthew 14:22-36

Three of the four gospels mention this account of Jesus walking on the water (Mark 6:45-52; John 6:14-21) while the disciples struggled in the boat with the storm raging around them. I believe that each gospel brings out a unique perspective of the event, so I would recommend reading every account. However, I will mainly focus on Matthew's writing. After Jesus feeds all the people (and heals many of them), He sends the disciples away into the boat while He departs to the mountain to pray (14:22-23). Verse 24 states that after a period of time Jesus was still alone praying while the disciples were facing a massive storm at sea, but He decides to head out to sea. Obviously Jesus did not use typical methodology when going to save the disciples at sea. Most people would have called for help or grabbed a boat themselves to try to rescue the endangered disciples, but Jesus was God possessing full control over nature. So Jesus takes a walk onto the water and comes into full view of the disciples, who freak out! Instead of recognizing Jesus as all-powerful, they believed the only one who had this kind of power was a ghost (14:25-26). Go figure...after witnessing Jesus' power to heal and perform miracles they didn't even suspect that this figure walking on water could be Jesus. Before we are quick to criticize the disciples for their lack of faith, I believe we've read the Bible and know what God is capable of, yet we fail to believe Him. Jesus immediately calms their fears by speaking to them (14:27) and I believe we can also relate to this...whenever you became frightened as a young child, there is nothing more soothing than to hear the voice of your dad. This is probably how Jesus' words sounded to them - they brought comfort. Peter speaks up and wants to walk on water to be with his master (rabbi) so Jesus calls him out of the boat (14:28-29). I can't help but making the application here that Peter felt more secure with Jesus (who was walking on water) than staying in the boat (where it was stable). Even though Peter loses faith while walking to Jesus, he still recognizes that he was more safe with Jesus (14:30-32). Again, I can't fault Peter with fear because I can relate with him. I find myself knowing that things are more safe with Jesus, but I fear what is in between the walk from where I am to where He is.

Dear God, I'm scared of what life may bring, but help me know that in You is a strong foundation and a refuge. Keep me safe in your arms.

Matthew 15:1-20

You knew it would not be long until the scribes and Pharisees returned on the scene to scrutinize Jesus' every move. Here they move in to accuse Jesus' disciples of not keeping the tradition of the elders by failing to wash their hands before they ate bread (15:2). The tradition of the elders was a list of rules which had been developed outside biblical writings and were eventually committed to print in the Mishna near the end of the 2nd century. The tradition of the elders was man's attempt to add what they thought was important to God's law. Apparently the disciples had violated one of these traditions by not cleansing their hands prior to eating bread. Of course the scribes and Pharisees were right there to question Jesus about the spirituality of His disciples and their failure to keep "man-made religious tradition." In only the way He can, Jesus shoots straight back at them with by pointing out their violation of one of the commandments...honor your father and mother (15:3-4). It seems that the same men who were critical of the disciples failure to wash their hands had failed to honor their parents by not financially caring for their parents (who were elderly) because they had dedicated a certain amount of money to God (15:5-6). In essence they were ignoring God's commandments but trying to maintain their "spirituality." Jesus continues to build His case against the scribes and Pharisees by pointing out that they had elevated man-made tradition over God's law (15:9). Furthermore, He expressed that what went into their mouth did not defile a person, but what comes out of it (15:10-11). Jesus was saying that a person's speech reveals the heart and in reality the heart is more important than a person's devised rules of spirituality. Jesus' disciples inform Him that the Pharisees were offended by what He had said, but Jesus goes further in His criticism by proclaiming their ultimate judgment through separation from God (15:12-14). The disciples needed to understand that the moral law far outweighed the ceremonial law. Ceremonial violations could be taken care of by ceremonial cleansing, but moral transgression of the law resulted in the corrupting of a man's heart (15:15-18). Be honest with yourself...have you created a system of spiritual rules for yourself without any regard to God's commandments? If so, you are in good company with the scribes and Pharisees. God isn't interested in you pacifying yourself by adherence to a list of rules which you have created to feel better about your relationship with God. Stick with what God has revealed in His word and quit wasting time concocting a system that is in reality for you. Although a person can create a facade on the outside, eventually the heart will manifest itself through actions. If the heart is pure, good with spew out; if the heart is corrupt, evil will soon follow (15:19-20).

Dear God, I desire to follow Your commandments and Yours alone. May I not create my own system of right and wrong but may I obey what You've already established.

Matthew 15:21-28

This seems to me an odd story because I read it through eyes which do not fully comprehend Jesus' actions; however, after taking some time to examine it closer, the story begins to make sense. Jesus withdraws from the scribes and Pharisees who had been attacking Him with every turn. He goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon where many centuries earlier the Canaanites had inhabited (Gentiles). A woman comes to Jesus crying out to Him to have mercy on her daughter, who was demon possessed. She addresses Jesus as Lord and Son of David which were strictly Messianic titles. These titles alone evidenced her belief that Jesus was the Messiah and had the ability to heal her daughter. But uncharacteristic of Jesus, He did not answer her (15:23). She continued to cry out so much that the disciples ask Jesus to intervene in the situation, but Jesus responds by telling them He was sent to the house of Israel, not to the Gentiles (15:24). Since Jesus had primarily come to deliver the Jews, He did not minister to the Gentiles. To me this makes Jesus sound mean or prejudice, but it is not for me to fully understand. I can gather that throughout the history of the Gentiles, they had rejected God and even persecuted His people (Israel). But, this woman would not give up. She came and worshipped Him saying "Lord, help me" but Jesus still refused. Jesus said that it is not good to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs (15:26). Since Jesus had come to give the kingdom (bread) to the Jews (children) it would be wrong to bring good to the Gentiles (dogs). The woman persisted saying that even the dogs would eat the crumbs which fell from the master's table (15:27). Even though she was not a Jew, she still saw herself in the illustration as a dog...someone who needed help and one who could still eat the crumbs which fell from the table. She was not minimizing Israel's blessing, but she was just asking that a little bit be given to her. To this, Jesus responds declaring that this woman's faith is great and He heals her daughter (15:28). The thing which caused Jesus to respond was she knew that help only could come from God. She was willing to humble herself and recognize Jesus as her way to God. This kind of attitude should be repeated in us each day. We should wake up every morning recognizing that without God I will not be able to live. Our prayer should be as the woman's - "Lord, help me."

Dear Lord, help me.

Matthew 15:29-39

Distinct from the feeding of the 5000 which had occurred earlier in the ministry of Jesus, the feeding of the 4000 takes place after Jesus had departed from Tyre and Sidon. As He came to rest on the mountain, multitudes of people brought the lame, blind, mute, and the maimed to be healed by Jesus (15:29-30). The people marveled at Jesus' miracles and responded by glorying God (15:31). After these many miracles, Jesus calls His disciples to Himself and confesses His compassion for the people because they had followed Him three days without anything to eat (15:32). Jesus did not want them to depart from Him hungry because they may faint on the way home. The disciples respond to Jesus in a negative way by inquiring where He intends to get enough food (15:33). Obviously those who walked closest to Jesus had forgotten His earlier miracle of feeding 5000 people (Matthew 14:13-21) with five loaves of bread and two fish. In this situation there were fewer people and more food (15:34) so Jesus was capable of repeating the same miracle. Jesus commanded that the people be seated while He took the bread and fish and miraculously fed the entire group (15:35-37). I'm not sure why the disciples lacked faith that Jesus could feed the people. After all they had seen you would expect them to not worry about seemingly impossible circumstances; however, before we are quick to condemn the disciples, we must closely examine ourselves. If we are honest, we've seen God do amazing things in our lives, but when the next tough scenario arises we are quick to allow doubt to enter our mind. Today, we must be challenged to believe God even when we have a hard time understanding how He will work through a situation. Humanly speaking, doubt is a reality, but with God all things are possible.

Dear God, help me to believe You even when I cannot see a solution.

Matthew 16:1-12

I have no doubt that a major theme which is regularly ignored within the gospels is Jesus' hatred for the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Whenever the first four books of the New Testament are referenced, it is most likely to the ministry of Jesus Christ and rightly so. However, a natural reading of the NT would yield many thoughts of why Jesus constantly confronted the teachings of the so-called religious crowd. In verses 1-4 of this passage, Jesus condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees for their failure to read the signs He had already given about being the Messiah. He had performed countless miracles, but they desired Him to do something more spectacular than healing others. Because of this rejection Jesus calls them hypocrites, which means actors and implies that on the outside they were religious but on the inside they were wicked - they were not really what they appeared to be (16:4). After His encounter with the religious leaders, Jesus returns to the disciples and warns them about getting mixed up in the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus was in essence warning them about the rapidly spreading (leaven) false doctrine purported by the religious people of the day, mainly that the external is all that matters. I know I've said it many times throughout our study of the book of Matthew, but Jesus is most interested in your heart! We should never think that we can carefully disguise the outward person and fool others (and God for that matter) into thinking we are spiritual. Spirituality comes from the heart and is never because of our best efforts. A pure heart is the gift of God and is never manufactured by anything we do. God so much wants our hearts to be surrendered to Him so that He can mold it into His image. Don't think you can impress God by your wardrobe, adherence to rituals, or good deeds. Start each day by giving God your heart and allow Him to change you into the person He wants you to be.

Dear God, here is my heart. Change it to make me the person you desire me to become.

Matthew 16:13-17

There comes a time in all of our lives where we must decide who Jesus really is. Every person must chose whether or not Jesus is truly God and if He really died on the cross and rose again for the payment of our sins....either He is God or He is not. In these verses, Jesus first asks the disciples what other people are saying about Him (16:13). The disciples responded by telling Him that some said He was "John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets (16:14)." The people were saying that Jesus' message was similar to the ones spoken by these great prophets of the Old Testament and then Jesus turned the question personal - He asked them who they thought He was. Simon Peter speaks up for the group and declares that "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter was expressing that after observing His miracles and hearing His words that He was deity. Behind Peter's expression of faith he was wholeheartedly declaring that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ) and all Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Him. I believe each of us must answer the same question - who is Jesus Christ? Although we have never walked with Jesus (as the disciples) or listened to His message, God has provided His Word (the Bible) to enable us to see the same things the disciples experienced. Even though Jesus no longer physically walks on this earth, God has provided for mankind a perfect record of His life and ministry. Who do you say He is?

Dear God, thank you for sending Your Son, Jesus, to earth. May many come to know Him as the Messiah and Savior.

Matthew 16:18-23

When the disciples confessed their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior, He gave them some instructions on the future church they would establish. Jesus turns to Peter and says "upon this rock I will build My church." There is a play on words in verse 18 - the name *Peter* (petros) means small rock and the word *rock* used here (petra) means foundational rock. It is very clear that Jesus is not declaring Peter as the foundation of the church because in relationship with other scripture (Acts 4:11-12) we understand that Christ is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23) as well as the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6-7) . All believers are living stones (1 Peter 2:5) which make up the the church. Jesus goes on to say that His church will never fall to the gates of hell (Hades)...the church will ultimately stand! Then Jesus declares power and authority upon all believers to forgive or retain the sins of those within the church (16:19). Jesus gave further instructions on dealing with wickedness within the body of Christ (Matthew 18:15-20). From this time on Jesus began to reveal to His disciples that He would suffer, die and be raised the third day (16:21) but Peter speaks up and rebukes Jesus for saying these things because he had a different idea of how things should be done. All the disciples expected Jesus to set up His kingdom during their lifetime; however, God the Father had a different plan (16:22-23). It is easy for us to envision a better way for things to be done, especially when our plans differ from the ways of God. Although the disciples did not completely grasp what Jesus was telling them they should have trusted Him. Jesus had never made a mistake and always did what was right; therefore, we also must accept God's plans over our own.

Dear God, thank you for giving the church victory over sins and death through Jesus Christ. Help us to accept your plans even when it does not make sense.

Matthew 16:24-28

After Peter had just rebuked Jesus for saying that He was going to die, Jesus took the chance to teach His disciples about the cost of following Him. I'm not sure that I firmly grasp all that Jesus is trying to communicate through these verses, but I'll give it my best shot. In verse 23 Jesus countered Peter's words by exposing that Peter's plan was contrary to what God wanted. I don't believe Jesus was angry at Peter but rather wanted him to understand his plans were not in line with the will of God. To make this point clear, Jesus had to be firm with Peter. Springboarding from this situation, Jesus teaches His disciples what it meant to follow after Him. First, the disciples must "deny" themselves. Denying self is probably much more complicated than I will define it here, but I believe it is the abandoning of your plans in order to follow God's ways. I don't think denying self is a one time thing, but a daily humbling of ourselves before God and submission to His authority in our life. Secondly, Jesus says that in order to follow Him a person must "take up his cross." The disciples were very familiar with the cross and it evoked pictures of suffering and hardship. When a criminal was sentenced to punishment by way of the cross he had to carry his cross to the place where he would be crucified. This was a public statement that he was now under the authority of the Roman empire whom he had once rebelled against. Jesus was trying to inform them that His followers would make a full commitment to Him regardless of any suffering which they would face as a result of following Him. Jesus then says something very profound in verses 25-26 - "whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." He goes on to ask "what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" These were words of comfort. It is a statement of contrast in light of what He had just said about denial and suffering. He was telling His disciples that following Him is worth it even though the path may be tough. Not only are these words of comfort, but also words of promise. A person who chooses to follow Christ, although he has given up his own plans, will ultimately experience life to the fullest. Verse 27 also promises reward to those who faithfully serve God during their lifetime. To summarize what Jesus was saying (although it is not my place), I believe He wanted them to know following Him was worth it.

Dear God, help me to deny myself and pursue Your plans knowing that You will help me experience life to the fullest.

Matthew 17:1-13

We must remember that in Matthew 16:28 Jesus told His disciples that there were some standing with Him who would not experience death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. The word *kingdom* here can also be interpreted royal splendor and is not necessarily a reference to Jesus Christ's earthly kingdom. Jesus was not saying that He was going to immediately set up His earthly kingdom; however, considering what would follow, Matthew 16:28 is best understood to be referencing what Peter, James, and John would soon experience - the transfiguration. These men accompanied Jesus to a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured, meaning He in some way had a dramatic change in appearance. Verse 2 tells us that His face shined like the sun and His clothes became white as light. Moses and Elijah also appeared and began talking with them. Luke 9:31 reveals that their topic of conversation was Jesus upcoming death. Peter speaks up and volunteers to make three tabernacles - one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Peter was no doubt referring to the Feast of Tabernacles where booths were dwelt in for seven days - the feast called to remembrance the 40 years of Israel's wanderings, but also looks ahead to Israel's future blessing when they would be gathered together (kingdom). Peter was simply expressing that he wanted this moment to continue. While Peter is speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them and God the Father draws attention to His Son declaring that He is pleased with Jesus and wants the others to listen to Him (17:5). The disciples fell on their faces in fear but Jesus comforts them and tells them to get up. As they get up, only Jesus is there and He commands them to tell no one what they have seen until He is risen from the dead (He was fearful people would try to crown Him king because of this incident). The disciples immediately ask Jesus why the scribes (interpreters of the law) say that Elijah must come before the Messiah. Jesus answers that Elijah has already come in the form of John the Baptist, but the people did not accept his message and eventually killed him. Then, Jesus informs them that He also is about to suffer at the hands of those who also killed John. I'm not sure I can bring much application into this passage except to encourage us all to look forward to that coming kingdom where Jesus will rule in truth and righteousness. He will one day restore things as they should be and all believers will rule with Him in His kingdom.

Dear God, I look forward to Your coming kingdom. Help me not to get frustrated by what I see happening around me, but may I know that You will one day rule in righteousness.

Matthew 17:14-21

While Peter, James, and John were on the mountain witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus, the other disciples were ministering to people. It seems that they had encountered a father and his son, who was possessed by a demon. This demon manifested itself in the form of epilepsy and was putting the boy in danger (17:15). The father had brought his son to the disciples hoping they could heal him, but they could not (17:16). Jesus reacts by saying "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" Jesus was condemning the disciples for their lack of faith. Jesus demands that the boy be brought to Him and He immediately rebukes the demon casting it from him (17:18). The disciples are confused because Jesus had already given them power to heal and cast out demons (see Matthew 10:6-8), but it seems they were trusting in their own abilities rather than making God the object of their faith. Jesus specifically tells them that their unbelief was the cause of failure (17:20). He then informs them that if they only have faith as a mustard seed (very small seed), they will be able to move mountains (17:20b). Obviously Jesus was not concerned about the amount of faith, but the object of it. The disciples were trusting in their own abilities rather than recognizing God as the One who enables them to cast out demons. At the end of verse 20 Jesus says that nothing will be impossible for them, implying that faith in God will empower them to accomplish great things for God. This kind of faith is not willpower or a display of our abilities, but a dependence on God to perform great things for His benefit. Verse 21 communicates that this faith is only a result of prayer and fasting. These two things are about dependence. When we desire to do things for God's benefit and not our own, God gives us the power to accomplish amazing things for Him.

Dear God, help me to never do things for You in order to bring attention to myself, but enable me to do great things for You so that others will be drawn to You.

Matthew 17:22-27

While staying in Galilee, Jesus revealed to His disciples what was about to happen to Him...soon He would be betrayed, killed, and the third day He would be raised up. Because the disciples did not fully understand God's plan, their reaction was one of disappointment. The end of verse 23 says they were exceedingly sorrowful. Before criticizing the disciples, we must keep in mind that they did not comprehend the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. They believed Jesus would set up His kingdom on earth during their lifetime; however, God the Father's plan required that His sinless Son die on the cross to satisfy the punishment for mankind's sin and be raised again to guarantee our eternal life. We can now look back and see God's plan perfectly unfold and this should bring joy to our hearts as we see God's forgiveness of sin through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. After Jesus revealed His future fate to them, they departed to Capernaum. When they arrived, those people who received the temple tax inquired of Peter as to whether or not his Teacher paid the temple tax. A temple tax was a yearly sum of two day's wages which enabled the temple to be maintained. Peter responded that his Teacher did pay and Jesus, anticipating Peter's thoughts about this matter, asked Peter what he thought. Jesus' question was very direct to Peter "From whom do the kings of earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or strangers?" Peter rightly responded "strangers." However, Jesus was going deeper with the question. Jesus said that sons of the king were exempt from paying taxes because of their relationship with the king; furthermore, Jesus was declaring that as God's Son (the King), He was exempt from the tax and they were also. However, instead of refusing to pay the tax, Jesus told Peter to go catch a fish and in the mouth of that fish he would find money. Peter was to use that money to pay the temple tax for himself and Jesus. Peter was being instructed by Jesus on obedience to authority. Even though the religious leaders were just looking for another accusation against Jesus (not paying the temple tax), Jesus still chose to obey earthly authority. If the Son of God obeyed earthly authority, how much more should we heed the leadership within our government? God requires us to respect and submit to authority even though we may not always agree with them. Do you have respect and reverence for earthly authority or are you always criticizing and disrespecting them? Think about it.

Dear God, as Your own Son obeyed authority, help me to also have a reverence and respect for the earthly rulers You have placed over me. Instead of judging them, help me to pray for them.

Matthew 18:1-14

Jesus had just predicted His death and resurrection to His disciples in Galilee. Departing from Galilee, they headed to Capernaum and on the way the disciples began arguing over who would be greatest in the kingdom (see Mark 9:33-34). So, Jesus sat down with them and gave them some instruction about the kingdom. Mark reveals that Jesus said "if anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Then, picking up on Matthew's commentary we find Jesus calling a little child to Himself and declaring that they must be "converted and become as little children" in order to enter the kingdom. In verse 4, Jesus explains that humility (as a little child is dependent on his parents) is the key to the kingdom; in other words, a person must come to God with a faith that is helpless and dependent on God. Without humility, no one will enter into God's kingdom. Jesus goes on to explain some simple principles about the relationship believers should have with other believers. Verse 5 challenges believers to receive other believers and never cause them to fall into sin as a result of our life (setting the wrong example). Jesus says that it is better to be drowned in the sea than to lead someone else into sin (18:6). The world is already seeking to lead others into sin, but the Christian should never cause someone else to stumble (18:7). Going on to use some figurative illustrations, Jesus declares that if our foot (hands or eyes) causes us to sin then we should cut it off (18:8-9). Jesus ends this particular teaching by communicating His love for all believers and His desire for all of them to follow in the ways of His Father (18:11-14). Jesus was an amazing teacher - He took the disciples from arguing about who was the greatest to discussing that humility makes a person great. Then He communicates that every person is equally important and another believer should never be setting the wrong example that may lead a fellow Christian to sin. How about you? Are you humbling yourself before God and others? Is your life leading others to follow God?

Dear God, help me to remain humble as a little child is dependent on his parents. Then, keep my life on the right path so I can set the right example for others to follow.

Matthew 18:15-35

Christ has just instructed the disciples on the importance of every human being and the severity of leading one of those people astray through wrong actions. Verses 12-14 pictures one hundred sheep and one wandering sheep who decides to do his own thing. Jesus relates the need to restore this sheep to the herd by any means possible. Now Jesus moves from teaching about restoration to some instructions on what to do when we are offended by someone else. In every human relationship, conflict is inevitable and Jesus wanted to make sure we didn't "write someone off" when they offend us. The Bible seems to imply a three step process in restoring a broken relationship between two human beings. First, approach the offending person privately about the matter (18:15) and if he does not listen then you should take two or three respected people to confront the offender (18:16). If he fails to repent, take the matter before the church (18:17). The goal is always to bring the offending believer back into a relationship with the other person; however, if he refuses to repent then the church should remove him so as not to influence other people with his sin (18:17b). Peter speaks up and asks how many times he should forgive someone who has offended him. Jesus responds by saying that forgiveness should have no limit (18:21-22). Jesus continues on to tell the parable of the unforgiving servant. This particular servant was forgiven by his king of a very large debt. This same servant turned around and refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller debt (18:23-30). The point is easy to understand - God has forgiven us of all our sin (large debt), so we should be willing to forgive others every time. Take some time right now to examine your relationship with others. Are there areas of unforgiveness in your life? If so, be reminded of Jesus Christ's complete forgiveness of your sin and forgive those who may have offended you.

Dear God, help me to handle my relationships with others in the right way. Enable me to forgive as You forgave me.

Matthew 19:1-15

Although the temptation for this passage of scripture is to discuss the subject of divorce, remarriage, and singleness, I am choosing to go a different direction. I am not minimizing the subject at hand, but I think Jesus may be trying to teach another lesson to His disciples. However, just to get the picture, let's begin with a little background to set up Jesus' teaching. Welcome back the Pharisees who seem to follow Jesus' every move. They come to Jesus and ask if it is okay to divorce for any reason. There were different opinions on the issue of divorce in that day - some thought divorce was permitted in any instance and others thought divorce was permissible only when sexual immorality had been committed. I believe Jesus is very clear that divorce is permissible only when sexual immorality has taken place (19:8-9). The disciples get involved and conclude that it may be better to stay single (19:10). Jesus responds by saying that singleness is up to the person...it is a personal choice. As the disciples were discussing this issue with Jesus, parents begin bringing their children to be blessed of Jesus. It was tradition for Jewish parents to seek out a rabbi to pray a blessing over their children. You would assume that the disciples would welcome these parents, but apparently they thought their conversation of "deeper matters of the faith" were more important than people. Don't get me wrong - Jesus stood up for the truth in the matter of divorce and remarriage; however, He felt people were more important than sitting around and discussing doctrine. Jesus immediately rebukes the disciples (19:13) and commands that the little children be brought to Him. There is a huge lesson to be learned here...discussing doctrine has its' place, but never at the expense of people.

Dear God, open my eyes to see the needs of people.

Matthew 19:16-30

This is one of the best passages to help us understand what it means to inherit eternal life or rather who does inherit it. A rich man comes to Jesus and asks "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds in an awkward way by correcting the man for calling Him good. Please understand Jesus was not denying His deity, but rather emphasizing that everyone has sinned except God (19:17). Then, Jesus tells the man if he wants eternal life he will have to keep the commandments. Before you freak out (knowing that you haven't kept the commandments), let's go a little further. The man responds to Jesus by asking Him which commandments he has to keep, to which Jesus lists several of them. The arrogant young man informs Jesus that he has kept all of those commandments (19:20) and continues to ask what else he has to do. Knowing he was a rich man, Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and then he will inherit eternal life (19:21). This hits the young man hard and he goes away disappointed because he had many possessions (19:22). If you are like me, I initially thought Jesus was spreading a false message of hope. I interpreted Jesus' message as "if you've sinned or haven't given up everything to follow me, you will not inherit eternal life." The disciples reacted in the same way to Jesus' response to the rich man and asked "who then can be saved?" The disciples knew they had broken the commandments and now they were concerned about not entering into eternal life. Jesus puts their minds at ease and says "with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." In other words, Jesus was declaring that eternal life is only made possible through God. Jesus was not preaching a works based salvation to the rich; however, He was trying to expose the sinfulness of the man's heart. The rich young man thought he had everything together but in reality it was his failure to admit his sin which prohibited him from receiving God's grace. We must recognize our sinfulness before we can receive the gift of eternal life. Have you ever dropped your facade and admitted your sinfulness before God. If so, you are ready to also understand that God did the impossible by sending His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to take the punishment for the sin's you have committed.

Dear God, I realize I am a sinner and without the sacrifice of Your Jesus Christ I cannot inherit eternal life. Today, I accept the grace extended to me through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for my sins.

Matthew 20:1-16

This parable is one of my favorites in the gospels. Jesus tells the parable of the laborers to His disciples and compares this to what the kingdom of heaven will be like. The story He tells is of a landowner who hires laborers to work in his vineyard (20:2). Let's get some background...people without work would go and stand in the marketplace throughout the day waiting for someone to hire them. The landowners would show up at the marketplace and hire people based on the amount of help needed to accomplish the work in their field. Typically, the work day started at 6:00am and ended at 6:00pm so the landowner as well as the laborers showed up early to hire workers. So with that in mind, this particular landowner goes to the marketplace and agrees with several laborers to pay them a denarius a day, which was typical daily wage. Realizing that he needed more help, the landowner returned to the marketplace at 9:00am and hired more laborers (20:3-4). The landowner again realized he needed more help so he returned to the marketplace at 12:00pm, 3:00pm, and 5:00pm (20:5-7). The evening came and the landowner told the steward of the vineyard to call all the laborers together to give them their wages (20:8). Beginning with the people who were hired last, the steward gave them a denarius which was the same pay received by those who worked all day (20:8-10). Everyone who worked that day, regardless of how long they had worked, received the same wage. Those who had worked all day were upset that they had not received more, but the landowner declares that he is good and gracious, even to those who had only worked a shorter amount of time (20:11-15). Here is the picture Jesus is trying to paint. The landowner is God the Father and the steward of the vineyard is Jesus Christ. The laborers are those who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ and carry out His work and ministry; therefore, the meaning is that those who began following Jesus Christ later in their life will receive the same reward in the kingdom of God as those who have followed Him their whole life. God is good and gracious desiring everyone to receive the blessings extended to them in spite of how long they have served Him.

Dear God, help me to be thankful for all those who are laboring together to do Your work. May I never think that I should deserve more than someone else; after all, all blessings come from You and You are good to all.

Matthew 20:17-28

Again, Jesus gives insight into His future death, burial, and resurrection (20:17-19). After this, the mother of James and John came to Jesus to ask if her sons could sit on His right and left hand in the kingdom (20:20-21). Jesus responds by telling her that she doesn't know what she is asking for and that suffering is necessary for positions of prominence. Jesus wanted her to understand that the path He was on was one marked with suffering and pain (20:22). James and John declare that they are ready to suffer for His sake; however, Jesus tells them that positions in the kingdom are not for Him to give but only the Father's (20:23). When the other disciples caught wind of James and John's request (also their mother's), they were upset (20:24). Jesus calls all of His disciples to Himself and begins to teach them about true greatness. The Gentile leaders of that day used their power and influence to be great, but Jesus' pictured a different kind of greatness. "Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant and whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave." Jesus shatters their idea about being great! Then, He challenges them to follow His example - He did not come to earth in order for people to serve Him, but to serve others and ultimately give His life to pay for the sins of mankind (20:26-28). What was Jesus trying to teach? it is very simple to understand, but hard to practice - greatness is found in serving others. As Jesus gave up His life to serve and save mankind, we also should spend our life investing in the lives of others.

Dear God, allow greatness in my life to come through my service to others. Help me to give my time, abilities, and money to serve others.

Matthew 20:29-34

As Jesus and His disciples are leaving Jericho, a great number of people follow Him and on the road they encounter two blind men. Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions that there were two men while the other writers only focus on the one named Bartimeaeus because he may have been the louder of the two. Although they cannot see what is happening, they detect that there is something big taking place. They enquire of others as to what is going on and find out that Jesus is nearby (Luke 18:36). Recognizing this as their only chance for healing, they cry out "have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" The way they addressed Jesus proves that they knew Jesus was God and therefore had the ability to heal them. This term Son of David was a messianic title and pointed back to when God promised David that through his line would come the one who would establish an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16). This, of course, was a reference to Jesus Christ. Although these blind men could not see, they knew this person who was healing the sick was the Anointed One. Verse 31 reveals that the multitude of people got involved with this incident and demanded that the blind men keep quiet. The people viewed them as a nuisance instead of helping them encounter Jesus Christ. The crowd's warnings fell on deaf ears because the blind men cried out even more for Jesus to have mercy on them. Jesus stands still and calls the men to Himself asking what they want Him to do (20:32). The men respond by asking Jesus to restore their sight (20:33). Jesus has compassion on the men, touches their eyes, and they receive their sight (20:34). This is a wonderful picture of humility and desperation and we have so much to learn from these blind men. First, these men knew Jesus was their only chance to be made whole. We must daily view Jesus as the only One who can deliver us from spiritual blindness and we must desperately rely on Him for guidance. Secondly, the blind men forgot about the people around them. If they would have allowed the crowd to discourage them, they would have never met with Jesus. We have a tendency to listen to the crowd instead of focusing on the One who can heal our brokenness. Like the blind men, we must see the need to humble ourselves before God and rely on Him for everything we need.

Dear God, keep me humble before You and may I recognize You as my only hope.

Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Jerusalem at the time right before the Passover (celebration of Jews being freed from Egyptian bondage, see Exodus 12). When they came to a place called Bethphage (near the Mount of Olives), Jesus sent two of His disciples to a nearby village to bring back a donkey and colt which were tied up (21:2-3). Matthew mentions that this action was a direct fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 where he declares that the King is coming sitting on a donkey. The disciples obeyed Christ and brought Him the donkey. Christ sat on the donkey while crowds of people laid clothes in His path along with branches from trees (21:7-8). In this culture, spreading one's clothes on the ground was a way of paying respect to a person of high status. In essence, these people were outwardly showing their belief in Jesus as the King of the Jews. The people also cried out "hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed in He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna means *save us* and implies that they recognized Jesus Christ as the One who would save them (21:9). Although the people did not totally grasp what was about to happen (His death, burial, and resurrection), they still recognized Jesus as the Messiah. As Jesus moves into Jerusalem, many began asking "who is this?" The multitudes responded by declaring Him to be "Jesus the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee." This particular instance was the first time Jesus was being heralded to the nation of Israel as the Son of David. He would eventually go the cross and give up His own life to satisfy the wrath of God on our sins. Today we should worship Jesus Christ as the One who has saved us from our sin and delivered us from sin and death. We should willingly "lay down our clothes" at His feet and worship Him as King and Lord over our life.

Dear God, thank You for sending Your only Son to save us. Help me to daily worship Him for what He has done for me!

Matthew 21:12-17

Following His triumphal entrance into the city, Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem and discovers many people buying or selling doves for temple sacrifices. It appears that another group of people, called the money-changers, were also gathered in the temple and their job was to exchange Roman money (which was not fit to buy sacrifices) at high exchange rates. All of this activity made Jesus very angry because He felt the temple had become a hangout for thieves instead of a place for prayer and worship (21:13). He began turning the tables of the merchants and money-changers to help them understand that they were using the temple for their own financial gain rather than reverencing it as a place to meet with God. The ungodly actions of these people had obviously caused distraction for those who genuinely came to worship God and as soon as Jesus confronted these thieves, the blind and lame came to be healed (21:14). The children cried out to Jesus as the Son of David, the One promised to save them (21:15). It was as if the temple had finally been freed to do what God meant for it to do. I find that many people get distracted when they come to the church to worship the Lord. Maybe the people aren't selling sacrifices or exchanging money, but there are many other hindrances to worshipping God the way we should. We seem to drag "baggage" into church because of our pride and disregard for what should be taking place at church - the worship of God alone. Sometimes we have a disagreement with another person and harbor anger toward them while trying to worship. Things may not be the way we think they should be in church (ministry change, music, leadership, broken relationship, etc.), but in reality we have been distracted from what church is all about...bringing glory to God through worship! That's what Jesus was trying to get across to the money-changers and merchants! Would God be angry with you at church? Are you coming with the right heart attitude toward Him when you walk into the doors of the church?

Dear God, guard me from bringing things into church that I should not. Help me to make church all about worshipping You!

Matthew 21:18-22

On the surface this passage seems to be an action that Jesus did out of frustration, but upon closer examination He seems to be actually drawing some symbolism as well as teaching a spiritual lesson on faith. As Jesus returns to the city of Jerusalem in the morning He is hungry and stops by a fruit tree along the way but instead of finding figs He discovers a barren tree (21:19). Seemingly frustrated Jesus curses the fig tree and commands that no fruit grow on it ever again and immediately the tree withers. To me, this appears pretty harsh; however, the disciples thought it was pretty cool because they marveled that He was able to speak a curse and the tree withered (21:20). The disciples had a thing with power and were often amazed when Jesus performed a miracle. But, Jesus was teaching a greater lesson. The fig tree is often symbolic of Israel (see Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7) and in reality its' fruitlessness represented their rejection of Him in addition to their failure to follow God's ways. As God's chosen people, Israel had been given many spiritual and physical blessings but oftentimes found the evil around them more attractive than obeying God. Jesus would allow judgment to fall upon Israel for their failure to produce spiritual fruit (see Galatians 5:16-25 for a discussion of spiritual fruit). The disciples then question about His power to curse the fig tree and Jesus encourages them that if they have faith they can perform this miracle and also move mountains (21:21). He is quick to remind them that this power only comes through asking God in prayer and believing that He can do it (21:22). The application in this situation is two-fold. First, as a "tree" is God's field, are you producing spiritual fruit? Your life should be drawing others to worship God alone. Secondly, do you realize you can accomplish God's will through prayer and faith in Him? God always enables us to do His will when we turn control over to Him and believe that He can do great things through us. Have you reached that potential?

Dear God, cause me to produce spiritual fruit so I can accomplish Your will and draw others to You.

Matthew 21:23-46

The chief priests and elders (the supposed spiritual leaders of that day) come to Jesus and inquire of Him by what authority He performs miracles and teaches. They had obviously observed the numerous things He had done, even His cleansing of the temple the day before; however, they knew that if He continued, their system would be destroyed. So, their goal was to find something to incriminate Him and what better way to do this than to get Him to say that He had authority from God the Father or that He was God. Jesus knew what they were trying to do so He told them that if they answered His question, He would tell them by what authority He does these things (21:24). Here is the question He posed: "the baptism of John - where was it from? from heaven or from men?" The religious leaders discussed this amongst themselves and knew if they answered "from heaven" then He would inquire as to why they did not believe His message about the coming Messiah (21:25). But, they knew if they answered "from men", the people would be angered because they accepted John the Baptist as a prophet (21:26). They chose not to answer and Jesus told them that He would not tell them by what authority He performed these things (21:27). Jesus continues on to tell two parables. The first tells of a man who had two sons (21:28-32) and the father asked the first son to go work in his vineyard, to which the son responded that he would not. The father approaches the second son and he says that he will go but he never does. Jesus asks which of these sons did the will of the father and they responded "the first." Through this parable Jesus is teaching that the tax collectors and prostitutes (outcasts of society) are like the first son because they believed in John's message (21:31-32); however, the "religious crowd" rejected his message because they were self-righteous. Jesus tells another parable of a landowner who plants a vineyard and leases it to some vinedressers (21:33-39). When the landowner sends his servants (symbolic of Old Testament prophets), the vinedressers kill them. Jesus says that again the landowner sends his servants (symbolic of more prophets and John the Baptist), but the vinedressers kill them (21:36). Lastly, the landowner sends his own son and they kill him also (21:37-39). The message is clear - Jesus is declaring Himself as the Son of God. God had sent many prophets before testifying to the salvation of God, but unbelievers had chosen to reject the message and silence them by killing them. Ultimately, God (the landowner) to testify of the message of salvation, but they rejected and killed Him also. Jesus was pronouncing swift judgment on those who rejected the message of salvation, especially to the self-righteous (21:40-44). Examine your heart right now...have you accepted the message of hope which was sent through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for your sins?

Dear God, may you help many to accept the message of hope which was sent by You through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help them to turn from self-righteousness and to the grace extended through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 22:1-14

This parable paints a scene where a king arranges for his son to be married, so he sends out his servants to invite the guests to the wedding (22:2-3); however, they refuse to come. Again, the king sends out his servants to the same people and invites them to the wedding but the servants are met with the same reaction (22:4-6). Furthermore, some of the invited guests take the king's servants and kill them and the king becomes furious so he sends out an army to destroy their city (22:7). The first part of this parable is an illustration of the so-called religious leaders of the day who had rejected the message brought to them by people such as John the Baptist. The king is symbolic of God the Father and the son is Jesus Christ. Those invited to the wedding feast pictures salvation, which was especially first extended to the Jews (God's people). Jesus continues the parable by saying that the king then tells his servants to go into the highways and invite as many people as they can to the wedding, whether good or bad (22:8-10). Jesus goes on to say that the wedding hall is full with the guests his servants had found. This is a beautiful representation of God's salvation being offered to all people regardless of their past. It appears that since the servants had invited people off of the streets that the king provided them with the proper attire for the wedding. The reason I say this is because there is one guy whom the king sees not wearing the proper attire and so he inquires as to how he got in (22:11-12). The king's inquiry is met with a speechless reaction as the king calls his servants to take this man away and cast him into outer darkness (22:13). My initial reaction is to think that the king is pretty harsh, but further examination reveals that this man just refused to be clothed in the garments the king had provided. Again, this is a perfect illustration of how we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ when we admit our inability to clothe ourselves in righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). Paul wrote about this same illustration in Philippians 3:9 when he says "not having my own righteousness which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith." Jesus ultimately wants people to know that salvation is not found in self-righteous works, but rather in grace through faith, which is His gift to us.

Dear God, thank You for providing the righteousness I needed in order to be Your child.

Matthew 22:15-46

I know this is a large portion of scripture to be covering in one reading, but I want to leave behind many of the details in order to discover an overall lesson Jesus is trying to teach. Many groups including the Pharisees, Herodians, scribes, Sadducees, and the chief priests were conspiring ways to entangle Jesus (22:15-33). They were all very angry at how Jesus had captured the hearts of the people and now they were trying to think up the most bizarre questions to entrap Jesus through something He would say. In the midst of all these crazy questions, Jesus responded in the wisest way that even they were astonished at how He answered (22:22,33,46). Did they not realize they were messing with God? But, there is one question asked by a lawyer (scribe who interpreted the law) which is worthy of our attention. He asks Jesus "which is the great commandment in the law?" Instead of responding with "thou shalt have no other gods before me" or another one of the commandments, Jesus gives a summary of all the commandments. Jesus says "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." Jesus establishes this as the first great commandment. Profound! If we love God, we will keep all the commandments! He goes on to say "the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God and love others. At the end of His answer Jesus says something that is easy to miss - "on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." He was telling these people that the whole Old Testament is based upon these two commandments. Every book of the law and every book of the Prophets were all trying to teach one thing - to love God and to love others. I realize we tend to look at the Bible and walk away feeling like there are a lot of things to obey; however, when it comes down to it, there are only those two things to remember. All of our attitudes, actions, and reactions should be based on our love for God and our love for others. Since I love God, I won't put other gods before Him, worship idols, or take God's name in vain. Since I love others, I will honor my mom and dad. Since I love others, I will not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. Jesus was trying to expose the real reasons God gave the commandments. Some people look at the do's and don't's of the Bible as burdensome, but in reality which one of us wants to be disrespected as a parent or have our spouse commit adultery? No one in their right mind would want these things to come on them! Realize that God gave us the commandments to experience life the way it was meant to be.

Dear God, keep loving You and loving others at the top of my list!

Matthew 23:1-12

As we have observed throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus has much to say to the scribes and Pharisees (those who had created a man-made system of righteousness). The scribes and Pharisees loved to be seen by others as they "performed" their good deeds because their motivation was selfish. They did not do good things because they loved God but rather because they wanted others to think they were spiritual. In addition to the Old Testament law, the scribes and Pharisees had also added some of their own rules and regulations by which they judged the spirituality of others. Jesus quickly became frustrated with these groups of people mostly because they believed obedience to ritual was more important than obedience with the heart. In this particular passage of Matthew, Jesus lays out his characterization of the scribes and Pharisees - He unveils the real issue. He began by telling the listeners that the scribes and Pharisees enjoyed sitting in Moses' seat (the highest position of authority in educating the people in the Old Testament law) because they could tell people what to do (23:3). But, Jesus says that His disciples should not be like them because they tell others what to do without obeying it themselves. Furthermore, Jesus tells His followers in verse 4 that the scribes and Pharisees create heavy burdens for people, meaning that their "extra" rules and regulations cause people frustration with their spiritual life. The reason these additional laws created discouragement was that they were not from God. I am a firm believer that we should ALWAYS follow God's laws and everything revealed in His Word, but I am totally against adhering to a set of man-made conditions for spirituality. In verses 5-7 Jesus exposes the real heart of the scribes and Pharisees - they wanted to feel better about themselves and they wanted others to think they are close to God. Closeness to God begins with humility, it begins by being a servant to others (23:11). We are never closer to God than when we have admitted our weakness and our inability to please Him on our own. The promise is very clear in verse 12 - those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Don't walk around appearing that you have God and life all figured out, but rather evidence humility before Him each day as you depend on His mercy and grace.

Dear God, I need You today and ask for Your help as I desire to be humble. May I not exalt myself or think that I have You figured out, but help me to remain weak before You.

Matthew 23:13-39

This passage is a continuation of Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead of trying to focus on every verse, I would rather center on just a couple verses that sum up the whole of what Jesus is trying to say. The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of following the minute details of the law, but failing to recognize the *weightier matters of the law* (23:23-24). Jesus mentions particularly that they ignored justice, mercy, and faith. Even though they obeyed the small areas of the law, they did not understand the underlying morality of it; in other words, they obeyed out of habit instead of obeying from the heart. Jesus goes a little further with His words - *you cleanse the outside of the dish, but inside are full of extortion and self-indulgence* (23:25). They were so consumed with what people perceived them to be on the outside that they didn't care about the condition of their heart. In verse 27 Jesus even compares them to whitewashed tombs which looked good from the outside but in reality were full of decay on the inside. Outward change never affects the heart. The scribes and Pharisees appeared righteous from the outside, but inside they were *full of hypocrisy and lawlessness* (23:28). I believe we live in a day where the outward is more important than the inside. We are consumed with other people's perception of us so we go to great lengths to maintain our status; however, without a right heart attitude, outside change means nothing. Jesus wants us to inwardly love His law because that is what ultimately changes us. Consume yourself with God's Word and allow that to change you.

Dear God, change me from the inside out.

Matthew 24:1-35

After Christ finished condemning the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, Jesus and His disciples spent some time observing the temple which had been built by Herod the Great (beginning in 20BC). The buildings were magnificent to the eye even though construction was still being done on it and no doubt the disciples marveled at its beauty (24:1). However, Jesus revealed to them that the temple would be destroyed and not one stone would be left upon another (24:2). Of course Jesus was speaking of a near fulfillment when the Roman general, Titus, completely destroyed the temple by fire. Jesus was also referring to a distant fulfillment after the church age had ended. Confused, the disciples came to him privately saying *when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and at the end of the age?* The destruction of the temple did not fit into what they had envisioned in their minds (they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately), so they wanted more details (24:3). Jesus gives an explanation by first unveiling the signs before His second coming (24:4-35) and then He uncovers the timing of these events beginning in Matthew 24:36. In verse 4 Jesus details what will characterize this age before the kingdom of God: false prophets (vv.4-5), wars (vv.6-7a), famines, pestilences, and earthquakes (vv.7b-8). Jesus goes on to say that there will be hatred (v.10), deceit (v.11), and chaos (v.12); but those who are His children will endure through His strength (v.13). A great promise is also given here - the gospel will be spread to all nations and then this age of tribulation will come to an end (vv.14-29). The final sign that the kingdom of God has come will be when Jesus Christ Himself appears in heaven and gathers all believers together to begin the 1000 year reign of Christ on earth (24:30-31). Jesus promises that His kingdom would not come until all of these things are fulfilled (24:32-35). Let the truth of what Jesus shared with His disciples drive us to take action and share the message of salvation with all those who will trust in Jesus Christ as their payment for sin.

Dear God, spare many from this coming judgment because Your people have spread the message of salvation through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins.

Matthew 24:36-51

In response to the disciples' question about the timing of the kingdom of God (24:3), Jesus gives two illustrations - a real life example and a parable. Jesus states right up front that no man, not even the angels, know when the kingdom of God will begin; furthermore, He points to the time of Noah as an example of the timing of the kingdom. In Noah's day, people were consumed with eating, drinking, and marrying thereby ignoring their responsibility to worship and obey God (24:38). Then, Noah entered the ark and God sent a great flood upon the earth as judgment for the people's wickedness and failure to love God. Jesus says that this is comparable to what the kingdom of God will be like...people will be consumed with their own daily lives and judgment will suddenly fall without warning (24:39-41). Jesus challenges them to always be ready for the coming kingdom and that means keeping their lives pure before God each day (24:42-44). Following the illustration of Noah, Jesus also shares the parable of the two servants. The first is faithful and wise and manages the master's household while he is away. When the master returns, he finds that his servant has been faithful to do the things he has asked of him (24:45-47). However, the evil servant thinks that his master has taken a long time to return, so he beats his fellow servants and begins to drink with the other drunks (24:48-49). Jesus is clear in saying that the master will come at a time when the evil servant is not ready for him and will face judgment from him (24:50-51). Jesus' message is easily discernible - be faithful in obeying God and be ready at all times for His coming. We should never get distracted by worldly things so much that we ignore our God-given purposes and responsibilities. We have been given gifts from God and our desire should be to consistently use them to bring glory to God and point others to Him.

Dear God, help me to be faithful in using my gifts, talents, and abilities for You. May I not get distracted by worldly temptations, but use the time You've given me to carry out your work.

Matthew 25:1-13

Continuing His teaching on the second coming, Jesus answers the disciples' questions about the timing of the kingdom of God (24:3). Instead of specifically answering their question about when the kingdom of God would begin, Jesus gives them yet another parable. Matthew 25:1-13 has become known as the parable of the ten virgins. In this teaching Jesus introduces the listener to ten virgins who take their lamps (traditional for night weddings) and go out to meet the bridegroom (25:1). Jesus reveals that five of the virgins were wise and five of them were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps but failed to take oil to light them; however, the wise ones took their lamp with the oil needed to light them (25:4). For some reason the bridegroom was delayed and did not come when he was expected. Now, we have to understand a little bit about Jewish wedding customs in order to fully understand the meaning. There were a couple parts of weddings...the first step was engagement, the second step was called the betrothal where the ceremony actually took place, and after a period of time the wedding feast would follow. Following the ceremony (where the vows were exchanged) the couple was considered married, but the marriage had not been physically consummated. During the time between the betrothal and the feast (followed by the physical consummation), the groom would work and build a place to live. Back to the parable...Jesus is centering on the time between the betrothal and the wedding feast. The groom, which is a symbolic of Jesus Christ, has not yet returned to establish His kingdom and those waiting for the wedding feast (symbolic of people on earth) are left wondering when he will return. When the groom finally did return, five of the virgins attending the wedding feast could not make it because they didn't have oil for their lamps to see in the darkness. The other half (wise virgins) had adequately prepared for the wedding celebration and were able to make it. The main emphasis is found in verse 13 - Jesus tells His listeners to "watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." Remember that Jesus is specifically referring to the time at the end of the seven year tribulation, not the time of the rapture. Jesus is sending warning to be watchful at all times and always be prepared for His return.

Dear God, help many during this time of tribulation to be prepared and watching for Jesus' return. May Your word be spread to all nations and may they receive it with joy in preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 25:14-30

After instructing the believers to be ready for Christ's return and the establishment of the kingdom, Jesus shares a final parable with them. This teaching is commonly known as the parable of the talents. In this parable Jesus tells of a man who is traveling to a far country (illustrates Jesus in heaven before His second coming) so he calls his servants (those living during the time of tribulation) together and distributes his possessions to them. To one of the servants he gives five talents (certain sum of money) and to another he gave two talents and to the last one he gave one talent. He gave to each man the amount of money he felt that they could handle (25:15). The man goes away on his journey and while he is away the servant with five talents trades with others and gains five more talents (25:16). The servant with two talents gained two more (25:17). The servant who had been given one talent went out and dug a whole and buried his money (25:18). After a period of time, the man returns and each servant gives an account of how he handled the master's money (25:19). The servants with five and two talents bring their money before the master and he is pleased with how they've used it and declares them "good and faithful servants (25:20-23). However, the servant with one talent comes accusing the master of being an unfair and unreasonable man (25:24-25) and made excuses as to why he had not gained anything with the money given to him. The master calls this servant "wicked and lazy" and sentences him to be punished (25:26-30). This parable is a clear illustration of the responsibility that God has given His followers to be faithful in that which He has entrusted to them. The issue in this parable is not the amount given to each servant...He rewards both the servant with five talents as well as the servant who was given two talents. The issue seems to be the faithfulness of the servants. The servant who was given one talent is an example of a person given his very life by God but chose to ignore his responsibility to worship Him with it. We can surmise from the master's punishment that this servant also represents an unbeliever who will ultimately be cast into hell (25:30). Those who are truly servants of God will be faithful (not perfect) to do His work; however, those who live life for themselves prove that they are not a follower of Jesus Christ.

Dear God, I desire to be faithful to You and what you have entrusted me with. Help me to use what You've given me to bring honor to You.

Matthew 25:31-46

To begin with, we must understand these verses in relationship to where this happens in the scope of the future. Currently we are all living in the church age and the next big event on God's timetable will be the rapture (spoken of in John 14:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 3:10). The rapture (rapturo), which is Latin for the words *caught up* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, brings an abrupt end to the church age as Christ appears in the clouds and snatches up all living believers from the earth (as well as dead believers) and takes them to heaven. Millions of Christians will disappear from the earth in an instant and immediately following the rapture there is a seven year period (often referred to as the Tribulation) then followed by the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth (millennial reign of Christ). Getting this picture of the future is very important in understanding the words of Jesus in this passage. When Christ returns to earth following the tribulation period but right before the millennial reign, there is a judgment of nations (specifically Gentiles). Jesus will sit on the throne and all nations (Gentiles) will appear before Him and He will separate them into "sheep and goats." The sheep are true believers and the goats are those who have rejected Jesus Christ as Savior. All believers, those who were converted during the seven year period of tribulation - Revelation 6-19, will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Christ remarks that their good works proved salvation had truly taken place, specifically that they had treated the Jews with love and respect during the time of tribulation (25:34-40). However, Jesus sits in judgment of those who refused to help the Jews during this time of tribulation (25:41-46) and their final judgment would be eternal punishment. Jesus is not teaching a salvation through works, but that when true salvation takes place, works will automatically follow. *Faith without works is dead*. Although Christ is speaking of a specific judgment in these verses, there is much application for us today. True conversion will always result in good works. Examine your heart today!

Dear God, may Your Spirit develop good works in my life.

Matthew 26:1-13

As Jesus finishes speaking about future things (Matthew 24-25), He turns to His disciples saying "after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." God's appointed time had finally come for His only Son to die for the sins of all mankind. God "made Him (Jesus Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Because Jesus was perfect and sinless, He could satisfy the punishment we deserved for our sin and give us a right standing before God. It is only through Jesus Christ (His death, burial, and resurrection) that we are saved from the penalty of sin and given eternal life. Jesus was informing His disciples that the time of His death had finally come. Behind the scenes to this situation, Matthew reveals that the religious leaders were plotting in the palace of the high priest (Caiaphas) about how to kill Jesus quietly (26:4). However, because the Passover was such a big event in Jerusalem and Jesus had many followers, they decided to wait until the conclusion of this feast to kill Jesus (26:5). The scene quickly changes in Matthew's gospel to Jesus in the home of Simon the leper. This man must have been someone whom Jesus had healed earlier in His ministry. While He was in Simon's house, a woman came to Him (John reveals that it is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus) having an alabaster flask. The alabaster flask contained very costly oil...Mark tells us the price is three hundred denarii, which is comparable to a year's wages. Mary took this costly oil and poured it on Jesus' head as He sat at the table - this act was an expression of worship and devotion to Him. The disciples reacted in anger as they looked at this action as a waste of money which could have been given to the poor (26:8-9). John reveals that it was Judas Iscariot, who would soon betray Jesus into the hands of the religious leaders, that spoke out against this woman's expression of worship. Jesus immediately defends the actions of Mary and declares that she did this for His burial. Although Mary probably did not fully understand her actions, Jesus commended her and promised that her story would be told as a memorial to her (26:10-13). Mary's story should be an example to us as our hearts should also be devoted to Jesus and consistently express our worship of Him as our Savior and God.

Dear God, may I freely and consistently worship You through my actions as well as my attitude!

Matthew 26:14-29

Jesus had just rebuked Judas (as well as the disciples also) about his reaction to the woman using the very expensive oil to anoint Jesus. Judas was angry because he felt that the oil could have been sold and given to the poor; however, Judas' motives were far from pure. Judas leaves and immediately goes to the chief priests and asks what they are willing to give him if he delivers Jesus to them (26:15). They count him out 30 pieces of silver and so Judas begins his quest to betray Jesus into the hands of the religious leaders (26:16). After this incident, Jesus and His disciples go to celebrate the Passover (Jewish celebration of their deliverance from Egypt). Back in ancient times, the Jews had been under bondage to the Egyptians and through the hand of Moses they were delivered from the plagues. The most significant plague was the 10th (and final one), where the firstborn of every household was killed. However, God promised the Israelites deliverance from this plague if they would put the blood of a spotless lamb over their doorpost. This deliverance from the death of the firstborn became known as the Passover because God "passed over" the homes which had blood on the doorpost. Now Jesus and His disciples were about to celebrate this time once again, but Jesus was going to bring a new meaning and significance to it. When evening came the twelve disciples sat down with Jesus and He revealed that someone would betray him. After they finished arguing over who it would be, Jesus gets to the heart of what the Passover would become...the Lord's Supper. Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and then gives it to His disciples saying "take, eat; this is my body." (26:26) Then Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to His disciples saying "drink from it all of you for this is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Jesus was in essence celebrating the last Passover and the first Lord's Supper. Jesus Christ is central to both observances - He represented the passover lamb and He also represented the elements in the Lord's Supper. As the Israelites were saved from the death of the firstborn through the death/blood of the lamb, all people are saved from death through the death/blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. The bread represents Jesus' body which was broken on the cross (26:26). The juice represents His blood which was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sin (26:27-28). What a beautiful picture of what was about to happen on the cross! Although the cross is a place of agony and punishment, it also symbolizes a place of forgiveness and sacrifice. Today, celebrate anew the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for the forgiveness of your sin!

Dear God, thank you for the cross!

Matthew 26:30-35

At the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, they sang a hymn and went to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus reveals to them that they will be "made to stumble" because of Him, meaning they would abandon Him (26:31). We have to get the picture here...the religious leaders have been looking for an opportunity to kill Jesus because He claimed to be God and had stood against their system of beliefs (outward is more important than inward). Furthermore, Jesus knew it was necessary to die on the cross to pay for the sins of mankind, but He also knew His followers would suffer persecution because of their faith in Him. So, Jesus informs the disciples that they would temporarily abandon Him during the time of His persecution, mostly because they feared the same treatment by the religious leaders (26:31:b). But, Jesus also told them that He would be raised (from the dead). Peter is the first to speak up and declares that he will never abandon the Lord (26:33). Jesus quickly responds by telling Peter that he will deny Him three times (26:34). Peter speaks up again and tells Jesus that he is willing to die for Him (26:35) and the other disciples also affirm their loyalty to Jesus. I believe that the disciples really did love Jesus and were willing to follow Him; however, they really did not understand that their human side was weak. I'm not sure why Jesus chose to tell the disciples that they would abandon Him. Maybe it was to let them know that He understood or maybe He wanted them to be prepared. Whatever the reason, the disciples should have not been so confident in themselves. Although we are strong in Christ, we are weak in our flesh. Each day we must admit our inability to handle the circumstances of life and allow God to provide the strength we need for the moment. I love what 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." When we are weakest, God can show Himself the strongest.

Dear God, I need Your strength for today and help to face those things that I think I cannot handle.

Matthew 26:36-46

Jesus comes to a place called Gethsemane, which was a place in which Jesus and His disciples often met. Located across the valley from Jerusalem, Gethsemane was a garden of olive trees and has become known as the place where Jesus Christ agonized in prayer before His betrayal by Judas. As Jesus enters into the garden, He tells His disciples to sit while He goes to pray and then He calls Peter, James, and John to go with Him (26:37a). Jesus begins to pray and becomes overcome with sorrow and distress, even to the point that He wanted to die (26:38). I can't imagine what Jesus must have felt as He recognized that He would soon suffer a violent death to pay for the sins of mankind. Obviously, He needed support during this time of distress so He asks Peter, James, and John to stay with Him and watch (26:38b). Jesus then falls on His face and prays to His Father "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me..." Throughout the Old Testament, a cup symbolized divine judgment against sin so in essence He was asking for God to find another way to judge sin. However, Jesus continued to pray "nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Although Jesus Christ was overwhelmed with emotion as He was feeling the full wrath of God upon sin, He still told His Father that He would do whatever His Father wanted Him to do (26:39). To bear the weight of all mankind's sin must have been agonizing! After praying, Jesus returns to find His disciples sleeping and He challenges them to "watch and pray, lest you enter temptation." Jesus knew what was about to happen and was aware they would need divine strength to handle the circumstances ahead (26:40-45). After Jesus' words, He went to pray again but when he returned He found the disciples sleeping...they had no idea what awaited them. Jesus once again urged them to watch and pray; however, they fell asleep. As Jesus spoke to them the third time, Jesus says to His disciples "rise, let us be going. See my betrayer is at hand." Jesus knew the time had come for His capture and subsequent death. It is complicated to imagine what Jesus was feeling during this time of agony in the garden. But regardless of what He was feeling, paying the penalty for mankind's sin was more important! Thank God for Jesus Christ who prayed and received strength to make it through this overwhelming time. There are certain times when we are also overwhelmed with fear and uncertainty but we must follow the example of Jesus Christ praying for divine strength.

Dear God, provide the strength only You can give!

Matthew 26:47-56

The time had finally arrived. Judas enters the garden of Gethsemane with the religious leaders and betrays Jesus with a kiss (26:48-49). As they begin to take custody of Jesus, Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant (26:51). Jesus rebukes Peter for trying to take the law into his own hands and Luke's gospel details how Jesus heals the man's ear (Luke 22:51). Even though the arrest of Jesus was unfounded, Peter still had no right react the way he did (26:52). I find what Jesus says next to be interesting..."do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?" He was saying that if He wanted, He could pray and God the Father would send 72,000 angels to rescue Him; however, Jesus wanted the disciples to know that He was submitting to the Father's plans (26:54). Jesus was very aware that He must die on the cross to pay the penalty for sin and failure to do that would leave man in their state of sin. God the Father loved us so much that He was willing to give up the life of His Son so that we could have eternal life. God didn't need Peter to step in and deliver Him from the captors because their was more at stake than defending Jesus. The forgiveness of sin was Jesus' focus as He submitted to God's will! As Jesus continued to speak to the religious leaders, verse 56 reveals that all the disciples "forsook Him." I can't begin to feel what Jesus must have felt as those who were closest to Him abandoned Him during this time, but Jesus understood. After all, He had told Peter earlier that he would deny Him. Now Jesus was alone, left to His accusers, and would soon face death but no one was there to walk with Him. I guess I cannot point the finger at the disciples for abandoning Him because I would have probably done the same thing. When it comes down to it, I know that humanly speaking my desire is to protect my own life; however, think of how much more important we were to Jesus than His own life. Spend some time thinking about that!

Dear God, thank You for being willing to be accused of something You did not do in order to save my life from sin and death!

Matthew 26:57-75

Jesus was quickly taken away by the religious leaders to Caiaphas, who was the high priest. Verse 58 reveals that Peter followed Jesus at a safe distance so he could see what was happening and finally sat down with the servants. The chief priests, elders, and council sought false testimony against Jesus, but they found none (26:59-60a). However, several people misconstrued Jesus statement's about the temple and it's future destruction resulting in Jesus being accused of blasphemy (26:60b-66). They began to spit on and beat Jesus (26:67-68). The scene quickly switches back to Peter, who is sitting with the servants. A little servant girl comes to Peter saying that she saw him with Jesus, but he quickly denied it (26:69-70). Peter left the courtyard and another girl accused him of being connected with Jesus, but denied even knowing Him (26:71-72). A little while later Peter is again accused of having known Jesus, but he adamantly denies having ever known Jesus (26:73-74a). Immediately the rooster crows and Peter remembered that Jesus had told him that he would deny Him three times, so Peter leaves weeping bitterly (26:74b-75). I'm not sure about you, but there are times when I've felt that I abandoned God when I should have been standing for Him. All of us can relate with Peter because he represents our struggles between faith and fear. There is no doubt in my mind that Peter loved Jesus, but he was fearful of where loving Jesus would take him. Peter personally observed what was happening to Jesus and he did not want to face the same punishment for following Him, so he ran away. What is the lesson here? I'm not sure that we can really learn a lesson here, but we can certainly understand the struggle Peter was experiencing. Although many do not fear death for following Christ, we do fear what those around us will think if we live for Him.

Dear God, provide the courage to live for You.

Matthew 27:1-25

The morning after Jesus' captivity the chief priests and elders continued to plot against Jesus in order to put Him to death (27:1). So, they tied Jesus up and took Him to the home of Pontius Pilate (Roman governor) because technically only Rome was permitted to pronounce the death sentence. As Jesus stood before Pilate it became obvious to him that Jesus was an innocent man and the chief priests/elders were envious of His ministry (27:18). As was customary during this time of Passover, the governor would release a prisoner to gain favor with the Jews. Pilate brought a man named Barabbas before the people. Barabbas was a notorious prisoner because he was a robber and murderer and in the back of Pilate's mind he wanted the people to allow Jesus to be released instead of this hardened criminal, Barabbas. However, the religious leaders stirred up the crowd against Jesus and convinced Pilate to release Barabbas rather than Jesus (27:15-22). Even Pilate's wife attempted to come to the rescue of Jesus by informing her husband of haunting dreams she had about Jesus (27:19). Pilate asked the people what he should do to Jesus and they answered "let Him be crucified." Pilate immediately responded by asking what Jesus had done wrong, but the people cried out more to crucify Him (27:23). The governor knew that the situation was going to get worse if he did not give into their demands so he washed his hands declaring his innocence in the pronouncement of death of Jesus (27:24). The people did not care because they replied "His blood be on us and our children." I guess what amazes me most about this incident is the fact that Jesus remained silent...He never defended Himself, but rather was focused on the mission which His Father had sent Him to fulfill - death to pay the penalty for man's sin. Why? "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...." Jesus was willing to go to the cross because of me and the sin that separated me from a relationship with God the Father. If He willingly died for me, the least I can do is live for Him!

Dear God, thank You for being willing to go to the cross for me!

Matthew 27:26-50

I'm not sure if there is anything that I can add to this passage. The words truly speak for themselves as we see Jesus, who was betrayed by Judas earlier, now being beaten and mocked. Here is a list of what Jesus faced as a result of claiming that He was God: flogging (v.26), nakedness (v.28), a crown of thorns twisted on His head (v.29), humiliation (v.29), people spit on Him and struck Him on the head (v.30), nailed to a cross (v.35), crucified between two thieves who also made fun of Him (vv.38,44), public blasphemy (vv.39-43), and ultimately abandonment by His Father (vv.45-50). I can't help but think that Jesus Christ willingly died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins. Jesus loved me so much that He gave up His very life so I could have eternal life! Thanks be to God for salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ!

Dear God, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to take the punishment that I deserved. Help me to give You my life as Jesus gave His life!

Matthew 27:51-66

Because Jesus was truly God, many supernatural things happened when He died. Matthew gives us an account of several of those things. First, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (27:51). This curtain blocked off the entrance into the Most Holy Place within the temple and Exodus 26:33 informs us that the ark of the covenant, which symbolized God's presence, was behind that curtain. Furthermore, Hebrews 9:2-10 tells us that the priests only went behind the curtain once a year in order to offer a blood sacrifice for his sins as well as the sins of the people. Of course this sacrifice did not remove the sin but was symbolic of the sacrifice Jesus Christ would make to take away our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, the temple's veil was torn from top to bottom symbolizing that sacrifices no longer had to be made by the priests because God accepted the payment of Jesus' death. Hebrews 10 also reveals that the curtain being torn also opened the presence of God to any who would come in the name of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22). Another result of Jesus' death was that the graves were opened and many bodies of saints who had died were raised. Matthew alone mentions this miracle and adds that after Jesus' resurrection the righteous dead appeared to many people. We probably would also be safe in assuming that those who were raised ascended into heaven giving us a glimpse of the rapture spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 4. An earthquake had also taken place as a result of Jesus' death causing many people to think Jesus was the Son of God (27:54). When evening had come (following Jesus' death), Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus (27:57-60). Pilate commanded that Jesus' body be given to Joseph and he took Jesus and buried Him in a new tomb (27:60). The tomb was made of rock and after Jesus was placed inside the tomb, Joseph rolled a large stone against the door and left. On the next day the chief priests and Pharisees gathered to Pilate asking him to secure the tomb because they feared Jesus' disciples may try to steal the body to make it look like He had resurrected (27:62-64). Pilate agrees to their request so they go, seal the tomb, and place guards by it (27:65-66). I wonder how the believers must have felt while Jesus was in the tomb...confused, defeated, and disappointed. We can definitely identify with these feelings in our daily life as we experience pain, loss, and confusion; however, we must remember that we worship God and He will always prevail!

Dear God, help me to look past my confusion and doubt realizing You possess all power to change that which was meant for evil into good!

Matthew 28:1-20

Followers of Christ were still disheartened from His death and were in mourning because they had lost the One whom they loved. In fact, Mary Magdalene and many other women returned to the tomb where Jesus had been buried in order to anoint Him for burial proving that they did not expect Him to come back to life. On the way to the tomb on Sunday morning, Mark records that the women were discussing who would roll away the stone from the tomb (Mark 16:1-3) but as they approached, they saw the stone was rolled away (Mark 16:4). An Angel of the Lord had descended from heaven and rolled away the stone (28:3-4) and told the women not to be afraid because Jesus had risen from the dead (28:5-6). The angel also commanded the women to go "tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him." So, the women quickly left to tell the disciples that they had found an empty tomb and Jesus would meet them in Galilee (28:8). As they were on their way to tell the disciples Jesus appeared to them and they rejoiced and worshipped Him (28:9-10). Jesus later appeared to the eleven disciples in Galilee and they also worshipped Him (28:16-17). Jesus then speaks to His followers and gives what has become known as the Great Commission (28:18-20). He commands believers to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus left His followers with an incredible task - go and tell all people the truth about Christ! Those who would believe the truth of Christ (His death, burial, and resurrection for our sins) were to be baptized and become devoted followers of His ways. Bringing this into relevance for this generation, followers of Jesus Christ must tell others the truth about Jesus. The truth is that He died on the cross in order to remove the penalty of sin and those who believe in Him will one day be raised to eternal life in heaven; however, while on earth they should live life by His standards. This is a tremendous opportunity! Have you believed the truth about Jesus Christ? Are you telling others the truth about Jesus Christ? Is your life demonstrating the truth Jesus Christ taught?

Dear God, may I tell others the truth about Jesus Christ and consistently demonstrate His love and grace through my life!