

Jesus' Genealogy (Matt 1:1-17)

1. Jesus' Background

a. Ancient biographies often opened with the noble background of their subject, background that would shed light on the identity or character of the person about whom they wrote. By tracing Jesus' royal ancestry, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus comes from a lineage of kings. This is not Jesus' genetic line through his mother, but the legal line of Joseph; yet for kingship, it was the *legal* line that counted. (For that matter, most Roman *emperors* in this period were adopted relatives of their predecessors, not their genetic sons.)

b. Like a good rabbi skilled with words, Matthew plays on a couple names in a way that hints that Jesus' character transcends that of his legal ancestors. Although it is not obvious in most translations, he changes the letters in a couple names. The evil king *Amon* becomes *Amos*—alluding to the prophets. The better king *Asa* becomes *Asaph*, one of the psalmists, alluding to the Psalms. Jesus' heritage is not *only* royal; it evokes the entire heritage of earlier Scripture, the law and prophets and writings.

2. The Book of the Genesis of Jesus (1:1)

a. The opening words of Matthew's Gospel are literally, "The book of the *Genesis* of Jesus Christ." Matthew borrows these words from genealogies in Genesis, especially the genealogy of Adam, for which the Book of Genesis was named (not only in English but also in Greek).

b. The genealogy that follows is striking, however: whereas the phrase in Genesis identifies a person's descendants, here it identifies Jesus' *ancestors*. In ancient thought, people depended in some sense on their ancestors for their significance; but here, their ultimate descendant heads the list. Matthew does not use the genealogy merely to identify Jesus in terms of his ancestors. Rather, Matthew reads Jesus' ancestors in terms of him. Jesus is the climax and goal of Israel's past history; as such, even his famous ancestors depend on him for their ultimate significance.

3. Jesus is Son of David, Son of Abraham

a. Jesus' genealogy will list many ancestors, but Matthew highlights in advance two particularly key points: David and Abraham.

b. As heir of David, Jesus is the promised king. Yet Jesus, David's royal descendant, exercises authority far greater than David. The Gospel's conclusion shows us that he is not only king over Israel, but has all authority in heaven and earth (28:18). Even already on earth, Jesus exercised

special authority to help people. Thus blind people come to him pleading, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” (9:27; 20:30-31). His success in casting out demons leads others to suspect that Jesus is “son of David” (12:23), even in the case of a foreign woman who might otherwise not have submitted to Israel’s new king (15:22). In the Old Testament, David did minimize the influence of evil spirits on Saul, and Jewish tradition made his son Solomon an exorcist. But why do even the blind hail Jesus as Son of David? David did not cure blindness. Jesus demonstrates authority far greater than David. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus displays authority over sickness, spirits, seas and storms. We can trust him with the problems of our lives! Yet Jesus also invites the submission of followers under his authority. He is king not only of the natural world but rightful king of humanity. We can submit our lives to him, enrolling in his service.

c. The title “son of Abraham,” by contrast, may identify Jesus’ kinship with the rest of Israel. Thus Jesus will spend forty days tested in the desert like Israel spent forty years; Matthew will apply to Jesus biblical passages about Israel’s ideal mission. Matthew shows that Jesus identified with his people’s heritage and fulfilled what they could not fulfill on their own. Even more generally, we recognize that Jesus has embraced our common humanity; we do not suffer or celebrate alone, because he has shared our place. Beyond all this, it is possible that Jesus evokes Abraham’s mission in some way: it is clear from Genesis that the nations of the earth should be blessed in Abraham. In Matthew, Jesus becomes a blessing to the nations.

4. Jesus is for Everyone

a. Matthew highlights the diverse elements in Jesus’ background. Jesus identifies with Israel and comes as Israel’s king, but the Gentiles noted in his ancestry pave the way for an important theme in Matthew’s Gospel.

b. Happily, we would not omit women in our genealogies today; most ancient genealogies, however, did so. Had Matthew wanted to include the most prominent women in his list, he could have included Israel’s most famous matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and (less directly relevant to Jesus’ line) Rachel. Instead, he highlights four women who were either Gentiles or had significant Gentile associations.

c. Tamar in 1:3 was a local Canaanite who bore Judah two sons; in Genesis 38, God vindicated her. Many of us are familiar with the story of Rahab in 1:5: she was a person in Jericho that God spared. In fact, the Book of Joshua has a large contrast between Rahab, who betrayed her people to serve Israel, and Achan of Judah, who betrayed his people Israel. Rahab hid spies on her roof; Achan hid loot under his tent. Rahab and her family were saved; Achan and his family were destroyed. The story shows that the issue is not one’s ethnicity or culture, but whether one is willing to be on God’s side. Matthew 1:5 also mentions Ruth. She was a Moabite, and Moabites were not allowed to join Israel to the tenth generation (Deut 23:3). Yet Ruth became part of Israel, and the immediate ancestor of King David; it was because she accepted the God of Israel. The fourth woman, Bathsheba, whom Matthew simply calls “Uriah’s widow” in 1:6, was

probably an Israelite by birth, yet by marriage she took on an association with Gentiles: she had been the wife of “Uriah the Hittite.”

d. One purpose of Jewish genealogies was to highlight the purity of one’s Israelite ancestry. Why then does Matthew deliberately emphasize Gentiles in Jesus’ ancestry? Matthew wants us to see that God’s plan was for all peoples all along. There were hints of this in Jesus’ heritage: three ancestors of King David and the mother of King Solomon. This theme develops throughout Matthew’s Gospel—Magi from the east honor Jesus; a centurion displays exceptional faith, as does a Canaanite woman; Jesus’ Gentile execution squad becomes first to acknowledge him as God’s son after the cross; and so forth. The Gospel climaxes with a call to disciple all nations.

e. What does this emphasis have to say to us today? First, that God wants us to transcend ethnic, racial and cultural barriers. God’s love is not limited to a single group of people; he reached out to all of us, and invites us to do the same. Second, there is a mission emphasis in Matthew’s treatment of Gentiles. If we love all peoples, we must commit ourselves to reach all peoples with the good news about Jesus.

5. Finally, Jesus arrived Right on Schedule

a. Matthew estimates three sets of fourteen generations, connecting significant events in Israel’s history: from Abraham to David; from David to the exile; and from the exile to Jesus.

b. Matthew’s point is not precise chronology: like genealogy writers in the Book of Chronicles, he feels free to skip less relevant generations. His point, rather, is that history moves in eras. God makes dramatic shifts in history at certain points. Israel had special experiences with God in the times of Abraham, David, and the exile. By the time Jesus was born, Israel was due, or past due, for another special experience in their history. Jesus was the climax of Israel’s history, the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes and the promises of the prophets. The God of history is still at work today, fulfilling his promises and reminding us of the salvation he brought us in Jesus.

The Virgin Birth (Matt 1:18-25)

1. Recounting Jesus’ Background

One way that ancient biographers sometimes honored their subjects was by describing their virtuous background, and any extraordinary circumstances surrounding their births that could suggest divine interest. The parents who raised Jesus were certainly virtuous, and the birth described here is the most divine in all history. Scripture already noted miraculous births, such as those of Samson, Samuel, and especially Isaac, but no one else narrated a virgin birth. (By the way, against the protestations of some, Greek mythology included no virgin births. Gods

seducing and raping virgins are an idea quite different from the virgin birth here—Mary is not impregnated and remains a virgin until after Jesus' birth.)

2. Explaining their Betrothal and potential Divorce

Betrothal in ancient Israel meant more than engagement means today. Although the couple was not allowed to have intercourse until the end of the betrothal period (typically a year), they were pledged to each other by an agreement between their families. Jewish tradition suggests that betrothed couples in Galilee could not be together alone, unchaperoned, until the wedding. Betrothal normally included some economic arrangements; the groom might offer a down payment on the money he would pay the bride's father for the marriage; this could help defray the father's expense of having raised the groom's future wife. In this period, the bride's father also gave a gift of money to his daughter when she married to help provide for her (in the event of harm to the husband or divorce).

Betrothal could be broken only one of two ways: by means of divorce or one of the partners dying. Once an agreement was made between families, divorce was not normally desirable; if, however, the wife or fiancée was thought to have been unfaithful, this would shame the husband. This behavior would constitute a legal charge.

3. Joseph's Compassion

Matthew declares that Joseph was a "righteous man" (1:19); he is thus a positive example. (Ancient biographers and historians were concerned with providing moral examples, and Matthew is no exception.) In cases of adultery, divorce was mandatory under Jewish law; Roman law agreed. Joseph has grounds to believe that Mary was unfaithful; the question for him is thus not whether he should divorce Mary, but how he should do so.

By charging her before a judge, Joseph could publicly repudiate her pregnancy; he could reduce his dishonor by shaming her. He could also be certain to recoup any money that he had paid toward the marriage, though her shamed family might have returned that to him anyway. Once a father had given his daughter a dowry, her husband could keep the dowry if she were found unfaithful. Joseph has various possible incentives for divorcing her publicly.

But Joseph, being a righteous man, chose to divorce her privately instead. This means that he would give her a certificate of divorce in front of two or three witnesses, sparing her public shame. Even though he had every reason to believe that Mary had wronged him, and even though he would not marry her, he still cared about her honor.

4. Joseph's Example of Obedience

Ancients took dreams very seriously, but this would be all the more true if someone important delivered a message in the dream. Gentiles told stories of deceased people appearing in dreams, but revelatory dreams in the Bible were normally from God or angels.

Joseph's obedience to the dream is praiseworthy. Think about what he risked by marrying her, at least if anyone else knew that Mary was pregnant. People would assume that he had gotten her pregnant; Joseph would thus embrace her shame for the rest of his life. Whether or not anyone else knew, Joseph is ready to trust Mary based on what God has shown him. He is ready to follow wherever God leads his life.

5. Their Example of Self-Control (1:25)

Joseph and Mary were married. If they were like most new couples in their day, they probably had narrow living quarters together, perhaps in a makeshift dwelling on the roof of the groom's parents' home. People in antiquity often felt that if a young man and woman were alone together for an hour, they would end up having intercourse. Like many people today, many people back then thought that people were just like animals in heat, unable to control their sexual appetites.

This young couple puts to shame our excuses today. In addition to passion, they would have had another reason for intercourse, at least on the first night of the wedding feast. Couples proved the woman's virginity by the blood on the sheet during their first intercourse (cf. Deut 22:15, 17). By having intercourse that night, Joseph and Mary could have proved that Mary was still a virgin. Yet they chose to abstain, valuing God's honor above their own. Why would they need to do this? So that Jesus would have not only a virgin conception but a virgin *birth*.

6. Immanuel: God With Us (1:23)

Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, which in Greek speaks of a virgin giving birth. Yet Matthew is probably also thinking of the verse's larger context. In that context, Assyria would battle against Israel and Aram before the promised son was grown (Is 7:14-17); Isaiah says almost the same thing regarding his own son in the very next chapter (8:3-4). The son Isaiah refers to would be a sign to the king who was reigning in Isaiah's own day. What does this have to do with Jesus? In the next chapter, Isaiah declares that the names of his children are intended as signs pointing beyond themselves (8:18). To whom would "Immanuel," or "God with us" (7:14), more aptly point than to the son of David rightly called "Mighty God" in the very next chapter, in Isaiah 9:6 (cf. 10:21; 11:1)?

Matthew does not think of "God with us" merely at Jesus' birth, or during his earthly ministry, or in some abstract way. He revisits this issue toward the middle and end of his Gospel. In 18:20, Jesus announces, "Where two or three have come together in my name, I am in their midst." In 28:18-20, Matthew's Gospel closes with Jesus' Great Commission. The final words indicate that as we continue carrying out this commission, Jesus will be with us: "I am *always* with you," he declares, "even until the end of the age." Jewish people understood that only God could be with them at all times. There could be no misunderstanding about who Jesus really is.

Sometimes when I have preached about Joseph's righteous example of compassion, consecration, and especially self-control, people have felt guilty. At that point I like to remind them that this narrative addresses not only the righteous example of Joseph and Mary, but also includes another character: *Jesus*, who will save his people from their sins. Jesus came to deliver us from our old life of disobeying God to give us a new, forgiven life on God's side. He is ready to be "with us"—we need only invite him.

The Pagan Seekers (Matt 2:1-12)

Ancient writers and hearers were used to learning positive and negative examples from the behavior of characters in their narratives. They could also learn from the contrast of different characters, as in this chapter. Here pagan Magi, whom Matthew's Jewish audience might expect to oppose Jesus, come to worship him. Herod, king of the Jews, soon acts like Pharaoh of old—a pagan king. And while the Persian wise men go to worship Jesus, Israel's Bible teachers and religious leaders of God's people, who can even identify exactly where the Messiah will be born, fail to look for him.

1. "In the days of Herod the King" (2:1)

- a. Herod died in 4 B.C., and the events in this narrative occur at least two years earlier. Despite the best intention of our calendars, Jesus was born in 6 B.C. or earlier.
- b. Herod was Idumean, a descendant of the ancient Edomites, and while he was Jewish in a general sense, he also built temples for pagan gods in areas dominated by his Gentile subjects, including temples for the supposedly divine emperor Augustus.
- c. I should comment briefly about Herod's relationship with this emperor. Herod's political instincts were usually excellent, but he did make a few mistakes. One notable one was that he was friends with Marc Antony but enemies of Antony's girlfriend Cleopatra. After Octavian (Augustus) defeated both Antony and Cleopatra, Herod suggested to him that, since Herod had been a faithful friend to Augustus' enemy Antony to the end, Augustus could trust that Herod would also prove faithful to him as well. He did remain a faithful subject of Augustus from then on. The idea of new kings, however, would go over well neither with the Roman emperor nor with Herod himself.
- d. Although the Bible condemned divination, including astrology, in this period even many Jewish people believed that stars could predict the future, at least for Gentiles. Astrology was considered the science of the day; later synagogues sometimes even included zodiacs on their floors with a picture of the sun god (used simply as a symbol for the sun, under God's authority) in the middle. Rulers, however, got nervous about astrologers, especially when they started predicting new kings or (by implication) the demise of old ones. Emperors sometimes banished

astrologers from Rome. When comets appeared, people expected kings to die. One later emperor, Nero Caesar, reportedly executed a number of nobles in hopes that their deaths, rather than his, would fulfill the warning of a comet. This may help us understand why Herod acted so paranoid.

2. Persian astrologers (2:1-2)

Magi, whom some translations call “wise men,” were noted astrologers and dream interpreters. They served the king of Persia, but here come on a special diplomatic mission to honor another king. Many people in the Roman empire respected the esoteric eastern wisdom attributed to the *Magi*, but some applied the term to magicians, who were not respected.

Greek translations of the Old Testament spoke of the *Magi* as Daniel’s enemies, so the first time that Matthew’s audience heard the story, they might expect these *Magi* to be hostile. Sometimes we have unfair prejudices about groups of people who do not share our faith; fortunately, God loves and often reaches out to people we do not trust. As the parable of the sower teaches us, we should sow widely, because we cannot predict what ground will bear fruit.

Moreover, Scripture condemned divination, including astrology, as worthy of death. Yet in announcing his Son’s birth, God chose to speak to these *Magi* where they were looking. (Some scholars suggest that among celestial phenomena that could have gotten their attention was a planet that symbolized kingship aligning with a symbol for Judea.) When God has touched people, however imperfect their knowledge, we should work with them rather than pushing them away. Matthew’s Gospel closes with a mission to all peoples, and one of his first examples after the four women in the genealogy is these *Magi*.

3. The Bible Experts (2:4-6)

When the *Magi* arrive, their caravan is so large that all of Jerusalem is talking, and they cannot evade attention (2:3). Against tradition, there is no reason to believe that there were only three of these wise men. Why do they come to Jerusalem? Presumably they expect that a new Judean king would be born in the palace of the old one. Further, even had they known that their destination was Bethlehem, one had to travel to Jerusalem before reaching Bethlehem, on the road six miles to the south.

The *Magi*’s knowledge was only approximate; it was the Bible teachers who could tell where the promised child would be born. It is not surprising that the aristocratic priests and scribes would have cooperated with Herod’s inquiry. The old Sanhedrin, Jerusalem’s municipal assembly, had given Herod a lot of trouble, so when he took power he executed them and replaced them with his own political supporters. (I believe I already mentioned Herod’s political acumen; he certainly had ways of reducing public expressions of dissatisfaction about his reign.) The current leading priests and scribes in the Sanhedrin were his supporters, but they did know the Bible.

They quoted Micah 5:2: the expected king would be born to the line of David in Bethlehem (2:4-6); Herod therefore sent the Magi on to Bethlehem (2:8). Yet everyone knew why these Magi had come to Jerusalem; all Jerusalem had been troubled by their inquiry about the birth of a king. These Bible teachers knew the Bible, and knew the report that a king had been born. Yet there is no implication that these Judean wise men themselves went to Bethlehem, in contrast to the Persian wise men who had spent many months traveling from the east. It appears that they simply took Jesus for granted—and that is a sin that only people who know the Bible can commit. I wonder: do we ever do this?

Yet as we read Matthew's Gospel, we see that in the next generation, the successors of these aristocratic priests and scribes were not content to ignore Jesus. No longer a baby, Jesus had become a threat to their own interests, and some of them wanted him dead. Being religious, or even knowing the Bible, or even being respected as pastors or teachers, is no guarantee that our hearts are right. Perhaps even today, the line between taking Jesus for granted and needing him out of our way remains thin. Let no one misunderstand me: my life is devoted to helping people understand the Bible. But God asks more of us than *knowing* the Bible's teachings. He bids us follow him.

4. Worshiping Jesus (2:9-11)

Although the star may have only appeared to move (Bethlehem was, after all, only six miles south of Jerusalem), the language of it going before them might remind Matthew's audience of the pillar of fire in the wilderness (Ex 13:21-22). It was customary when looking for someone in a small town to simply ask around. Luke says that shepherds had spread word around Bethlehem about the child's birth; although Mary and Joseph are now in a house (Matt 2:11), some local people may have known where to find them. A local midwife would probably know where any young babies were. However it happened, the Magi found the family.

Back in verse 2, the Magi had already publicly announced their mission: to "worship" or "pay homage to" the king of the Jews. Although I have described them as "pagans" because that is how they would appear to Matthew's ancient Jewish audience, we do not know if all of these Magi believed in many gods. Most Persians in this period were polytheists, but some followed a Persian faith called Zoroastrianism, which affirmed one good god and an opposing evil power. In any case, the Magi were ready to pay homage to Jesus here—and rightly so. Others in this Gospel also fall before Jesus with requests or worship, especially after his resurrection (see 28:9, 17). These Magi did not know everything they needed, but they took seriously what they did know. We who know Jesus: do *we* worship him this seriously?

The Magi lavish on him their gifts: gold and costly spices from the east. Granted that the Magi probably had access to more wealth than most people do, their entire journey had been one costly in time and resources. Again we may ask: how seriously do we treat our worship and honor of Jesus?

5. Followers from the East

In part there was a diplomatic mission from Iran in the heart of Central Asia, where the gospel has never yet flourished like it has in some other regions (except in regions like Armenia). Followers of Jesus did spread eastward in Asia in the following centuries. Yet Persian Christians suffered in many generations, partly because of the perception that Christianity was a western religion belonging to the Roman Empire. But after Judeans in Bethlehem, Asians came first. When Matthew's Gospel keeps emphasizing the receptiveness of Gentiles, he is inviting his Jewish Christian audience to care about peoples besides themselves. This is important for Christians today to remember as well: his Gospel later declares that the good news must be preached among all peoples. Right from the start in Bethlehem, Jesus was for everyone.

The Exodus to Egypt (2:13-23)

When Pharaoh killed Israel's male babies, God preserved Moses and later used him to deliver Israel out of Egypt. Here, however, the corrupt king of Judea kills babies, and sends the future deliverer from Judea to Egypt for refuge. Neither sin nor God's activity is limited to any one land.

1. Warned in a Dream (2:13)

God warned the Magi in a dream not to go back to Herod; Magi were known as dream interpreters, so they took the warning very seriously. (Of course, given the fact that Jesus was not one of Herod's offspring, reporting back to Herod about the new king's whereabouts would have been dangerous anyway, at least for anybody who knew anything about Herod.) Such a caravan was too large to be missed; presumably they traveled southward toward Hebron; they may have then followed an inferior road to the coast.

Joseph is no Magus, but his own dream is clear enough; indeed, in the first two chapters of Matthew the angel of the Lord instructs Joseph in three or four different dreams. Matthew's audience might remember the Old Testament Joseph interpreting dreams, or think of the Jewish tradition that God told Moses' father about his role as future deliverer when he was still in the womb. But God also spoke to the Magi and (later in this Gospel) Pilate's wife in dreams. However God speaks, we must listen. Sometimes, as here, it is a matter of life and death.

2. Refuge in Egypt (2:14-15)

Egypt had provided a place of refuge for Israelites fleeing oppression in earlier centuries (Jer 26:21), but Matthew's quotation from Hosea 11:1 in our passage underlines a great irony. God had delivered his people, his children, from Egypt, but here he sends his son to Egypt because it is Judea that proves inhospitable and dangerous.

Matthew quotes only part of the verse: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” The rest of the verse reads, “When Israel was young I loved him.” Think about how those two parts of the verse hold together. In Hebrew poetry, in which Hosea is written, a second line often echoes the thought of the first line. Hosea was not really prophesying about the Messiah here per se; he was talking about God delivering his child Israel from Egypt, at the time of the exodus. He goes on to talk about feeding them as a father feeds his child—the way God provided manna in the wilderness.

What did Matthew mean when he quoted this? Some people think that Matthew simply did not know Hosea very well, but this is unlikely; Matthew does not follow the popular Greek mistranslation of this verse in his day, but offers his own more accurate translation from the Hebrew. My suspicion is that Matthew knew not only the rest of the verse—but also the rest of the chapter that sheds light on Hosea’s point. Hosea goes on to speak of Israel’s captivity; God had freed them from Egypt, but would subject them to Assyria (Hos 11:5). Yet broken-hearted about his people’s sin, God promises their restoration in a new exodus: “they will come from Egypt and Assyria,” God says, “and I will restore them again” (11:11). Hosea mentioned the first exodus as a prelude to a new exodus, a new era of salvation. Right from his opening verse in ch. 1, Matthew has made clear that Jesus identifies with his people’s heritage fully (Matt 1:1; cf. 3:15). Jesus experiences exile like Israel of old, but his suffering is simply setting in motion the promised deliverance to come.

What would life be like in Egypt? Especially if Joseph and Mary had an animal, even a portion of the Magi’s gifts would have provided for them in Egypt. Arriving in northern Egypt, they could readily settle in massive Alexandria, where as much as one-third of the city was Jewish—although the politically dominant Greek residents denied Jews and Egyptians citizen rights there. Alexandria even had an elite class of Jews educated in Greek philosophy who tried to build connections with the Greek establishment, though Joseph and Mary, given their background, may not have felt comfortable among them. Jewish communities also existed elsewhere in Egypt in this period.

Despite God’s provision, the family was involuntarily far from home, relatives, and the life they knew. In a sense, they were refugees; even from his infancy, Matthew is telling us, the Son of man had nowhere to lay his head. Even from the start, Jesus’ mission was dangerous, attracting opposition; we who follow him must be ready to suffer the loss of comforts as well.

Years ago, I wrote in a Matthew commentary that Jesus’ family were refugees. Soon after that, I received a letter from a dear friend of mine from Congo; we had become friends through the campus ministry at Duke University, where I did my Ph.D., and where she was an exchange student working on her own Ph.D. Her letter horrified me: she reported that war had come to her city and she did not know whether she would live or die. By the time the letter reached me, her town had already been decimated and its survivors scattered. For eighteen months, I did not know whether she was alive or dead, and prayed desperately for her safety. This was a young woman I cared deeply about, and we had even discussed marriage at one point; now I wondered

whether I had made a mistake in not marrying her. Yet I felt God's assurance in my heart that he knew that I had done what I believed was right at the time, and he would take care of her. Eighteen months later, I learned that Médine was alive, and soon we were able to reunite in person. She read my Matthew commentary and was encouraged to understand that Jesus identified with our suffering even to the point of being a refugee, as she had been for many months. By the way, as in Matthew chapter 2, there is hope of a happier life for the survivors. The Lord led further, and Médine is now my wife.

3. Herod the Tyrant and the New Captivity (2:16-18)

Thwarted in his attempt to discover the new king's identity from the Magi, Herod decides not to take any chances. The Magi had told him that they had seen the star as much as two years earlier, so Herod orders the execution of all the male babies up to two years old. Given estimates of Bethlehem's population, this could have been some twenty children. Herod had a major fortress known as the Herodium within sight of Bethlehem; he may have dispatched the soldiers from there.

Although Herod's chroniclers were more interested in political events in Jerusalem, they show us a tyrant who acts very much in character in this narrative. Herod was so insanely jealous that he ordered his favorite wife strangled because he suspected her of adultery; to his credit, he did feel badly about it when he later learned of her innocence. His jealousy was more often against potential rivals for the throne, however. Thus this wife's younger brother, the high priest, was becoming far too popular for Herod's tastes. The young man then had a drowning accident—in a pool that archaeology suggests was only about three feet deep. One son tricked him into executing two of his other sons, who later proved innocent. He ended up executing also the son who had tricked him—even though he was dying, a process he finished shortly thereafter. Although probably fictitious, a remark attributed to the emperor Augustus is appropriate: Better to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons.

While Herod's behavior here fits what we know of him historically, Matthew may also be interested in how it fits a pattern of unjust tyrants through history. By killing male babies, Herod would remind all ancient Jewish hearers of the most famous baby-killer in Israel's history: Pharaoh ordered Israel's babies killed during Moses' childhood. I might mention, by the way, that while Israel continued to suffer for years after that time, God did punish the oppressors. Pharaoh ordered Israel's babies thrown into the Nile; God later turned the Nile to blood. Pharaoh ordered Israel's babies thrown into the Nile; God later killed the oppressors' firstborn. Pharaoh ordered Israel's babies thrown into the Nile; God later drowned Pharaoh's army in the sea. Justice does not always come right away, but God does not forget.

Matthew's Jewish audience might also think of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who like Pharaoh killed Israel's babies. In the first century, Gentiles sometimes killed babies, and even more often threw

them away on trash heaps; only Jews and Egyptians consistently opposed such behavior. Here Judea's corrupt king acts no better than the pagans.

Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15, which figuratively depicts Rachel as mourning her descendants as God's people are carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Everyone knew that Rachel was buried near Bethlehem (Gen 35:19), so Matthew can invoke the image of her weeping even more conveniently over the slaughter of her people here. Ironically, however, it is no Nebuchadnezzar or other Babylonian ruler who destroys God's people here. It is Judea's own corrupt king.

Matthew does not report this event dispassionately; rather, he mourns. Sometimes Matthew reports that good actions were done *so that* Scripture might be fulfilled; here he reports that Scripture was fulfilled, but omits the "so that": God was not the author of Herod's atrocity. Like Israel in the time of captivity, Bethlehem's mothers mourned. In a world of injustice and hardship, Matthew invites his hearers to do the same.

Whether you recoil at global sufferings reported on the news or remember unjust treatment you have suffered yourself, it is good to remember that God is not neutral. God cares, God mourns, and though we sometimes do not see it, God has a plan. God did not intervene to save all the innocent babies of Bethlehem from human injustice, just as he did not intervene to save all Israel's babies in Egypt. Matthew reports miracles, but Matthew is also realistic: miracles do not always happen. Yet God did preserve the future deliverers Moses and Jesus, hence his longer-range purposes in history to rescue many others. Even in the midst of tragedy, God is often at work. God has not forgotten us. There *is* hope.

4. Settling in Nazareth (2:19-23)

a. The tyrant's death (2:19). Herod wanted to be mourned when he died, and remained vicious to the end. He arrested some nobles and ordered them to be executed when he died, to make sure there would be mourning in the land at least for *someone*; fortunately, they were instead released when he died, and the land rejoiced instead. (As Proverbs says, when the wicked perish, there is glad shouting—Prov 11:10.)

Three or four times, Matthew has mentioned Joseph's need to get the child and his mother to safety (2:13-14, 20-21). Herod's obsession with power is pathetic: himself soon to die, he wants to kill a *child*. Yet two or three times, the narrative now emphasizes that Herod himself is dead. Brutal as tyrants are, the ultimate power of life and death does not belong to them. Tyrants and their injustices have come and gone; their day is not forever.

b. The angel instructs Joseph to return to the Holy Land, "for those who tried to kill the child are themselves dead." Why does he use the plural when only one person, Herod, has died? Perhaps Herod's son Antipater, who was executed on Herod's deathbed, was part of the plot. But whether or not that is the case, what is more significant is that Matthew's language evokes Exodus 4:19:

when Moses found refuge in Midian, God told him to return to Egypt, “for,” he said, “all those who were trying to kill you are dead.” God sent Moses back to Egypt for a mission; God now sends Jesus and his mother and stepfather back to the holy land. Again, the pattern with Egypt and Israel is reversed. In the end, it is not a holy location or nationality that we need but holy behavior.

c. Even when some of our troubles are over, other troubles remain; that is the way the world was then and that is the way the world is now. Herod, who sought the child’s life, was dead, but one of his sons, Archelaus, was reigning in his place. While Archelaus may not have had any knowledge of or intent to kill Jesus, he was also a tyrant. It has been said that Archelaus shared all of his father’s vices yet at the same time lacked his one virtue, namely administrative skill. His mother was a Samaritan and his rule proved both unpopular and unstable. These conditions led to severe violence a few years later, and Rome finally banished him to Gaul. In the meantime, both Joseph’s wisdom and another dream warned him to relocate north to Galilee.

d. In 2:23, Matthew quotes Scripture to explain the family settling in Nazareth. We know from Luke that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth before moving to Bethlehem, but Matthew does not have reason to go into these details in his narrative. Many Judeans, including from the hill country in areas like Bethlehem, had settled in Nazareth and villages like it. But Matthew’s interest is explaining why Jesus would grow up in Nazareth.

Humanly speaking, Nazareth was insignificant. Some argue that Nazareth may have had as few as five hundred residents, although probably some more people lived in outlying areas. In another Gospel, Nathanael asks the obvious question: “Can anything good come from *Nazareth?*” (John 1:46).

Yet Matthew quotes Scripture to indicate that whether or not Nazareth looked humanly significant, it was *divinely* significant, fulfilling God’s ancient purposes. Even though Matthew says that the prophetic message was fulfilled, scholars still struggle as to which text or texts Matthew has in mind when he quotes, “he shall be a Nazarene”; some think he refers to the angelic announcement that Samson would be a Nazirite. A larger number of scholars, including myself, think that he is making a Hebrew wordplay on the Old Testament messianic title *nezer*, the branch.

What is less disputable is the point: what is humanly insignificant may be divinely significant. Maybe you think that the settings in which God has placed you are not very important, or that your gifts are small, or that your opportunities to serve God are miniscule. Begin to trust God at work in those places. Even after Jesus moved to larger venues like Capernaum, his entire public ministry took place in a very small part of the world, virtually ignored by Rome until his movement became too large to ignore. Jesus spoke of the mighty kingdom of God first revealed like a tiny mustard seed. God is not bound by human definitions of greatness. We each do our best to make the biggest difference for the kingdom that we can. Yet we must remember that

God's power is perfected in weakness, his wisdom appears like folly to the world, and the cross is the prelude to the resurrection. God may be waiting to fulfill his purposes more deeply in your life and all our lives until we learn to trust not in the stature of our surroundings but in him alone.

Preparing the Way (3:1-12)

John prepares the way for the divine coming one and demands repentance in view of the coming judgment. His lifestyle confirms and models repentance and whole-hearted consecration to God.

1. John's Message of Repentance (3:2, 7-12)

John preaches repentance in view of the coming judgment: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2). Jewish people recognized that God reigns over creation, but expected his kingdom, or reign, in a special way in the future when he would restore Israel and judge the nations. John reminds them that the kingdom involves God's righteous judgment of the wicked, and that included sin in Israel also.

a. Israel would not be privileged. Indeed, some biblical prophets like Amos warned that God could judge his own people even more stringently (Amos 3:2; 9:7-8). When Gentiles turned from their old way of life and turned to Judaism, they would immerse themselves in water to purify themselves from any association with idolatry. Here, however, John supervises *Jewish* baptisms in the Jordan; even God's own people must repent to be ready for the coming judgment.

John makes this point explicit in v. 9: "Do not start claiming to be Abraham's children, as if that is enough! God is able to raise up children for Abraham from stones!" Greeks actually had myths of people made from stones, but the image would not be lost on Jews either: God who created from dust could create from rocks as well. John may even use a play on words to get people's attention: in Hebrew and in John's language, Aramaic, "stones" (*avanim*) and "sons" (*banim*) sound similar. John's words demand attention for his message: God does is not obligated to honor our privileges. None of us can count on our parents or ancestors before God; nor does our ethnicity save us. Each of us must choose to respond to God ourselves.

b. People needed to prepare for coming wrath (3:7-8, 10, 12). In v. 6, people were preparing by means of confessing their sins, and by baptism, a radical act of recognizing and turning from sin. Yet John demanded full sincerity. Some respected religious people were so secure in their own righteousness and status that John needed to shake them free from their complacency. "Offspring of snakes!" he cried. "Who warned *you* to flee from the coming wrath?"

The Pharisees and Sadducees John so addressed viewed themselves as respectable children of Abraham; John instead traces a different line of spiritual descent. According to popular educated belief in John's day, desert vipers hatched from eggs while still inside their mother—then chewed their way through their mother's womb. By being born, they killed their mothers.

Calling people the offspring of snakes was like calling them, “parent-murderers.” It was of no value appealing to one’s ancestors if one were hostile to ancestors. This is not the only place in Matthew’s Gospel that critiques the religious elite; in fact, Jesus denounces them at length in ch. 23. Although these warnings had relevance for religious prestige in Jesus’ day, elsewhere in this Gospel Jesus also includes warnings for religious leaders in the church. If we bask in our religious respectability instead of turning wholeheartedly to God, we use religion to blind us to God himself.

In v. 8, John calls for the fruit of repentance; in v. 10 he warns that every tree without this repentance-fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The ancient prophets had portrayed Israel and the nations like trees that could face God’s judgment. Most fruit trees in the holy land were small, more useful for fuel than for large building projects. A tree worthless for fruit might well find itself burned.

Preaching to many farmers as well as the religious elite, John returns to the image of fire in v. 12: He warns that the coming one was ready to winnow the grain. When people winnowed grain, they would throw it up in the air, so the wind would blow the lighter chaff out from the grain. People could not eat the chaff; it was useless, except as poor fuel. Earlier biblical prophets had already compared the wicked with chaff; now John warns that God would gather the righteous like wheat into his barn, but the wicked he would burn like chaff. He invites his hearers to choose: repent and be like wheat and trees that bear good fruit. Or stay as you are, and be like chaff and trees meant for the fire.

Lest anyone miss his point, John says that the chaff will burn with unquenchable fire. Everyone knew that chaff burned up quickly. That the chaff’s fire would be unquenchable refers to the harshest view of hell in John’s day. Jewish teachers contrasted Gehinnom, hell, with the future paradise for the righteous. Some teachers believed that hell would be temporary, or would annihilate the wicked quickly; John, however, warns the religiously proud that they are at risk of hell forever.

2. John’s Mission for Christ (3:3, 11)

John does not just preach judgment; he announces the judge.

a. Prepare the way (3:3). Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah about a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for God. Those who went before a king would make way for him; they might even create good roads before a great king. Now the greatest of all kings is coming, God himself. As will soon appear, the God whose way John prepares is Jesus.

b. The mightier one and his sandals (3:11). What we have said about preparing the way for God is also clear in what John says about the mightier one. John says, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” That is, John says he is not worthy to be his servant; slaves were the ones who would deal with the master’s sandals and feet. Disciples would do almost anything for a teacher that

slaves would do, except deal with the master's feet. Earlier Scripture often calls prophets the "servants of YHWH," but John says he is not worthy even to be the coming one's servant. Keeping in mind that the coming one is Jesus, we should remember how great Jesus is.

c. Baptizer in the Spirit and in fire (3:11). In the Old Testament, only God had the authority to pour out his own Spirit. If Jesus, whose way John prepares, baptizes in the Holy Spirit, he is clearly divine. Thus, as we have noted, John teaches us not just about judgment, but also about the judge. Later in Matthew's Gospel, we read of people at the last judgment who protest to Jesus, "Lord, Lord": but Jesus judges them according to whether they were actually his followers or not.

I should digress here because of debates today about what the phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit" means. Some say that it occurs at conversion, and others that it occurs after conversion. Probably both views limit John's point too much. Clearly baptism in the Spirit is contrasted with judgment; since the fire for the trees in v. 10 is judgment, and the unquenchable fire for the chaff in v. 12 is judgment, context demands that we read "baptism in fire" in v. 11 as judgment also. The "you" in "you will be baptized in fire" is plural, so the entire crowd is addressed. The "offspring of vipers" John addresses will not all repent: some will bear fruit, others will be cut down; some will be wheat, others will be chaff; some will be baptized in the Spirit, others will be baptized in fire. One gets either the Spirit or the fire. But while the work of the Spirit starts at conversion, it does not end there. While Jewish people used baptism for initiation, the image of immersion could also signify more. Unlike our debates, John probably is not focused on a particular moment of encounter with the Spirit, but the entire sphere of the Spirit's work. That is why some biblical writers focus more on one aspect of the Spirit's activity and some focus more on another. All are part of the mighty outpouring of the Spirit that John proclaimed.

3. John's Lifestyle

If we are challenged by John's message, we are challenged no less by his lifestyle, that confirms his integrity to preach the message. Jesus later says that John came neither eating or drinking, whereas Jesus came eating and drinking; that is, God works through different servants with different styles of ministry. Nevertheless, John's sacrificial lifestyle invites us to consider what we, too, can sacrifice for God's purposes.

a. Notice John's location in v. 1. The wilderness was not a place of comfort; prophets, bandits, and others unwelcome in mainstream society might have to make their home there. People expected a new exodus there, just as in the context of Isaiah's quotation noted above. But one lacked there the amenities of polite society, particularly as we shall see regarding John's diet. John's location is certainly challenging to many of us today: in the wilderness there is no place to plug in our toasters, our lamps, our computers. It was a place of heat and cold, animals, and limited resources.

b. Observe also John's wardrobe in v. 4. John apparently has one set of clothes, and they are the rugged clothes of the very poor. John's simple wardrobe of course tells us something in addition to his lifestyle of sacrifice: it evokes the clothing of Elijah in the Old Testament, who also wore a leather girdle (2 Kgs 1:6). The prophet Malachi declared that Elijah would come to prepare the way of the Lord (Mal 4:5-6; cf. 3:1). John is like a new Elijah, preparing the way for Jesus. To do so, however, he must live sacrificially like Elijah of old. The mission comes first.

c. Also take into account John's diet in v. 4. He eats locusts sweetened with natural sweetener, honey. Poor people often ate locusts, but few people ate a diet restricted solely to locusts. John's location in the wilderness limits the food available to him, but his mission comes first. To get honey, John would smoke bees out of a hive, and then break it open to get the honey out. His diet is limited but this is a sacrifice he undertakes for the kingdom.

John's lifestyle supports his message: everything is about being ready for the kingdom, not about how much we can exalt ourselves in this world. Can we follow John's example? Are we ready to sacrifice status, comfort, and even risk health and life itself for the greater good of God's kingdom?

Announcing God's Son (3:13-17)

1. Why is Jesus Baptized? (3:13-15)

That Jesus came "from Galilee" to John's baptisms in the Jordan could suggest that he found him in Perea, where John seems to have done some of his preaching. Because this baptism is a baptism involving repentance, however, John seems taken aback. "I need to be baptized by you," John protested. John had already been preaching that the coming one would baptize in the Holy Spirit, a baptism John undoubtedly would like. Now the coming one had come; how then was he coming for John's merely preparatory baptism in water?

Jesus responds that it is necessary to fulfill all righteousness (3:15). Perhaps this has something to do with fulfilling God's purpose in Scripture, as in 5:17, or setting an example by following John's "way of righteousness," as perhaps in 21:32. One understanding of this phrase is that to fulfill his mission Jesus identified with repentant Israel, the same way he identified with us by becoming a human being or identified with our sins on the cross. Matthew has portrayed Jesus identifying with Israel earlier, for example in 2:15 ("Out of Egypt I called my son").

2. The Spirit on Jesus (3:16)

In any case, the coming Spirit-baptizer comes to be baptized, and becomes a model of the Spirit-baptized person when the Spirit comes on him. What does this model of the Spirit-baptized life

look like? Almost immediately after the Spirit came on Jesus in 3:16, the Spirit led him into the wilderness in 4:1 so that he would be tested by the devil. One thing the Spirit-filled life *cannot* mean is that people of the Spirit do not face trials and tests. Moreover, the Spirit is related to Jesus' mission. Matthew later quotes a verse from Isaiah echoed in the Father's voice to Jesus here. This verse speaks of God putting his Spirit on his servant, so the servant can preach justice to the Gentiles (12:18).

The heavens opening and the descent of the dove would communicate starkly. In the first verse of Ezekiel, the heavens parted to give Ezekiel his first vision of God's throne (Ezek 1:1). God is thus giving a tremendous revelation of himself at this point. Doves could be used to symbolize various things, but the most obvious allusion would be to an account toward the beginning of the Bible that all of Matthew's target audience would know. In Genesis 8:11-12, a dove bringing an olive leaf indicated that judgment had passed, and a new world was being born. Jesus is no mere prophet; he is the kingdom bringer, the one who will ultimately establish a new era of peace after God's judgment.

3. The Heavenly Voice (3:17)

The Father provides multiple confirmations of Jesus' identity. The opened heavens, the Spirit as a dove, John's prophecy, and a heavenly voice all confirm Jesus' climactic role here. Some Jewish people believed that the Spirit had been largely quenched in their time, and that prophets no longer spoke, at least not with the same authority as in earlier, biblical times. Many of these people believed that God spoke only through a heavenly voice, which was less authoritative than prophecy, although it often quoted Scripture. Here, however, Jesus has the attestation of both a prophet (namely, John) and the heavenly voice: the "voice of one crying in the wilderness" (3:3) and "the voice from heaven" (3:17).

This heavenly voice speaks only one more time in this Gospel, in 17:5, where it again confirms Jesus' identity: "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased; heed him." In that case it simply adds to what it declares here by commanding the hearers to heed Jesus. If Jesus is God's son, then God wants us to heed what he says.

The content of the voice may refer to at two Scriptures. Various times in Scripture, and especially in Psalm 2, God said that he had adopted David's line; the Dead Sea Scrolls show that some Jewish people looked for the Messiah as God's son. But Jewish people held various views of what the Messiah's mission would be, so the other biblical allusion here is important.

We know the other text that Matthew wants us to hear because he quotes this text later. Matthew quotes a verse about the Spirit coming on God's servant and translates it in a way that echoes the voice from heaven: the servant is God's "beloved" in whom he is "well-pleased." That is, Jesus' mission as God's son does not simply fulfill contemporary expectations of a mighty messiah who would overthrow Israel's enemies. Rather, God's son was also a suffering servant. Matthew's fuller quotation of that passage emphasizes that the servant would preach justice to the Gentiles,

and the Gentiles would hope in his name (12:18-21). Far from being anointed as a nationalistic conqueror, Jesus was being anointed as one who would suffer and bring light to all peoples.

Sometimes when we learn God's mission for us, we try to fulfill it in human ways, with shortcuts, instead of going the more difficult way that God has assigned for us. This was a temptation that Jesus himself would have to face in the next chapter. There, the tempter offers him the promised kingdom, without the cross. "If you're the Son of God!" he charges (4:3, 6). But the heavenly voice already defined Jesus' sonship in connection with his servanthood.

Testing God's Son (4:1-11)

As soon as the Spirit descended on Jesus and God's voice declared Jesus his son, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to face testing of his sonship. When God acts in our lives, we need to be ready to expect testing of what he has done. As Jesus' calling is tested, the tempter probably seeks not so much to deny the value of the heavenly voice in 3:17 as to reinterpret it, defining sonship in terms of the world's models of power. Meanwhile, Jesus faces temptations like Israel in the wilderness, but instead of failing them as Israel had, he overcomes. Jesus is our champion, winning a decisive victory against the tempter that qualified Jesus to finish his saving mission.

1. The Spirit Led Jesus to Testing (4:1-2)

Mark says that the Spirit "thrust" Jesus out into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke choose a gentler description: the Spirit "led" him there, echoing the language of God leading Israel during their own time in the wilderness. Sometimes we may suppose that if God is leading us, everything will be easy. But the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where his commitment to his calling would be tested. When our faith is secure, it can stand the test; that does not mean that we need to go looking for testing—two chapters later Jesus says to pray "Lead us not into temptation" (6:13). It does mean that the extent to which we withstand tests of our faith shows how solid our faith is; where testing reveals weaknesses (as it usually does), it can help us to grow if we continue to follow Jesus. Jesus' faith certainly holds firm here.

Jesus' difficulty in the wilderness includes not only isolation but hunger. If John ate a limited diet in the wilderness, Jesus even more strictly fasts in the wilderness. His forty days of fasting evoke Moses' forty days of fasting before he received the law. In the next chapter, in fact, Jesus will begin to expound the law in a special way.

2. The Devil Tempts Jesus with Worldly Power (4:3, 5-6, 8-9)

Twice the tempter repeats "If you are the son of God" (4:3, 6). Such behavior is certainly in keeping with the traditional role of the devil from the beginning, questioning what God has said; recall the serpent's question in Genesis: "Has God said?" (Gen 3:1). One may, however, translate the phrase, "*Since* you are the son of God." That is, the devil is not so much disputing the

indisputable voice as seeking to frame God's call in a different way. Rather than a son who is a suffering servant, the devil emphasizes roles of power without reliance on God.

a. First, the devil urges Jesus to turn stones into bread to satisfy his appetite. Jesus *was* hungry, but turning stones into bread was the sort of activity for which magicians were known. People believed that magicians could turn one substance into another. Of course, God could have done this had he wished; though speaking figuratively, John had warned in the last chapter that God could even turn stones into people. God could also provide manna from heaven in the wilderness, and water from a rock. But Jesus was not going to act at the tempter's bidding rather than God's. Magic is seeking supernatural power by a shortcut, without reliance on God. Even worse, one can do magic in the name of God, treating God as an idol, as some formula we can manipulate if we follow prescribed procedure. Jesus later *would* multiply food for other hungry people, but Jesus was not manipulating God or acting apart from him. He acted not at his own whim but in full obedience to the Father's command.

b. Second, the devil urged Jesus to throw himself from the highest part of the temple, a location that overlooked a deep valley. To justify this demand, he quotes Scripture out of context, as we shall note further in a few moments. He incites Jesus to *prove* that he is God's son, because if he is, the angels will protect him.

Yet Jesus did not need to prove anything to the tempter or to the world. In 8:29, the many demons acknowledge Jesus as God's Son, and fear their imminent judgment. The world may not recognize the truth, but the devil and his followers already knew who Jesus was, and feared him. It is easy for us to forget that it is our heavenly Father's opinion that matters, and not what the world thinks of us. Often we are tempted to defend truth the world's way—getting angry or even tempted to resort to violence to defend Jesus, like Peter taking up a sword. But Jesus' way is through the cross, depending on God to vindicate. That does not mean that we do not speak against injustice and untruth—Jesus himself did that forcefully. It does mean that Jesus does not need our wrong-headed weapons to defend him. Forgetting that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, some Christians even today use distortions of the truth and harsh political rhetoric to make their point; this is fighting with the world's weapons, but the Lord says, "Put away your sword" (26:52). Jesus does not need or desire that kind of defense. Sometimes events like the cross are God's will, and the gateway to a higher, divine vindication.

c. The devil's climactic temptation for Jesus is to offer him the kingdom that he has come for, without the cross. By acknowledging the devil, Jesus could fulfill his mission without the hardship, and take a spiritual shortcut to exaltation. Daniel 4:32 shows that God was the one who was sovereign over human kingdoms; the devil here acts as a usurper. The devil could create a political or military messiah, but he could not impart the new life of God's Spirit to transform human hearts.

Jesus responds by ordering Satan to be gone. This is not the only occasion in this Gospel where he speaks in this way, however; he utters a similar command in 16:23, addressing his own disciple Peter. Both of these passages have something in common. Like Satan, Peter wants the kingdom without the cross. Peter acknowledges Jesus as the messianic king, but adamantly denies that Jesus will experience this kingship through the cross. Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan ... your interests are not on what God cares about, but on what people care about.” The kingdom without the cross was a demonic idea: conquest and exaltation without suffering. God’s way is sometimes a hard way, but shortcuts to achieve his purposes, like cheating in any test, ultimately compromise the process and mean failure.

3. Defining God’s Call through Scripture

To each temptation, Jesus simply responds with God’s commands. Obedience to God’s will is never in question; defining God’s will comes from Scripture. The heavenly voice, like the star in chapter 2, takes people only so far; ultimately we must resolve other questions about guidance from the principles of Scripture. Just as Matthew earlier uses Israel’s history as a template for understanding Jesus’ mission, so Jesus here defines his sonship in terms of how earlier Scripture defined Israel’s mission as God’s children. As Israel was in the wilderness forty years, so Jesus was there forty days; but whereas Israel failed the tests, Jesus, quoting three commands that God gave Israel in Deuteronomy, passes the test.

a. When the devil challenges Jesus as God’s son to turn stones into bread, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3: “One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word from God’s mouth.” Jesus does not simply quote a verse about bread at random, but knows the context: two verses later, Deuteronomy 8:5, declares that God treated Israel as his child (Deut 8:5). As God’s son, Jesus also can depend on God’s provision. In the rest of the verse that Jesus quotes, God provided manna for Israel in the wilderness. Jesus is not saying that people do not need bread; he is saying that as God’s child he can rely on his Father to provide it.

b. Jesus’ second response to the tempter comes from Deuteronomy 6:16, fewer than forty verses before his first quotation. Unlike the tempter, Jesus does not twist Scripture out of context, but keeps in mind the same story of Israel with which he started. The verse he quotes refers in context to the Israelites testing God at Massah by refusing to accept that God was among them until he wrought a sign for them (Ex 17:7). Jesus here refuses to test God by demanding such a sign; he believes what the Father has spoken.

c. Finally, Jesus’ third response to the tempter comes from Deuteronomy 6:13, a mere three verses before the verse he has just cited. Again, Jesus is sensitive to the context. This passage in Deuteronomy emphasizes that God is one (Deut 6:4) and, in the verse immediately following the one Jesus quoted, prohibits idolatry (Deut 6:14). Worshiping the devil is therefore obviously out of the question! Jesus does not quote Scripture and then struggle with whether to obey it; once the meaning of Scripture is clear, Jesus is committed to obey it.

d. It is, however, important to remember that Jesus is not the only one who quotes Scripture in this passage. The devil seeks to make his case more persuasive to Jesus by quoting Scripture as well. He quotes Psalm 91:11-12 out of context; the preceding verse of the psalm (91:10) makes clear that God's angelic protection is for events that *happen* to his servants; these are not events they seek out to test God by trying to prove he is with them. The devil thus subtly twists the point of the passage by quoting selectively; he uses Scripture to try to make bad motives look good. That the devil quotes Scripture out of context here should not surprise us, given how commonly he unfortunately continues to do it today, even in our churches and on the airwaves! It makes all the difference in the world whether we read Scripture in its context, hearing in it the points for which it was originally written.

In the end, Jesus received from the Father what he needed, without doing things the devil's way. Jesus refused to abuse the promise of angels in Psalm 91 out of context a few verses earlier; now in Matthew 4:11 angels came and ministered to him.

This narrative teaches us about Jesus' identity. He is God's son, but as defined by his biblical mission, not just any worldly models of power. In Matthew's context, he is also the one who succeeds where Israel failed, as the deliverer of Israel and the world.

Finally, as we would expect in ancient biography, Jesus is a model for us when we face testing. We know this because Jesus warns his disciples to pray so they will not fall prey to temptation: "Do not lead us into temptation" (6:13) and "Keep watching and praying, so you will not enter temptation" (26:41). As a model for us, this passage warns us against trying to fulfill God's call the world's ways. When God gives us something to do, we should look for biblical principles in context and not just the way people normally try to carry out such activities. It also warns us that the voice of temptation often comes in subtle forms, even verses out of context to justify selfishness or unbelief; the real way of God's blessing is walking in his mission for us, not our own. Finally, Jesus models for us a life of perfect, unshakeable faith in God's word. Once we know what God is saying, we can stop second-guessing and questioning.

Jesus Begins His Public Ministry (4:12-23)

1. Jesus relocates to a more cosmopolitan community (4:12-16)

Because Jesus' mission is to Galilee more broadly, he relocates to a community on the Lake of Galilee that provides more centralized access to the rest of Galilee. But Capernaum was also on major trade routes, and allowed exposure even to some non-Israelites; one thinks of the centurion Jesus meets there in 8:5-13.

Matthew may think less of the geographic and ethnic dimensions of the location, however, than its symbolic significance. Members of the Judean elite may have criticized the Galilean origins of Jesus' movement. Most explicit for Matthew is an association with Gentiles. Although Jesus lived in a fully Jewish part of Galilee, people had not forgotten the predominantly Gentile character of the region several generations earlier. Matthew quotes a passage from Isaiah that speaks of "Galilee of the Gentiles." There is no question why Matthew would believe that this passage is relevant; it comes just about 35 verses after the passage about Immanuel that Matthew quoted in his first chapter. This passage about a light in Galilee of the Gentiles goes on in a few verses to speak of the mighty God who will sit on the throne of David.

Why does Matthew make a connection between Jesus' relocation and the ultimate ministry to the Gentiles? This is a theme that he will emphasize throughout his Gospel: from the Gentile associations in Jesus' legal ancestry in ch. 1, to the Magi in ch. 2, to the centurion in ch. 8, to another Isaiah quotation about God's servant reaching Gentiles in ch. 12, to the examples of repentant Nineveh and Sheba in that chapter, and so on until Matthew's climactic conclusion: "Make disciples of all the nations." God had Gentiles in mind from the beginning, even in Jesus' relocation to Capernaum. Since most Christians today are Gentiles, this might not sound profound, so let us put it another way. Matthew's Gospel speaks of the kingdom being preached among all peoples. Whatever anyone's culture or language or ethnic background, Jesus came for all of us. God had every group of people in mind from the start, and we need to be sensitive to how we can serve his plan to touch all peoples. Jesus is the rightful Lord and Savior for all humanity.

2. Jesus preaches the Kingdom (4:17)

Just as John the Baptist's message is summarized as, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2), so is Jesus' message summarized here. "Repent" evokes the message of earlier prophets, who called Israel to turn back to God. Sometimes the prophets warned people to turn to God in light of God's impending judgment and the eventual day of the Lord, the day when God would judge the world.

Here Jesus speaks of God's future reign as the "kingdom of heaven." Some readers have tried to distinguish between the "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven," but these were Jewish phrases that meant the same thing. If anyone doubts that, they need only compare the relevant passages in Matthew and Mark to see that while Mark uses the phrase more intelligible to Gentiles, "kingdom of God," Matthew usually uses the familiar phrase "kingdom of heaven."

When we use the English word "kingdom," we sometimes think of a people or a place. The Greek word translated "kingdom," however, refers especially to a king's authority or right to rule. Jewish people understood that God already rules the world, but they prayed expectantly for a time when God's kingdom would come in its fulness, ending Roman oppression and bringing peace. In Jesus' ministry, he was bringing us a foretaste of the kingdom, though in a partial form

like a mustard seed. Just as a seed grows, however, Jesus' ministry of preaching and demonstrating God's reign was a foretaste of the ultimate time of peace and justice for which we all long.

If we live in the light of the magnificent future that God has promised those who love him, we will live a new way. That is, we will repent in light of the coming kingdom. In chapters 5 through 7, Jesus will elaborate some of what a repentant, kingdom lifestyle looks like. But we get a practical demonstration of that lifestyle even in the verses that immediately follow this one. This appears in the example of some fishermen who become disciples.

3. Radical discipleship (4:18-22)

Jesus called people to repentance in light of the coming kingdom; in this next paragraph Matthew offers an example of a repentant lifestyle, submitted to the king. People abandon other matters central to their lives to follow the one who matters most.

a. People who wanted to be disciples usually went and found their own teachers; it might even be considered undignified for a sage to go around looking for people to be his students. There were, however, a few exceptions; some radical sages called people to abandon their livelihoods and take up the sage's way of life. That is what Jesus does here. Of course, the disciples may not have realized that they were giving up their livelihoods permanently. If they traveled around Galilee, most places in Galilee were within a day's walking distance. Likewise, education was usually seasonal; thus a worker could study during part of the year and then go home in time for harvest season.

But Jesus is not just calling them to study: he is calling them to a new vocation. Beyond the more basic levels of biblical education, long-term disciples of rabbis, perhaps in their mid-teens, could be rabbis-in-training. Jesus does not call us to be rabbis per se; he says in chapter 23 that we have one rabbi, Jesus himself. When we make disciples of the nations, we are making disciples for him, not for ourselves. At the same time, Jesus summons his disciples to be more than rabbis who wait for students to come to them; they are to become fishers of people.

The Lord often takes us where we are at when he calls us to do something new. Moses and David could draw on their backgrounds as shepherds, becoming shepherds of God's people. Peter, Andrew, James and John could draw on their expertise as fishermen. Paul drew on his scribal training. Before my conversion, I was immersing myself in ancient Greek and Roman history, literature, mythology and philosophy, which eventually proved useful to me as a Bible scholar. In most cases, even if much of our background falls short of God's purposes, God has supplied something in our backgrounds that can be used for his kingdom.

b. Jesus' call is often demanding. These disciples did not abandon their occupation because they needed a better job. Fishing around the Lake of Galilee tended to be a more profitable business than the small farming in which the majority of Galileans engaged. Like farmers, they were

engaged in a business that was indispensable. The primary staples in the Galilean diet were wheat, barley, and salted fish; Galileans also ate various fish products like fish gravies. These local fish included large carp; to preserve the fish, people would dry, salt or pickle them. Although fishing lines also existed, commercial fishermen like these pairs of brothers would use casting nets, probably made from rope or cords. The boat would pull the narrow end of the casting net while its wide end, held down by leads, trapped fish.

James and John abandon not only business, but a *family* business; Matthew does not tell us what Zebedee thought, but does tell us that James and John left their father's business to follow Jesus. To abandon one's family was a radical matter and could make one the object of disdain among one's kin and in one's village. Of course, they were often in town; a few chapters later Jesus has dinner at Peter's home, where Peter's mother-in-law is also staying. But this passage also emphasizes priorities: just as Jesus relocated for his mission, the disciples must be willing to abandon their livelihoods and every form of security they know to follow him. One may think of Elisha turning his back on his wealth to follow Elijah's call in 1 Kings 19. The point is not to abandon jobs and family ties; Jesus often calls us to serve his purposes within our livelihoods. The point is, however, that Jesus is worth more than anything else, and serving his purposes, however he calls us, is a privilege worth sacrificing any security.

4. Jesus *Demonstrates* God's Rule (4:23-25)

In 4:17, Jesus preaches God's kingly reign. In 4:18-22, we see disciples submitting to God's reign. In 4:23-25, we see Jesus demonstrating God's kingly reign or authority over sickness and spirits. Jesus was teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee; this was where Jewish people gathered to pray and study the Scriptures.

Among Jesus' activities was healing all sorts of sicknesses. In modern times people sometimes only count healings as miraculous if they involve illnesses that could not be cured by other means, but Jesus was more interested in meeting people's needs than in meeting skeptics' definitions. He heals all kinds of sicknesses, small and large. There were many sick people in Galilee; large numbers congregated at warm springs in places like Hammat Tiberias, seeking to feel better.

Matthew uses some hyperbole, or rhetorical overstatement, in reporting that all the sick people in Syria were brought to him, but clearly he healed many. Subsequent chapters offer us merely a summary of some of the dramatic healings that Jesus performed. For the past few centuries, many people in the western world have doubted the possibility of miracles; that is one of the main initial reasons that some scholars came up with arguments doubting the Gospels. Believers in most parts of the world, however, have not accepted this skepticism.

During a period of phenomenal growth in the church in China, it was reported that at least half of new conversions were because people experienced divine healing or knew of those who had. Similar reports come from places as diverse as India, the Philippines, Argentina, and much of Africa; this also characterized the Korean revival in the early twentieth century. My wife's circles in mainstream churches in her country in Central Africa offer eyewitness reports of dramatic healings. Jesus demonstrated the reign of God in his day, and continues to demonstrate his power today. This is not to say that everyone who prays gets healed. For whatever reasons, not everyone gets healed, and that seems to be true regardless of people's theology of healing. But sometimes God performs healings that are really difficult to explain any other way. Jesus' healings in the Gospels aroused my interest in the subject, and my research eventually became a book. Hopefully I can share some stories as examples along the way to illustrate God's power expressed in these narratives. Jesus did great things back then; but for us who know that he is risen and alive, we have no reason to doubt that he still does great things today!

Although Jesus later meets hostility among the elite in Jerusalem, he grew very popular in Galilee and in surrounding regions. Indeed, already some people here come to him from Jerusalem and Judea. What appears most striking, however, is that some come to him from different parts of the Roman province of Syria (the province that included Judea and Galilee), including the Decapolis. Although Jews as well as Gentiles lived in the Decapolis in this period, Matthew is giving us another hint that Jesus' message and ministry was not meant to be confined to the holy land alone. Jesus is for all peoples, all places, and all times! Let us trust him.

Kingdom Blessings (5:1-16)

Beatitudes were a common literary form, especially in Jewish circles; they are common in the Hebrew Bible. The form goes like this: "Blessed is the one who ... for such-and-such a reason." "Blessed" is sometimes translated, "Happy"; it might be most easily rendered here, "It will be well with." Since the latter is so cumbersome, however, I will retain the familiar expression "blessed." This list of blessings tell us who is blessed, as well as identifying what blessings they will obtain.

1. Blessings of the *Kingdom* (5:3-12)

The blessings mentioned here involve the promised kingdom. The first blessing mentioned here, in 5:3, is, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to them." The final of the first, long series of "blessed is theirs" blessings, in verse 10, likewise reads, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to them." When ancient speakers or writers framed a passage with the same phrase, they wanted to highlight that phrase and bracket off that section. The other blessings Jesus lists there can also be understood as blessings that would come with the kingdom: Isaiah had prophesied that Israel would be

“comforted,” as in 5:4; the psalmist promised that the meek would “inherit the earth,” as in verse 5. The satisfying of hunger, the receiving of mercy or being pronounced God’s children in the day of judgment, and seeing God can all be associated with the coming of the kingdom.

None of this is surprising in view of the preceding context, where Jesus’ preaching is summarized: “Repent—turn from sin—for the kingdom is at hand.” The coming of God’s kingdom will make all things right for those who make themselves right for the kingdom. These kingdom blessings thus belong to the repentant, who live in submission to the values of the kingdom in the present, to be ready for the kingdom to come.

2. Blessings for the Repentant (5:3-12)

What does a lifestyle look like that has repented in light of God’s coming kingdom? Matthew spells it out with these examples. These are not people who, like some of their contemporaries, thought to bring God’s kingdom era by human force: not the violent, but the gentle will inherit the earth (5:5); not the merciless, but the merciful (5:7); not the warmongers, but the peacemakers (5:9). Rather, these repentant people are the broken who depend only on God—something like the majority of people who came to Jesus in desperate need of healing, deliverance, or comfort. These are the poor in spirit, an attitude of dependence rather than boastfulness that often flourishes among the poor and needy (5:3); those who mourn (5:4); those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:10).

Most of all, it is those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom, and for the kingdom’s king, Jesus (5:10-12).

They stood in the shoes in the prophets who preceded them, Jesus warned (5:12); Jewish tradition heavily emphasized the suffering of the prophets. Sometimes when I do my biblical scholarship I forget that not everyone welcomes good scholarship if it ends up affirming more about Jesus than they are prepared to believe. Some critics are quick to remind me that they do not respect my conclusions, hence do not respect my scholarship. In other settings, people of faith are maligned more explicitly or persecuted more forcefully. To grasp the historic continuity with the suffering of the prophets and the future certainty of God’s reward puts things in perspective, giving us courage to keep depending on God. Of course, Jesus explicitly refers to times when people say things about us “falsely.” We have no right to complain if the accusations are true, still less if we publicly bear the name of Christ when engaging in such activities, whether slander, bitterness, or the like.

Because Jesus is the future king, his presence in the Gospels means that he is also providing kingdom blessings there. Thus, for example, Jesus multiplies food and the hungry are satisfied. In the Gospels, the needy cry out to Jesus for mercy, and in compassion he heals them.

3. The Blessings and *Jesus*

Jesus sits to teach, like an honorable Jewish sage, and many associate Matthew's mountain setting with Moses giving the law from a mountain, since Jesus' message will soon turn to explaining passages from the law of Moses. But Jesus himself exemplifies the virtues offered in these blessings, and when we live them out, we share in Christ's character, in what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is meek ("gentle and humble in heart," he says in 11:29). As one who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, he had finished a forty-day fast in the previous chapter. When people cried to him for mercy, he was moved with compassion and showed mercy. As one who would not break a bruised reed (12:_) and who chose to die rather than to fight, Jesus was a peacemaker. Jesus exemplifies these virtues, and following them means following him, adopting his character for ourselves.

4. Tasteless Salt, Invisible Light (5:13-16)

Many people call themselves Christians but are not gracious, are not humble, do not care about others. What does Jesus say about disciples of the kingdom who fail to live out the values of the kingdom? He compares them with tasteless salt and invisible light—that is, they are worthless for the purpose they claim for themselves. Some scholars have spoken of chemically unsalty salt—Dead Sea salt so full of impurities that much of it evaporates over time. Closer to the point of tasteless salt's worthlessness may be the story of a later rabbi. When someone asked him, "What do you do with salt that has lost its saltiness?" he replied, "You salt it—with the afterbirth of a mule!" As the cross between a horse and a donkey, mules are sterile—they can have no afterbirth. The rabbi may be saying, "You ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer! Salt doesn't lose its saltiness, but if it did, what would you do for it—salt it? No, it's worthless. Get rid of it." Likewise Jesus say, you are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its taste, it is worthless and fit only to be thrown out and walked on by people (5:13).

The same is true of invisible light (5:14-15). Of course today we have uses for ultraviolet and infrared light, but Jesus was not thinking of uses for invisible light that were not used in his day. He shows the incongruity of lighting a lamp and then concealing the light (indeed, in a manner that might well extinguish it). A city set on a hill, like Jerusalem, was obvious, especially when it was well-lit at night. Isaiah had already declared that God's people were the light of the world. But if we make that light invisible, what is the point? Rather, we should let our light shine so people will glorify our Father in heaven (5:16). Later Jesus will warn hearers not to do their works before others to be seen by them and glorified (6:1); here Jesus encourages us to do our good works so others will see them and glorify God. The question is not whether people see our good works, but whom we want them to glorify. The meek and poor in spirit do not absorb the honor for themselves, but for the one on whom they know they depend, on God.

Jesus Demands More than the Law (5:17-20)

Some people today think that because we are not “under the law,” to use Paul’s phrase, we can ignore right and wrong. Paul himself condemned such teaching, and Jesus’ message here is even clearer: Jesus demands more righteousness than the law, not less. Other passages in the Bible, including Jesus’ teaching about receiving the kingdom as a dependent child, show us that Jesus gives us the power to live differently. Our focus for the moment, however, is challenging the claims of those who act like right behavior no longer matters.

1. Jesus came to Fulfill the Law (5:17)

In 5:17, Jesus explains that he did not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. He will give examples of what he means by this emphasis in 5:21-48, where he goes beyond the letter of the law to its spirit. The law says: You shall not kill; Jesus says, You shall not *want* to kill. The law says: You shall not commit adultery; Jesus says, You shall not *want* to commit adultery. And so forth. The laws address behavior; Jesus addresses the character behind the behavior—God’s intention behind the law all along.

The written code was limited; in any culture, civil laws—the laws of a society—limit sin rather than abolish it. If you obey them, they restrict you from running stoplights and going beyond a particular speed; they cannot make you a completely safe driver. They punish you for beating your neighbor; they cannot punish you for hating him. That is simply a limitation of the genre of law—it addresses particular cases, but is not meant to transform the heart. Nevertheless, God always desired his people to understand the intent behind the law. In Deuteronomy 5:29, God longed for his people to have a heart to reverence him and keep his commands; in Deuteronomy 30, he wants to circumcise their *hearts* to love him, and they could obey his law *if* it was written in their *heart*. Ancient Jewish teachers also valued the law’s intention, though few hammered on this point as much as Jesus did.

Jesus’ mission is not less than the law his contemporaries knew; it was more. For some of his contemporaries, especially Pharisees, one guarded the law with other regulations extending it so that one would not inadvertently violate any of its intention. They sometimes called this a “fence around the law.” Jesus demanded hearts that followed the law’s purpose.

2. Not the Smallest Stroke Will Pass from the Law (5:18)

Some have said that Jesus spoke of obedience to the law only until he had completed fulfilling it, but Jesus says that not the least stroke will pass from the law even until heaven and earth pass away (5:18). This was a graphic, hyperbolic way of saying that God’s word stands forever, just as he would say about his own message in Matthew 24:35: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Jesus warns that not even an *iota* or a pen stroke of a letter would pass from God's law. In English today, we sometimes use an "iota" for something small, based on Jesus' saying, but the Gospels are here designating the Greek letter that was the equivalent for what Jesus probably originally said in Aramaic: a *yod*. The *yod* was the smallest Hebrew and Aramaic letter. Jesus' audience undoubtedly understood precisely what he meant, because some other ancient teachers offered similar claims.

Jesus may allude to popular stories about the *yod*. Thus some rabbis observed that a *yod* was removed from Sarai's name when it became Sarah. They reported that this *yod* cried out to God from one generation to the next, complaining that it had been removed from the Bible. But when Hoshea's name was changed to Joshua, they noted that a *yod* was inserted into his name. "You see," the rabbis said, "not a single *yod* will pass from the Bible." In another story, a *yod* cried out to God that King Solomon had uprooted it from the Bible. "A thousand Solomons shall be uprooted," God replied, "but not a single *yod* will pass from my Word." These were simply graphic ways of emphasizing that all of God's Word is holy; we dare not ignore even the smallest detail. Likewise, Jesus is saying that we must take God's Word very seriously—even more seriously, he will reveal in verse 20, than the Bible experts and Pharisees of his day did.

3. The Smallest Commandment (5:19)

Some scholars observe that Jewish teachers spoke of disobeying the law as "annulling" it; this was not accidentally overlooking a commandment, but open rebellion against God's Word. By contrast, one would confirm God's Word by obeying it and teaching in ways that honored it.

In verse 19, whoever annuls a commandment or teaches others to do so will be least in the kingdom. Whoever keeps them, by contrast, will be called "great" in the kingdom, an expression that in this period of Greek may mean "greatest" in the kingdom (cf. 22:38). But what happens if two different people break the least commandment. Will both be equally least in the kingdom? What happens if someone breaks the least commandment one day and keeps it another? Jesus was not giving a mathematical formula by which to *quantify* status in the kingdom. He is speaking graphically, like the rabbi who praised a particular student as so brilliant that he outweighed the entire rest of the world. On another occasion, however, the rabbi praised a *different* student as so brilliant that *he* outweighed the entire rest of the world. This makes no sense mathematically, unless the second student had a brain transplant from the first student in the meantime, since each was technically part of the rest of the world when the rabbi talked about the other. This was just the rabbi's way of emphasizing how brilliant the student was. In the same way, Jesus is emphasizing that we will have to give account for how we embrace even the smallest detail of God's Word.

Jewish teachers debated which commandments were the greatest and the least. One view was that the greatest commandment was to honor one's father and mother, but that the least was the commandment that when taking baby birds from a nest one should leave the mother behind

(Deut 22:6-7). The later rabbis who held this view noted that Scripture attached the same promise to both commandments: “Do this, and you will live.” Therefore the rabbis concluded that the punishment or reward was the same for the least or greatest commandment. Rabbis themselves acknowledged that virtually everyone had sinned and broken some commandments; they used this, however, as a graphic way of saying that all God’s commandments matter. Jesus makes the same point here.

This warning suggests that we do not have the option, as many churches and church teachers would like, of picking and choosing among God’s commandments. We cannot say, “Oh, I do not kill; I just commit adultery.” We cannot say, “I do not commit adultery; I just do not care about my neighbor’s lost animal.” We cannot say, “I do not practice homosexual intercourse; all *my* sex outside of marriage is purely heterosexual.” Jesus demands that we heed all of God’s Word, not just the parts we find comfortable.

Jesus is being graphic to underline the point. Of course there are times when we will disagree among ourselves exactly how to interpret a given passage. Of course there are places where the principle behind a passage demands a different application in a different setting, just as Jesus himself, later in Matthew’s Gospel, sometimes places the spirit of the law above its letter, or at least above its traditional interpretation (I am thinking of 15:4-6 and especially 19:8).

4. Righteousness Greater than that of the Pharisees (5:20)

Lest anyone miss Jesus’ point, he concludes in verse 20 that we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we have righteousness better than that of the Scripture teachers and Pharisees of his day. Such a warning might well frighten his audience: Pharisees were known for their piety, including meticulous tithing and even fasting two days a week at least during the dry season. But the following context reveals that Jesus is not addressing the number of days that we fast, but rather the condition of our heart. (For example, in ch. 6, he urges us to fast in secret so that our reward is from God alone.)

In the rest of this chapter, Jesus emphasizes that following God’s law involves not just outward compliance, but inward agreement with and delight in what God requires. It involves a life of genuine faith in God that cares what God thinks about us even when no one *else* is looking. What might make us nervous is that the Pharisees would have agreed with what Jesus was saying. Inward obedience was also part of their teaching. It is not enough to *agree* with Jesus; we must actually *be* what he calls for. If the Pharisees fell short, it was less because of their teaching than because even the best of human effort does not by itself transform our character; that comes only by the Spirit. Elsewhere in the New Testament we learn about a spiritual rebirth, where God changes our hearts, and where the Spirit begins to reshape our character. By faith we can receive that new life.

While the rest of the New Testament helps us understand the dynamics of how we are transformed, however, we should not ignore how forcefully this passage would have struck its first audience, who did not have the rest of the New Testament. It is meant to shake us all from our complacency, to call us all to repent in light of the coming of the kingdom (as Jesus said in 4:17). It is meant to remind us that we must take all of God's Word seriously, and that simply going through outward motions of obeying it is not enough. Neither is agreeing with it doctrinally. We must embrace God's message from our hearts and live accordingly.