

THAT IT MIGHT BE FULFILLED

A Study in Matthew's Gospel

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Introduction and Lesson One

Introduction to the series

Among students of the New Testament it is fairly common knowledge that Matthew puts a great deal of emphasis on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the life and ministry of Jesus. Often when reading this Gospel we encounter these words: "that it might be fulfilled." This emphasis seems particularly appropriate for the traditional understanding of Matthew's first intended audience—fellow Jews who would appreciate Jesus' continuity with the revelation of the Old Testament Law and Prophets.

Of course it is also important for Gentile Christians to know that God's Word in Jesus is not a contradiction but a fulfillment of what God had said earlier. For one thing, there is a powerful argument for the validity of the Gospel itself in showing the consistency of Jesus' teachings and actions with the long-established authority of the Scriptures. Jesus' teaching authority, revelation, and supreme act of salvation fulfill plans and promises made to his covenant people over many centuries. Thus our theme, "that it might be fulfilled," looks back from the Gospel events and words to the words of the Old Testament.

There is, however, another dimension of the theme, "that it might be fulfilled," which focuses on the present and the future. Jesus not only brings fulfillment of OT prophecies; he also brings fulfillment into our lives and brings assurance of fulfillment in the future. For example, Jesus said that he did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). The context for that pronouncement is not so much the fulfillment of predictions as it is the fulfillment of righteousness, as already revealed in the OT and now being further explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. "Fulfillment," as we will be studying it, will not be limited to how Jesus fulfilled OT predictions by his life. We also want to think about how Jesus fulfills God's purposes for us through his life-changing power. These two dimensions—fulfilling ancient prophecies and fulfilling God's purposes for our lives—can be distinguished, but they are finally inseparable. They are inseparable because "fulfillment" in both senses is found only in the one person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Therefore we state our theme this way: "Jesus came that it might be fulfilled." All that he did and all that he said was (and is) for this purpose: "that it might be fulfilled." The eight lessons of this series attempt to describe the multiple dimensions of what "it" is, the ancient predictions and the eternal purposes of God.

[Note that Scripture quotations will be taken from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.]

Lesson One **Jesus was born "that it might be fulfilled."**

Matthew 1:18-25

We begin to see Matthew's focus on fulfillment of OT prophecies in connection with the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, and in the subsequent events surrounding his birth. After giving us the genealogy of Jesus in his opening verses, Matthew tells how an angel spoke to Joseph, explaining to him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him (her intended husband) but rather had been specially chosen by the Lord as the mother of Jesus, the promised Savior. The conception itself is the work of the Holy Spirit (vs. 20), which means that Mary is still a chaste virgin, even though she is pregnant. Then Matthew explains to us that

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
23"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us." [Matt. 1:22-23]

The Scripture Matthew quotes is Isaiah 7:14, which in its original historical context (more than 700 years before Christ) was a promise God made to King Ahaz of Judah. The historical setting is enlightening, not only for how God spoke to his people then but also for how Matthew sees the application to Jesus. We need to give some attention to both contexts, Isaiah's and Matthew's, in order to appreciate this.

In 734 BC, Judah was attacked by Syria and Northern Israel (Ephraim). Judah was completely overmatched, but God sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz that he would not let these enemies defeat Judah. As a sign of this promise, God referred to a birth in the fairly near future: a young woman (*almah* in Hebrew) would have a child. This child was to be named "Emmanuel," meaning "God is with us." (You might recall that other children of OT prophets, particularly of Isaiah and Hosea, were given special names to illustrate the prophetic message.) This child (presumably not a miraculous conception in Isaiah's historical context) would still be quite young when the two nations attacking Judah would be destroyed. This is clearly the meaning when you look at the context in Isaiah 7:1-18, especially vs. 14-16. In fact the nations of Syria and Northern Israel were destroyed by the Assyrian Empire within a few years of this prophecy.

In connection with Matthew's quotation from Isaiah 7:14, it will be helpful to know that while the Hebrew word *almah* means simply "young woman" (married or not), the Greek word in Matthew 1:23, *parthenos*, regularly means "virgin," a person without experience of sexual intercourse. Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 7:14 is from the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint, often cited as LXX, for the 70 translators who supposedly produced it about two centuries before Jesus' birth). Even apart from the unambiguous Greek word, however, it is clear from the context in Matthew that Mary's conception was a unique miracle. Jesus has no earthly, biological father. (Luke, who gives more of

Mary's perspective on these events, affirms just as clearly that Jesus has no biological father. Luke 1:26-38)

Verses 15-16 of Isaiah 8 have no application to Jesus. Verse 14, the one Matthew quotes, has more meaning, however, than could be fully seen in the days of Ahaz and Isaiah. Thus, while verse 14 had "a fulfillment" in Isaiah's time, it could only be partially "fulfilled" until the time came for its "fuller fulfillment."

The child born in the days of Ahaz served *as a sign* that God was with Judah (and against their enemies). *Jesus is more than a sign* that God is with us—he *is* God with us. The child born in the days of Ahaz "fulfilled" the prediction as it applied to the immediate crisis facing the nation, but not in the "fuller sense" (what theologians call the *sensus plenior*) that came with the Incarnation of Jesus.

We cannot take the time or space here to explore all that is involved in the use of the OT by Matthew and other NT writers. This particular prophecy, however, provides an opportunity to make a few observations, especially with regard to our theme, "that it might be fulfilled." One of the most important things to note is this: There is a pervasive understanding in the NT that the same God who spoke and delivered in the OT has done so in Jesus, in ways *consistent* with the divine words and deeds of the OT and yet *surpassing* them.

Thus Matthew would have no trouble at all perceiving that Isaiah 7:14 could have relevance in its own historical setting more than 700 years earlier but only be "fulfilled" with the coming of Jesus, the true "Emmanuel." There is a sense in which every divine act of deliverance in the OT can be viewed this way. Since Jesus is the personal embodiment and agent of God's ultimate salvation for the whole world, he is the "fulfillment" of all the previous acts of deliverance, which were important in their own right but also provisional and partial, pointing to the need for a more complete salvation. All earlier "fulfillments" of God's promises to save and bless point to Jesus, "for in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'" (2 Cor. 1:20).

Seeing Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment not only of God's promises but also of God's previous acts of salvation is crucial to the NT understanding of OT history and of the new salvation experience in Jesus' name. The new is not viewed as the *replacement* of the old so much as it is seen as the *fulfillment* of all that had come before. For the new to be "fulfillment" there must be *continuity* with the old. Even when the new causes some aspects of the old to be set aside, it is because they have been fulfilled, not because they have been nullified. Seeing this continuity between God's dealings with Israel in the OT and the life and ministry of Jesus is what makes possible the next "fulfillment" we look at in Matthew.

Matthew 2:13-15

On the way to this passage we could quickly point out that Jesus' birthplace has been duly noted by Matthew as a fulfillment of prophecy, even though he does not use the word "fulfilled" in this case. But Matthew reports that the Bible scholars of his day

agreed that Micah 5:2 predicted Bethlehem as the location (Matt. 2:5). So this is a fairly straightforward example of predictive prophecy (through Micah, who lived more than 700 years before Jesus' birth) and its wonderful fulfillment in the circumstances of Jesus' birth. As Luke 2:1-7 tells us, it took an edict from the Roman government to arrange Mary's presence in Bethlehem at the right time, since she and Joseph were residents of Nazareth, far to the north.

If Matthew 2:5 is straightforward, 2:13-15 is not so easy. In fact it may look completely arbitrary and fanciful on Matthew's part, unless we see Jesus as Matthew did, as "the great fulfillment" of all of Israel's significant history.

After the wise men had departed "for their own country by another road" (Matt. 2:12), Matthew tells us that

an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." [2:13-15]

You may have no problem with this passage until you look up the prophetic words in their OT context, Hosea 11:1: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." In its own context, this does not even look like a prophecy (in the sense of prediction). As part of Hosea's message to Northern Israel (in the 700s BC), these words are God's claim on the nation, recalling Israel's deliverance from Egypt centuries earlier. Israel had been "called" out of Egypt, to be God's "son," as a nation. But Israel had been unfaithful to God, had lived as though they were not God's "son." As a consequence, judgment was coming on the nation, despite God's continuing love and commitment to fulfill his covenant purposes.

Matthew is able to see that Jesus' "sojourn" in Egypt (though much shorter and different in character from that of Israel before Moses led them out) is a significant parallel to the history of Israel. Just as the nation had been called "out of Egypt" to be God's son (Hosea's meaning), so now Jesus, God's Son, comes "out of Egypt" and enters again the Promised Land. But Jesus will fulfill what it really means to be God's Son, unlike the nation, which often and tragically fell short of the calling. Jesus *would be* perfectly what the nation had been *called to be*.

Lest we sit in judgment on others for falling short of their calling, let's remember that the church's record over the centuries has been something less than perfect, too! If Israel's true calling can only be fulfilled by Jesus, the Son of God, so too the church's calling can only be fulfilled in Christ. And until that calling is fulfilled, the whole creation experiences the pain of childbirth, moving toward the day when all of God's "sons" are everything we have been called to be (see Rom. 8:19-23). Viewed in that light, Jesus not only "recapitulates" the significant history of Israel—bringing it to perfection and total

fulfillment—he also fulfills the purposes of Almighty God for all humanity. Jesus has come “that it might be fulfilled.” But until all is fulfilled (as indicated by the words of Paul in Rom. 8), there will be suffering and anguish. Matthew tells us of one awful example of that in our next passage.

Matthew 2:16-18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

This horrible incident is known as “The Slaughter of the Innocents” or “The Massacre of the Infants.” As vicious and heartless as this was, it was far from being Herod’s only crime and perhaps not his most ruthless. By some estimates of the population around Bethlehem at the time, about 20-30 children would have been killed in this episode, which only Matthew tells us about. But we know from other sources that Herod was more than capable of such cruelty. Herod was notoriously paranoid about his hold on power. He had his wife and three of his sons executed because of disputes and plots about who would succeed him. (Even the brutal Romans were negatively impressed. Augustus is reported to have said: Better to be Herod's sow than Herod's son--referring to Herod's Jewish scruples about swine but his apparent lack of scruple about murder!) At one time he had 300 officers killed; another time he ordered a priest burned alive. Because he knew the Jews would not mourn when he died and relieved them of his cruelties, Herod arranged beforehand for hundreds of Jewish men to be slaughtered in a stadium when he died. In that way he hoped to insure a level of mourning that would be appropriate for the death of a great king! The Jewish historian Josephus records all this and more in *Jewish Antiquities* 16.11.7; 17.2.4; 17.6.4-5.

The OT quotation in Mathew 2:18 is from Jeremiah 31:15. Similar to the earlier quotation from Isaiah 7, there is more than one historical event with which this woeful prediction must be connected. In the first instance, Jeremiah was predicting great mourning over the loss of life in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Jeremiah’s ministry spanned the tumultuous decades leading up that catastrophe and the Babylonian Captivity. Jeremiah also got to bring words of hope that eventually a “new covenant” would be established, which would fulfill God’s will in his people by changing their hearts (see Jere. 31:31-34). The time would come when the mourning would be turned into dancing (Jere. 31:13), but not until after great mourning for overwhelming loss (vs. 15).

Here again we can see an earlier episode in Israel’s history being “replayed,” as it were, in the coming of Jesus. The birth of the Savior—who will bring that predicted “new

covenant” (see Matt. 26:27-28 and parallels)—is accompanied by suffering of “the innocents,” as the wicked human king is willing to shed anyone’s blood in order to hang on to his power. God is acting faithfully to fulfill his good purposes, but it won’t happen without the suffering of the innocent. As Jesus becomes the ultimate innocent to suffer (see Matt. 27:19, 23), he joins the ranks of many “innocent” whose suffering can be attributed not to their own sins but only to the sinfulness and brokenness of the world Jesus came to save. In Jesus, the suffering of the innocent is fulfilled by bringing victory and healing through the suffering, in order to end (eventually) all suffering. In this regard, too, Jesus came “that it might be fulfilled.”

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Lesson Two
Fulfilling all righteousness

In the first lesson we focused mostly on how Jesus fulfilled OT predictions by his birth. As mentioned in the introduction, however, that is only one dimension of "fulfillment." Jesus came not only to fulfill ancient predictions but also fulfill the eternal purposes of God. As inseparable as these dimensions are, they are nonetheless distinguishable. In this lesson we will focus more on Jesus' intentional fulfillment of God's purposes.

Matthew 3:13-17--Jesus is baptized to fulfill all righteousness

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is an important passage for several reasons. Its importance is evident in the fact that this episode is one of only a few included in all four Gospels (cf. Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34). Jesus' baptism at the hands of John was obviously of tremendous importance in the early church's understanding of Jesus' person and work. One vital aspect of the accounts given by Matthew and John is the emphasized distinction between John and Jesus, even though they both preached repentance and God's Kingdom. In John 1:29-30, John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God and testifies that Jesus is greater than he is because "he was before me." In a similar manner but using different words, Matthew's account shows John the Baptist's desire to defer to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you."

John's deferential attitude toward Jesus is presented in all four Gospels but in different ways (cf. Matt. 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:15-18; John 1:24-28; 3:26-30). Matthew is unique in presenting John's protest--"I need to be baptized by you"--and Jesus' response: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Since John's baptism was connected with repentance in preparation for God's Kingdom, John's protest could be interpreted as his recognition of Jesus' sinlessness, or at least Jesus' moral superiority to John. More likely, however, the Baptist refers to his need for what he knows Jesus will bring--the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11 and parallels).

By his water baptism John offered people an opportunity to signify their repentance and readiness to welcome God's Kingdom. John recognized Jesus as the one who would offer something greater than repentance and readiness for the Kingdom. Jesus would bring the operative power of the Kingdom--the Holy Spirit. John's mission was to *prepare* people

for the coming Kingdom; Jesus' mission was to *empower* people to live in the present Kingdom. No wonder John wanted Jesus' baptism!

Before Jesus can do what only he can do, however, Jesus insists that John do what he has been called to do. To John's protest and request Jesus replies, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15).

Easily overlooked but very important in this sentence is the word "us." By receiving baptism for repentance, even though he needed no forgiveness, Jesus identified with those who do need to repent and be cleansed. That would include all other persons receiving baptism from John and, indeed, all humanity, for "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). Though he needs no repentance or forgiveness for himself, Jesus identifies with those who do. That is the very reason for the Incarnation, why the eternal Word of God took on our flesh. That is the reason ultimately for the Cross, where Jesus took on the penalty for our sins and the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

In identifying with the people he came to save, Jesus is like OT prophets who preceded him. Moses, interceding for Israel after the golden calf incident, prayed this way: "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin--but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written" (Exod. 32:31-32). Moses had not sinned with the people in idolatry, but he identified his future with the people and thus prayed for mercy on them. (Cf. a similar prayer from Paul in Rom. 9:1-3.)

A slightly different example is Isaiah, who became convicted of his own sinfulness at the same time as he confessed the sin of his people (Isaiah 6). Isaiah received purging from his sin so that he might bring God's cleansing word to others.

In still a different manner, Hosea learned how to identify (at least to some degree) with the heart of God toward Israel, as Hosea had to endure the insult and indignity of a faithless covenant partner. Hosea himself had not sinned against God or against his wife, but Hosea endured suffering caused by the sins of his wife.

These OT examples show us that the most effective human instruments for proclaiming God's word were those persons who willingly identified with the people to whom they were sent, as well as with the One who sent them. Truly to be an effective "go-between," the intercessor has to share the feelings of both the alienated parties, in this case God and humanity.

Jesus came with God's agenda as his agenda, but he also made our situation his own. He identified with us by taking on our humanity and eventually taking on the penalty for our sins. Without being a sinner he could die for sinners and in this way bring sinners back to God. So when Jesus says, "It is proper for us," he does not mean that he needs to go through just the *formality* of being baptized. Rather he is saying that the *reality* which this baptism represents is the reality he has come to deal with.

John's baptism of Jesus—with a baptism for repentance—*identified Jesus with us*, those who need repentance and renewal. Jesus identified with this baptism, not for his own sake but for ours. We could say that he made our baptism his own, in preparation for making our death his own. That is what makes it possible for us to let his death be our death, for our sins, so that his life can be our life (see Rom. 6). Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism is part of how he saves us.

Another word in Jesus' reply to John ("proper for us . . . to fulfill all righteousness") is obviously important, although it may require further definition: "righteousness." We could hear this simply as Jesus saying, "It's the right thing to do." If we think of John's baptism as an admission of guilt, baptizing Jesus would not be "the right thing to do." Thinking of it as Jesus did, as identification with those who need cleansing, we might think of it as "a generous thing to do," or "a humble thing to do," or perhaps "a noble thing to do," but "the right thing"?

From the biblical revelation of God's point of view, yes, it is "the right thing to do." It is "righteous" for God's agent to identify with the people to whom God sends him. It is righteous because this is what God does. The people he wants to save, he first calls "my people," even when he chastises them for not acting that way. (See Hosea 2:23 in the context of Hos. 1-2.) To save a people God claims them as his own; he claims a relationship. We receive the benefit of this by acknowledging the relationship--by crying out to God as our Father and to Jesus as our Lord (Rom. 8:15-16; 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 12:3). But before we can claim God as our God, he claims us as his people (see Jere. 31:33; 1 Cor. 6:19-20).

For Jesus to submit to a sinner's baptism was "the right thing to do," not only because this was a way of showing his *identification with us* but also because it was a way of *establishing his claim on us*. It was a way of saying, "These people are my people."

When God makes a claim on us as his people, it is also a declaration of his intention to make us into the kind of people who reflect his character, which is righteous. (Cf. Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:14-16.) Jesus' reception of John's baptism, then, is more than his identification with those who need salvation; it is more than a declaration of intent to save us; it is *part of how he saves us*. Jesus received John's baptism not just because it was the right thing for him to do; it was the righteous means by which he took a substantive step toward making us righteous. It was "to fulfill all righteousness," all of God's righteous will for saving and sanctifying a people for himself.

The baptism of Jesus is itself an act of the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel. The revelation of God's righteousness is not just a revelation of his purity and freedom from sin; it is his *action* to make things right. When God's will and actions to make things right are made known, it becomes possible for us to trust him for our salvation. (This is Paul's point in the book of Romans, beginning with 1:16-17.)

Matthew 4:1-12--Fulfilling righteousness by righteous choices

Much of what was said above concerning Jesus' baptism could be repeated and applied to Jesus' experience of being tempted in the wilderness. Indeed, the experience of being tempted to disobey is more obviously necessary to Jesus' identification with us (see Heb. 4:15 and 5:7-9). We can know that he understands what we go through because he knows what it's like to be tempted. But again, just as with his baptism by John, more is going on than just Jesus' identification with us or even "getting a taste" for what it's like to be human.

Jesus' exposure to temptation was important not only to demonstrate his sympathy for us (Heb. 4:15) but also to provide the occasion for reversing the course of humanity. By Adam's disobedience, sin and death entered the world and exercised controlling power over all of Adam's descendants. By Jesus' obedience, sin and death are defeated, and God's will for humanity again becomes possible (see Rom. 5:12-21). Ultimately, of course, the decisive obedience of Christ must be the obedience "to the point of death--even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). But that ultimate and decisive obedience could not have happened if Jesus had failed to be obedient before then. Jesus' obedience in the wilderness, from that perspective, is just as vital for our salvation as his obedience in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Satan's tactics in the wilderness seemed to focus on deflecting Jesus from his mission by trying to get him to use his power and authority for self-centered purposes or to take a "short-cut" to desirable goals. Jesus' responses to Satan show his steadfast commitment to "fulfill all righteousness," regardless of the cost personally.

Jesus was genuinely hungry after his prolonged fast, and there's nothing sinful about being hungry. There's nothing sinful about seeking a legitimate way of meeting a legitimate need. The temptation to sin here involved the possibility of using his divine status ("Son of God," 4:3) to serve a self-centered agenda, instead of living by the Father's agenda ("every word that comes from the mouth of God," vs. 4).

The second temptation also focuses on Jesus' relationship with the Father, seemingly to entice Jesus to "prove it," to demonstrate his divine sonship by a spectacular feat, which would "show-case" God's protection of his Son (4:6). Jesus rejected the suggestion of putting "God to the test" (vs. 7). God the Father is in charge of the agenda and the timetable. Jesus refuses to put himself "in the driver's seat" by trying to force the Father into a response.

The third temptation offered "the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (4:8). All that Satan asked for in exchange was worship (vs. 9), that is, acknowledgement of Satan as the ruling authority who could grant such power. Jesus does not deny, in explicit terms, that Satan has authority over "the kingdoms of the world." But he denies that Satan has *rightful* ("righteous") authority: worship is for the Lord God alone, and only the Lord can be rightly ("righteously") served (vs. 10). Satan's claim to have authority over "the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" may or may not be true, in the sense of what actually takes place in the world. But even if his claim is true in that sense, it is not

right and can never be right. The world was not created for Satan's glory. Right use of this world can never be for the glory of anyone but God, who created it and still rightfully owns it. It would not be right for Jesus to worship Satan. For Jesus to fulfill all righteousness, he must honor the Father alone.

(Yes, Satan is called the "god of this world" in the sense of having sway over those whose hearts are not right with God, and perhaps even over many things that happen (2 Cor. 4:4). But that does not make Satan the rightful owner or ruler. Eventually this will be established in full manifestation, but it is true right now, all the time. This is our Father's world. See Psalm 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:26; and Rev. 11:15.)

Matthew 5:17-20—Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) Jesus teaches the core values and realities of God's Kingdom. The Kingdom was the focal point for Jesus' entire ministry--his preaching, teaching, and healing (see Matt. 4:23). When Jesus *preached*, he *proclaimed* the Kingdom, the establishment of God's rule in power (not so much offering it as announcing it, which is why the announcement is accompanied by the invitation to repent, to adjust one's life to the present and future reality of the reign of God). When Jesus *taught*, as in the Sermon on the Mount and in his parables, he *explained* different aspects of the Kingdom and its impact on our lives. When Jesus *healed* sick bodies, delivered people from demonic powers, or raised people from the dead, he was bringing the Kingdom into *manifestation* (see Matt. 12:28).

The Kingdom context is very important if we are to hear Jesus' teachings correctly. When, for instance, we hear the high standards of behavior and attitude described in the Sermon on the Mount, we need to remember that the Teacher is the Savior and Healer. By remembering this, we will hear the high standards as the reality which Jesus came to bring. If we forget that the Teacher is the Healer, and try to measure up to the standards on our own strength, we are bound to fail. If we forget that Jesus the Teacher is also Jesus the Healer, we will not be able to hear his words as "gospel," which means "good news." In fact inability to hear the good news from Jesus' own words is a significant problem in many Christians' lives.

Recognizing the human impossibility of living by the high standards of the Sermon on the Mount, some Christians have resigned themselves to view these standards as impossible ideals, meant to show us our need for the Savior. So they turn to Paul to hear the gospel (good news) of grace. There is a significant half-truth in that view. Indeed

we do well to recognize our inadequacies, but that does not mean the standards Jesus taught are impossible in themselves. They are only impossible in us; they are not impossible in the Kingdom, which means they are not impossible for the King. The standards are those of the Kingdom, but who can live by them? Only those whose lives are being changed by the presence of the King!

Where, after all, is the Kingdom? Wherever the King is! Wherever the will of the King is being done. Jesus did not come only to talk about the Kingdom, to predict it, and tell people to get ready for it. By his personal presence he brought the Kingdom. By his words he announced it and explained it. By his deeds he manifested the Kingdom in power. Jesus made this clear by his own explanation of the power at work in him: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Matt. 12:28). (The words "has come to you" could also be translated "has come upon you" or "has arrived in your midst.")

Those who think of the Kingdom as postponed until Jesus' second coming would do well to re-think the issue in light of Jesus' interpretation of what was happening in his ministry. Jesus described the effects of his ministry as the Kingdom. In fact, whenever and wherever God's saving purposes are being accomplished by God's power in Jesus' name, there (and to that extent) the Kingdom is upon us. While we have to recognize that the Kingdom is *not here fully* (and thus we continue to pray for its full coming, Matt. 6:10), we need to recognize also that it is *really* here, to the extent that God's power is at work according to his purposes. (Commentators usually refer to this as the "already--not yet" of the Kingdom, or the "now and not yet.") Yes, the Kingdom will be fully here only after the Second Coming, but it has been really here since Jesus' first coming, as demonstrated and explained by Jesus himself.

Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17-20 need to be heard in this light. If entry into the Kingdom is only for those whose "righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20), then we need the powerful presence in our lives of the One who came "to fulfill all righteousness" (recall 3:15, discussed above). If 5:20 is true, then we had better hope that 5:17 is also true, that Jesus has come "to fulfill" the Law and the Prophets. That means that Jesus has come to satisfy and demonstrate the righteous standards of the Law, even beyond the detailed observance of the scribes and Pharisees. He has come not only to demonstrate that righteousness in his own life; he has come to make that righteousness a reality in the lives of those who put trust in him and allow him to change them from the inside out. Such a transformation is the only way for the righteous standards of 5:21-48 to be fulfilled.

When does Jesus fulfill (rather than abolish) the Law and the Prophets? Every time his transforming presence enables one of us truly to do the will of the Father. Yes, he fulfilled the righteous demand for just punishment of sins by his once-for-all death on the cross, but he continues to fulfill the true righteousness revealed in the old covenant by the

reality of his presence in the new covenant people. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 8:1-4, particularly with reference to "the just requirement" or "righteousness" of the Law:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The purpose of Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection, and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit was **not** so that the Law and the Prophets could be abolished or annulled as far as we are concerned. Jesus and Paul preach the same good news: the effect of Jesus' sacrifice and the Spirit's presence is to fulfill the righteous will of God as revealed in the OT.

Jesus says this quite emphatically in Matthew 5:17. "Do not think," in this context, could be paraphrased as "don't even entertain the notion." In thinking about Jesus' purpose, in interpreting his significance, "don't even entertain the possibility" that he intended to make the previous revelation of God's will irrelevant. Far from it! He has come to fulfill, not to nullify.

There are two opposite but equally bad misinterpretations of the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes we have taken the standards seriously enough but have forgotten that the Teacher of the standards is also the Savior and Healer of our souls. Seeing the standards of the Sermon as impossible for us can lead to despair if we forget who said these things. The opposite error is to interpret grace as setting us free from righteous standards (sometimes called the error of "cheap grace"). But Jesus did not come to *raise the standards* (although he did explain them to reveal the delusions of the Pharisees who thought they were keeping them); nor did Jesus come to *lower the standards* or to inaugurate a new dispensation in which behavior does not matter to God. Not at all! Jesus did not come to raise standards or to lower standards. Jesus came to *raise people* to the standard. He died and was raised to raise us. Jesus says he came to fulfill, and in his Kingdom his word is the authoritative explanation of his purpose.

Now it is obvious from the entire NT that some aspects of the OT requirements for the covenant people do not apply to us, at least not in the same way. Circumcision and the food laws, for example, are discussed in the NT (e.g., Acts 15) and declared to be non-binding on Gentile believers in Jesus. But these were superficial signs of the covenant people's differences from all other nations; they were never the most important "righteous requirements" of the Law and the Prophets. The essence, rather, Jesus summarized in Matthew 22:37-40. Note especially the reference to "all the law and the prophets."

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment.

³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

The ritual laws (including those involving sacrifices) have been fulfilled by the completely adequate, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. The ritual laws were necessary only in a temporary fashion. Now that they have been fulfilled, they are unnecessary for us. In contrast, the moral law summarized in "love God" and "love your neighbor" is not made unnecessary by its fulfillment in Jesus. Rather it is made possible. We are now free to love God and one another as we never were before. Now "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19; see also the context in 1 John 4:7-19). Now "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). The experience of being loved by God and of being able to love with God's love brings to fulfillment what God had promised as the energizing force of the new covenant:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [Jere. 31:33]

This is the new covenant which Jesus died to put in place (Matt. 26:28). This is the fulfillment of which he speaks in Matthew 5:17.

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Three
Jesus fulfills God's healing purpose.

We began to see in the previous lesson that Jesus came "that it might be fulfilled" in a greater sense than merely fulfilling predictions. Jesus came to the world (and comes into our lives) to fulfill the Father's purposes, to impart righteousness and life in God's Kingdom. In this lesson, we focus particularly on the healing purpose of God which Jesus came to fulfill.

Matthew 4:13-17--The Light comes to a darkened place

¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--
¹⁶the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This passage is an example of how Matthew presents Jesus fulfilling predictions from the OT, but it is also an example of how Jesus comes to fulfill the healing, saving purposes of God. In this case the prophecy is from Isaiah 9:1-2. To appreciate the predictive element more fully, it might help to recognize that Isaiah 9:6-7 is in this same context:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

The first two verses of Isaiah 9 put emphasis on the Lord's promise to bring his glorious light into a dark corner of the land, an area held in contempt. This is the part that

Matthew cites in connection with Jesus' establishing his ministry base in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Not in Jerusalem, the capital, but in lowly Galilee, there the dawn of Christ's light begins to shine. Thus the lowly are raised to holy privilege; the least receive the light first.

Here Jesus begins to preach the message of the Kingdom: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 4:17). Here also he calls his first disciples (vs. 18). Here Jesus begins not only to preach and to teach but also to heal the sick and cast out demons (vss. 23-25).

Why start here? Why not start here? As Jesus will later express it, the "physician" responds to the needs of the sick (Matt. 9:12). If Jesus had an agenda to make the most publicity for himself, he would have gone to the big city. But Jesus' agenda was not oriented toward optimum "public relations." Jesus' agenda was the will of the Father--the Kingdom—and he started proclaiming it when and where the Father directed. And people in insignificant places need the Good News as much as people anywhere.

Since the Kingdom is the agenda of God the Father, all other agendas have to become secondary to that agenda, the determined purpose of God to have his will on earth as it is in heaven. That is why the true announcement of the Kingdom of heaven always has to be accompanied with the call to "repent." To repent means to change one's direction, to change one's thinking, attitudes, and actions into alignment with God's purposes. To repent means to abandon your own agenda in favor of God's.

"Repent" is a word with fairly negative connotations--the acknowledgment of wrongdoing is never comfortable in itself. But viewed objectively "repentance" in light of the Kingdom's presence is an overwhelmingly positive good. With respect to the announced Kingdom, "repentance" can be thought of as "change," or perhaps as "adjustment" to the impinging reality of God's rule. Seen in this light, "repentance" means adjusting to the new realities and possibilities brought by the Kingdom. Things are possible now which were not possible before. Your life can change in ways that were not possible before. Now Kingdom life is available; repent and adjust your thinking, choosing, and acting in response.

In the terms of this passage about "people who sat in darkness" but who now "have seen a great light," we might think of repentance this way. Imagine trying to navigate your way across a darkened room or perhaps an open field on a cloudy night. Suddenly the lights are turned on in the room, or the clouds break and the full moon shines through. Now you see that you were just about to run into a piece of furniture, or into a barbwire fence you had not realized was in your path. Wouldn't it make sense to adjust your direction? That's the "repentance" that light makes possible.

When Jesus brings the light of his presence and his proclamation of God's Kingdom, he calls for change--not only to avoid the destruction we risk by walking in moral darkness but also to receive the new life he comes to impart. Jesus comes "that it might be fulfilled," that God's purposes in giving new life might be accomplished. But if this

purpose is to be fulfilled, there must be change, adjustment, repentance on our part. If we grasp even a small part of the goodness of what God wants to do, we will embrace the opportunity to repent/adjust as part of the "good news" of the Kingdom.

Matthew 8:14-17--Jesus bears our infirmities

When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; ¹⁵he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. ¹⁶That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. ¹⁷This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

Healing happened everywhere Jesus went. This passage mentions one person in particular, Peter's mother-in-law, who was healed and her specific malady (fever). Then Matthew gives a more general report of people being healed and delivered from a variety of ailments, including demonic infestations. (Actually you might note the larger context, from the beginning of the chapter: Jesus touched and healed a leper; then he healed a centurion's servant from a distance with a word of command.) Matthew chooses this place in the narrative to point out that Jesus' healing ministry "was to fulfill" the words spoken through Isaiah: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (vs. 17).

The quotation is from Isaiah 53:4, which is worth observing in that context. Isaiah 53 is, of course, the great prophecy about the atoning significance of Jesus' death. We can detect the tone and emphasis of that passage by looking especially at Isa. 53:4-6:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Just from these verses you can see that the emphasis falls on dealing with the "sin problem." The predicted suffering would be "for our iniquities," because we had "gone astray." We need to remember that our most important need is for Jesus to bring healing for our spiritual alienation from God and his ways. Yet this Isaiah passage clearly refers also to "our infirmities" and "our diseases." Matthew's quotation of Isa. 53:4, specifically in a context dealing with Jesus' healing ministry, makes it clear that Jesus brings "healing" for more than our spiritual alienation, central though that is. The *whole* purpose of Jesus' coming is to bring *wholeness* in every dimension of life. The spiritual

dimension has to be kept central, since that involves our eternal destiny and since that is the core from which life flows out into the other dimensions of our being.

Sometimes we want God to bring wholeness into just one area of our lives, perhaps the area that is causing the most pain at the moment--be it physical, relational, or whatever. We can be confident that God cares about these dimensions of our lives, but we need also to understand that God's interests are comprehensive. He wants his Kingdom to prevail in every area of our lives, "on earth as it is in heaven." To call for God's wholeness in one area of life means ultimately that we need to welcome his wholeness into all of life.

When people come to Jesus seeking physical healing (or deliverance from demons), they recognize *some* of their need. When and as Jesus meets the *acknowledged* need, he also works toward healing *all* the needs, including the unacknowledged and unrecognized needs. Jesus' healing activity is always part of the unfolding revelation of his full identity as the Savior of the world, who gives "his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28, which also reflects the language of Isa. 53:11-12).

Another way of saying this: What Jesus was doing in Matthew 8, in the midst of his healing ministry, was not merely preliminary to what he did on the cross. It is part of the same work. Jesus' ministry of healing and deliverance is inseparable from the ultimate healing and deliverance accomplished on the cross. That is why a passage like Isaiah 53, which focuses mostly on the significance of Jesus' death for restoring us to right relationship to God, can also be cited by Matthew in connection with the healing ministry of Jesus in the years before he suffered.

This is actually a more important connection than the one we often hear made between Isaiah 53 and Jesus' power to heal. Often we hear reference made to 1 Peter 2:24--"by his wounds you have been healed"--which quotes Isaiah 53:5. But the context in Peter is focused on what we would call "spiritual healing," healing in our relationship with God through Jesus' death on the cross. In the context Peter is actually instructing us *how to suffer* unjust treatment *if necessary*, not how to avoid suffering (which is the way you often hear vs. 24 quoted!).

For a passage that teaches God's will to heal us (physically and otherwise) and the availability of that healing in Jesus' presence, Matthew 8:17 is far stronger. And the connection with Isaiah 53, so full of prophetic significance for interpreting the meaning of Jesus' suffering for our sakes, should make us even more confident of God's will to heal us. Putting it as directly as I know how, this is point: Jesus did not need to suffer stripes in order to heal our physical ailments--he was doing that before! But to heal us completely Jesus had to suffer the stripes and the crucifixion, with all its significance as substitution for us and paying the penalty for our sins.

Jesus did not gain power to heal us physically by suffering the stripes--he had that before. But to restore us to wholeness in unhindered fellowship with our heavenly Father, and to open us up to the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus had to deliver us from the debt of our sins. This he did by the cross. Jesus did not become the Healer by taking the

stripes--he was already the Healer. To invoke the stripes as the reason we should be healed (as sometimes you will hear) is somewhat ironically reversing this truth: Jesus took the stripes *because he is the Healer*; he is not the Healer because he took the stripes. Or to put it more simply, the healing is in Jesus, not in the stripes as such. But Jesus took the stripes as part of making his life in its blessed fullness available to us in the totality of our needs--spiritual, physical, emotional, etc.

Matthew 12:15-21--Jesus is God's Servant, sent to heal

Continuing to look at Jesus' healing ministry, we see in Matthew 12 how it provoked controversy, even though that was not Jesus' intention. Chapter 12 opens with Jesus and his disciples walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. The Pharisees criticized them for working on the Sabbath, since they were plucking and eating grain as they went. Jesus replied by reminding them of other precedents for doing necessary work on the Sabbath. He also reminded them of a passage he had earlier told them to study: Hosea 6:6--God's priority is mercy, not sacrifice (Matt. 12:7; see also 9:13, discussed in the next lesson). Then he made the extraordinary claim as "the Son of Man" to be "lord of the sabbath" (vs. 8). This bold statement, even more than his violation of their view of the Sabbath, probably accounts for the plans his opponents began to make later that day.

Still on this same Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and healed a man with a withered hand (12:9ff.). Before healing him, however, Jesus made a logical case for why "it is lawful to do good on the sabbath" (vs. 12). Apparently Jesus' opponents were not convinced, either by his logical argument or by his evident power to restore the man's hand with a word of command (vs. 13). They "went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (vs. 14). It seems they did not regard conspiracy and plotting as work which violated the Sabbath! Somehow, their plotting became known to Jesus.

When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, ¹⁶and he ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸"Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

¹⁹He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

²⁰He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.

²¹And in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Rather than stay and argue further with his opponents, Jesus moves on to another place. He's not looking to "pick a fight." He certainly doesn't abandon his healing ministry though! "Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them." As we often find him doing in the Gospels, Jesus "ordered them not to make him known" (vs. 16). In this context especially we can easily see Jesus' reason for wanting to keep the "publicity"

down: his intention was not "to stir things up" or "make a name for himself." Those things happened, to be sure, but as "by-products," not as his intention. What was his intention? That is described for us by verses 18-21, in which Matthew quotes from Isaiah 42:1-4.

In about the middle of the quotation (Matt. 12:19), we are told that God's Special Servant "will not wrangle or cry aloud"; he will not try to provoke public confrontation as an end in itself. Rather the Spirit-anointed Servant will focus on proclaiming "justice to the Gentiles [nations]" (vs. 18) and bringing "justice to victory" (vs. 20). The full significance of the reference to Gentiles (vss. 18, 21) would not become evident until later, when the early church began to take the Gospel to non-Jews. But Matthew is applying the word "justice" to Jesus' ministry, and his context for doing so is striking.

The Greek word for "justice" here is *krisis*. It is the word from which we get our English "crisis," but the Greek word has a broader meaning. Often it means "judgement" (either the process or the result), but in other cases it means "justice," in the sense of "right" being established. That is clearly the meaning here. By his ministry of saving, healing, and restoring, Jesus brings God's "justice"; he "makes things right."

If that strikes us as a strange way to describe Jesus' healing ministry, it is probably because in our culture we tend to think of justice as people getting what they deserve, whether good or bad. But in the biblical perspective, true justice is when God gets what he wants, when God "puts things right" in a way that shows his sovereignty, holiness, and goodness. Another way to say it: justice is "God's righteous order." Thus, when Jesus cast out demons or healed an infirmity, he was bringing God's will into manifestation (i.e., the Kingdom). This is God's idea of "justice." It is not because people deserve to be healed or to be rid of demonic torment; it is because God's righteous order calls for it. If you are willing to receive God's righteous order, it means you are willing for him to change your life according to his will. This means forgiveness and deliverance from sin; it also means his will being established eventually in every area of our being. That includes physical healing. When Jesus healed people, he was bringing "justice to victory."

Thinking of healing as "justice" (at least in this context) is supported by the imagery of verse 20: "He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick." These words portray Jesus' disposition toward hurting people. Those who are like "bruised reeds" need not fear that Jesus will "finish them off." He doesn't come to "break" the bruised; he comes to heal. His purpose is not to "quench a smoldering wick," someone whose life energies are almost exhausted. Jesus' purpose is to bring new life. The weak will find in him an inexhaustible source of strength. Bringing healing to the hurting and new life to the fainting--that is God's idea of justice, because it brings his creation back into "right order," back to the way he meant it to be.

The following verses (22ff.) further illustrate how Jesus' healing ministry "makes things right."

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Four

Jesus fulfills God's purposes by caring, serving, giving and forgiving.

In the previous lesson we saw how Jesus' ministry fulfills God's healing purposes. The most important healing that everyone needs is healing of the soul—the forgiveness of sins, and restoration into right relationship. In this lesson, we focus more particularly on how Jesus fulfills God's purposes by showing mercy and care for others, by serving their real needs, and (ultimately) by giving his very life to provide forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 9:9-13--Mercy, not sacrifice, is God's delight

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

We read here of the call of Matthew, and of a dinner which Matthew gave for Jesus and many others, perhaps that same evening. Notice that Matthew modestly does not call attention to his generous hospitality, but compare Luke 5:27-29, where Levi (another name for Matthew) is identified as the host.

The most important hospitality, however, is that which Jesus demonstrates. Even in calling a tax collector to be a disciple, Jesus would have shocked the religious people of his day. Tax collectors were despised and hated as agents of Rome and traitors to their own people, the Jews. The system was troubled by corruption, and often tax collectors cheated both the people from whom they collected and the government whom they supposedly served. Tax collectors, as a group, were not the kind of people you would look to for a spiritual renewal movement!

Jesus invites Matthew to be his disciple; Matthew invites Jesus to his home, and he also invites professional colleagues to join the banquet and meet Jesus. This is offensive hospitality, as far as the Pharisees are concerned! Matthew says that they *asked* Jesus' disciples about his table fellowship with "tax collectors and sinners" (vs. 11). Luke 5:30 indicates that it was not an innocent inquiry but a *complaint*. They found fault with Jesus for associating with people they regarded as unworthy. Jesus' standards are obviously not up to their standards!

Jesus responds to the complaint with a memorable illustration and an "assignment" to meditate on a specific scripture. Jesus points out that a "physician" associates with "those

who are sick" (vs. 12), for they need the physician's help. The "well" (in this case, those who *think* they are well) "have no need of a physician." Obviously Jesus' critics do not see him as *their* "physician." Indeed these critics think they could be of some help to Jesus, if only he would listen to their advice about what kind of company to keep! The tax collectors and other sinners, in contrast, are gathered around Jesus precisely because they believe he might have something that will help them—they need his "medicine." This is the kind of person to whom the "physician" devotes his skill and time. The good physician *is* a physician *for the sake of those who need him*.

Plainly Jesus is the physician in this illustration. He is the Healer (as discussed in the previous lesson), and he has come for this very reason and for the sake of these very people. Jesus is the Healer *for the sake of those who need his healing*. In this context, however, the work of the physician is not focused on physical bodies but on souls, on these persons who are alienated from God and God's ways. Just by being there with them, Jesus is allowing them into fellowship with God, allowing them to come into contact with the Source of their healing.

If "alienation" is the "disease," only "fellowship" can cure it. Therapeutic fellowship with God will bring the cure to the alienated ways of life afflicting these tax collectors and sinners. What would the critical Pharisees have prescribed for these "sick" souls? Probably that they should "get well" first (i.e., quit sinning and start living righteously), and then they could seek the company of "healthy" persons such as the Pharisees, and perhaps even be allowed into the presence of God (the "physician"!). The Pharisees' approach is "self-medication" (self-righteousness). Jesus' approach makes a lot more sense, doesn't it? Seeking contact with the Source of health is far more promising than sick people trying to produce their own health!

After his powerful illustration defending his table fellowship with "sinners," Jesus gives his critics a little "homework": "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (vs. 13). The quoted text should be familiar to Jesus' critics; it is a well-known verse from Hosea (6:6). In the Hosea context, God reprimands the people for their superficial zeal for outward displays of worship (sacrifices, etc.) while inwardly they lack true "knowledge of God." Their heart ignorance of God is shown by failure to share God's disposition of "steadfast love" or "mercy" (the Hebrew word in Hosea, *chesed*, can be translated either way). They were intent on making their religion *look good*, but they were not truly engaged in *doing good*.

That's the essence of Jesus' defense of his own activity and his counter-charge against his critics. By bringing healing fellowship to those who need it, Jesus is *doing good*, but to the Pharisees it *looks bad*. The Pharisees are more interested in *looking good*. Of course if Jesus' fellowship with sinners is ultimately to do them any good, they will have to change. Thus he calls "sinners" to respond to the opportunity to change (vs. 13; note the parallel in Luke 5:32: Jesus calls them "to repentance," not to stay the same). But the Pharisees would be open to associating with the tax collectors and sinners *only after they changed*, if then! If the "sick" need to "get well" first, they will have to do so without the Pharisees' help, since they care more about their own health and reputation.

Something the Pharisees and we need to understand is what Hosea 6:6 and many other scriptures teach: God is more interested in our heart being like his heart than he is in the size, number, or perfection of things we offer him. That God desires mercy rather than sacrifice means that he wants to *show mercy* to us (in ways that transform us), and he wants us to *show mercy* to others (cf. Matt. 6:12, 14-15; especially 18:23-35). Such acts of showing mercy are far more important than "showy" acts of religion. The bottom line is that God cares more for how we care about people than he cares about the perfection of what we offer him. (Cf. Micah 6:8 in context.)

Jesus gave this Bible study assignment to his critics, and perhaps some of them gave it some thought in the coming days. We know that some did not, however, for later we hear Jesus saying this in Matthew 12:7: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." This he said in response to their criticism of Jesus and his disciples for plucking and eating corn as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. The Pharisees cared less that the disciples might have been hungry than about the violation of the prohibition of work.

Sabbath taboos were more important to them than people's needs. That is why the Pharisees often complained about Jesus' healing people on the Sabbath. To the Pharisees, it would have been better for the person to remain sick or in pain than to risk violating the commandment. For them, the *sacrifice* of keeping the letter of the law was more important than receiving God's *mercy* in healing. Their priority was the reverse of God's! That is why Jesus said they did not understand Hosea 6:6, because they cared more about things God cares less about, and they cared less about things God cares more about. How do our priorities in caring compare with God's?

Other texts on Jesus' caring

At the beginning of Matthew 10, Jesus authorizes his twelve disciples to minister healing and deliverance to others. Then he sends them out to spread the message of the Kingdom (10:1, 5-8). If we back up just a little, however, to look at the end of chapter 9, we see an important motivation for this mission: Jesus' compassion. (This illustrates the fact that seeing a passage in context sometimes requires going back to the previous chapter. The chapter divisions, inserted centuries after the writing of the Bible, are not always in the best spot!)

Jesus had been traveling about, preaching, teaching, and healing (9:35). As he saw the crowds of people, "he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). He first instructs his disciples to *pray* for "the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest," which is "plentiful, but the laborers are few" (9:37-38). Then he *sends* them into the harvest (ch. 10).

This is an instructive order for involvement. Jesus first asks us to care about what he cares about by making his concerns our concerns in prayer. Then he empowers and guides our own activity in helping to meet the needs he has taught us to care about. The motivation for this kind of ministry is two-fold: (1) Jesus' *compassion* (9:36), which he

shares with us; and (2) *gratitude* for what he has done for us because of his compassion toward us ("You received without payment; give without payment," 10:8).

In another passage (ch. 18), Jesus gives more extended teaching on the importance of caring for one another in the church. In response to the disciples' question about who is greatest in the Kingdom (vs. 1), Jesus uses a child as an illustration and says, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 4). This makes a point about humility and "what counts in the Kingdom," but it also teaches us how to treat one another: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (vs.5). To show that we care for the King, we have to care for those he cares for. If he respects those who (in worldly terms) merit no respect, then we need to respect them in the same way.

This passage is easily sentimentalized, especially if we speak idealistically about the innocence of children, etc. The application in this chapter, however, focuses on how adults treat one another when someone has offended or someone has been offended. God cares about "these little ones who believe in me," whose significance might not seem as important to us as it is to God. Our enlightened self-interest should prompt us to treat with care all whom he treats with care (vss. 6-7). When we might be disposed to "write somebody off," we should ask whether God has given up on them, or whether we should make an effort to bring them back to the fellowship (vss. 10-17). The parable of the unforgiving servant (vss. 23-35) vividly presents the importance of treating others with the same mercy we have received. Our forgiveness of others (who don't deserve it) is so important that our forgiveness hinges on it (vs. 35). That's how much the Father cares about *all* his children--so much that he insists that we treat one another as his precious children.

Matthew 20:24-28--Jesus cares so much that he serves and gives.

Jesus' teaching about greatness in the Kingdom (ch. 18) did not immediately correct the disciples' priorities and ambitions. Two of the leading disciples, James and John, later came with their mother (!) to ask for privileged positions in the coming Kingdom (20:20-21). Jesus deferred their request to the Father's prerogatives (vs. 23), but the request itself angered the other disciples (vs. 24). Jesus seized the moment to teach again about true greatness in the Kingdom, pointing to himself as the defining model.

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

In the Kingdom of Heaven, greatness is not defined as *power over people*. Greatness in the Kingdom is defined by serving the goals and values of the Kingdom, and Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing ministry has already shown that the goal of the Kingdom is God's best, God's idea of fulfillment, for everyone who will humbly receive it. So

instead of being power over people, true greatness is *power to promote the best interests of others* (as defined by God). If the King of the coming Kingdom, the Son of Man, is so devoted to that purpose that he will give his own life as "a ransom for many," how could we imagine a different or higher aspiration?

The power of this passage is made even more evident by recognizing that Jesus' language for describing his purpose is borrowed from Isaiah 53, even though he does not quote it. Isaiah 53 is one of several passages which depict the "Servant of the Lord," who would come to do God's will, bring healing and restoration, and ultimately give his life for the salvation of others. (The Servant passages are Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; and (possibly) 61:1-11.) Isaiah 53 is the single most important chapter in the OT for predicting and explaining the significance of Jesus' atoning death. Verses 11-12 speak of the benefit which God's Servant will bring to the "many." The whole chapter (especially vss. 10 and 12) presents the Servant's suffering and offering up of his life as the means of saving others (i.e., the "ransom," although that precise word is not used in Isaiah).

So, when Jesus says that he came not to be served but to serve, he is doing more than saying service is better than domination. He is identifying himself as the Servant predicted by Isaiah hundreds of years earlier, whose service will extend to giving his life as "a ransom for many." This is the measure of greatness in the Kingdom, for this is what makes the Kingdom possible for others. If we want to be great in the Kingdom (as James and John and their mother wanted), we will do what God calls us to do to make the Kingdom accessible to others. That is true service and true greatness, and Jesus (as always) is the greatest example. (See also Phil. 2:3-11.)

For us to follow the lead of Jesus will mean serving the genuine, best interests of others (as defined by God), as God gives us opportunities. It will also mean giving what we have to give to enable others to know about and participate in the Kingdom. (This can obviously be connected also to our response to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.)

Matthew 26:26-29--Jesus serves and gives in order to forgive.

The importance of forgiveness--receiving it and giving it to others--has already been discussed above in connection with Matthew 18. The passage we just looked at (20:28) points us toward the ultimate provision of forgiveness in the covenant sealed by Jesus' blood. Notice how Jesus interprets the significance of his death in these words from Matt. 26:26-29, spoken shortly before Jesus' arrest:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Jesus' actions of blessing, breaking, and giving the bread, followed by blessing and giving the cup, are gestures which illustrate what Jesus is about to do: he is about to give his blessed body and blood to be broken and poured out. Notice again the allusion to Isaiah 53:11-12 in the word "many" (as also in Matt. 20:28). Notice also that Jesus calls his blood "my blood of the covenant," meaning that his sacrificial death will inaugurate and seal a new covenant relationship, after the same pattern by which the covenant at Sinai was sealed (cf. Exod. 24:8; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Among the Gospel writers, Matthew is unique in telling us that the blood of the covenant is specifically "for the forgiveness of sins" (vs. 28). In order for God's good purposes (the Kingdom) to be fulfilled in our lives, now and eternally, the barriers to God's blessing must be removed. In particular, those things which hinder our fellowship with God need to be dealt with decisively, so that we can have confidence in the basis of our relationship. If our confidence is based on how well we perform, or what we do to deserve God's blessing, we can never be confident enough to receive all that God wants to give. To give us the confidence, to provide a sure foundation for our relationship with him, God takes the initiative to establish a "covenant" by the shed blood of Jesus (i.e., by his death). God is so determined to give his Kingdom blessings to his children that he deals with the sin problem unilaterally, by sending Jesus to give his life as a ransom, to seal a new covenant by his shed blood. Before you and I had even thought of sinning, God had already provided a remedy for the way sin breaks fellowship. The remedy is in the blood of Jesus which establishes the covenant relationship. The blood of Jesus has a stronger effect to bring us into relationship than the power of sin (once it is confessed) has to separate us.

But if Jesus' blood has the power to remove sin as a hindrance to fellowship with God, this also tells us a great deal about the power of sin to hinder that fellowship. If nothing less than the outpoured blood of the Son of God was needed, then the capacity of sin to block God's good will in our lives must be great indeed. That Jesus was willing to care this much, to give this much, in order to provide forgiveness and blessed fellowship in the new covenant—that is the measure of God's commitment to have his Kingdom and his will on earth as it is in heaven.

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Five
Jesus fulfills God's purposes in our lives.

More on Matthew 20:28

In the previous lesson we looked at Matthew 20:28 (among other passages) with a focus on how Jesus fulfills God's purposes by caring, serving, giving, and forgiving. In all these things which Jesus does we are the beneficiaries. But we need to look further at how Jesus brings fulfillment into our lives by his transforming effects on us. For example, he doesn't just *serve* our best interests (as defined by God); he makes us *servants* like him. He doesn't just offer us forgiveness; he commissions (and commands) us to forgive. We become more than *beneficiaries* of the Kingdom of God; we become *agents* of the Kingdom. This is part of the purpose for which we were created—that we might be stewards for God's purposes on earth. As we allow Jesus to fulfill God's purposes in us, we find that it means our participation as partners with God in his work. This is why Jesus comes into our lives—"that it might be fulfilled."

The connection between what Jesus accomplishes for us by his work and what he enables us to become is evident in this key passage of Matthew 20:28. Seen in context (vss. 20-28), the point is not simply that Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. In context Jesus is teaching his disciples how to be "great" in the Kingdom. He is doing so in response to the jealousies and ambitions revealed in the request of James and John and in the other disciples' reaction to it. In effect Jesus tells them (and us) that greatness in the Kingdom is being like him, which means that the Kingdom's impact on us, as it grows, will make us like him.

Yet it is vital to remember that for this process of becoming like Jesus we depend completely on his fulfillment of the Father's purposes. We cannot hope to bring God's purposes for our lives to fulfillment unless Jesus does the Father's will in us. If service is the great ideal of the Kingdom (as in Matthew 20:26-27), we cannot achieve it unless we allow Jesus to serve us and give his life as a ransom for ours (vs. 28).

Another way to say this: You cannot be who you were truly made to be unless you let Jesus be who he wants to be—for you and in you. You can be fulfilled, but only if you let him fulfill his will regarding you. For God's will to be fulfilled, for our lives to be fulfilled, we need these two things: (1) we need to "be served" by Jesus' sacrificial giving; and (2) we need "to serve" in similar fashion and for the same motive, that the Kingdom of God might be manifested.

Matthew 16:13-28—Jesus' fulfillment versus Peter's

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

This famous passage is important for many reasons, some of them connected with historic disputes about the role of "Peter's successor" (the Pope, according to Roman Catholics). Our purpose in this lesson is not to address those concerns definitively but rather to notice the connection between Jesus' fulfillment of the Father's will for himself and the fulfillment of God's will for Peter. Jesus himself makes the application not only to Peter's life but also to the life of everyone else.

The first thing we might observe is that not all opinions about Jesus are correct, not in Jesus' earthly lifetime nor now. That is obvious and hardly needs to be said, except for this serious corollary: The needed beneficial effect of Jesus' life on ours is tied to a God-given understanding of who Jesus is.

Jesus congratulates Peter, not because he is smarter than all the other people who have opinions about Jesus' identity, but because the "Father in heaven" revealed it to Peter (vs. 17). Peter has received a divine gift by which he recognizes Jesus, and his declaration of this recognition becomes the occasion for a name-changing declaration by Jesus. Instead

of merely “Simon” (a very common name in Israel), he will now be “Peter,” which means “Rock” (vss. 17-18). And “rock” is what Jesus wants for the foundation of his church.

Historically Protestants have argued for other meanings for “this rock” in verse 18, suggesting that it does not represent **Peter** himself but rather his **faith** or his **confession**. Some of these arguments are based on supposed differences between *petros* (a masculine word for Peter’s name) and *petra* (a feminine word for “small rock”). Opposing arguments (not only by Roman Catholics) have observed that Peter and Jesus probably conversed in Aramaic, in which *cepha* (rock) would not have had the variable spellings that Greek makes possible. For our purposes in this lesson, we may safely sidestep these disputes (which have a lot of history behind them) and acknowledge that **Peter’s confession of faith** is *Peter’s*, but only by divine gift. We can also acknowledge that Peter’s confession of faith is what makes him *Peter*, in the sense of being part of the foundation of the church (see Eph. 2:20), in which we also are “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) through confessing the same faith.

We cannot really, finally separate the person from the confession or from the faith being confessed, although we may make distinctions for good reasons such as emphasizing our need to make the same confession. We also cannot finally separate Peter’s confession of faith from the One acknowledged by the confession: Jesus himself. The power of the confession (including its power to change Peter’s life) is only as good as the truth being confessed. Confessing that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” has a transforming effect on Peter and anyone else who confesses it *because it is true, because Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son*.

Peter’s confession of who Jesus is, changes who Peter is. He is more than just someone who confesses Jesus; he is part of the church. In Peter’s case, he is foundational to the church (according to Eph. 2:20). When and as we confess Jesus’ identity, we participate in the same reality; we are part of the church, too. Responding to who Jesus is changes who we are, and it changes what we can become in the future.

Many other important truths can be studied from this important passage. We could study, for example, the meaning of “the gates of Hades” (vs. 18), representing (among other things) the power of death. Jesus is saying that the community of faith he establishes (“my church”) will be stronger than death. The relationships cannot be destroyed by death. We could also spend a great deal of time on the binding and loosing in verse 19, concepts which have been part of the historic controversy over these verses. For now, let’s just say that Jesus intends his church to be like heaven’s colony on earth (see Phil. 3:20). The church’s leaders and members, therefore, should see themselves as ambassadors for heaven on earth. (See 2 Cor. 5:20. Note also that what Jesus said to Peter individually in Matt. 16:19, he said to all the disciples in Matt. 18:18, discussed below. See also John 20:23.) For our present purposes, however, we need to keep our focus primarily on Peter’s confession of Jesus and on its effect. The confession, though miraculous, is still incomplete, and so is its effect on Peter.

It is striking how quickly Jesus changes his tone toward Peter once he begins to explain the path he will take as Messiah (vs. 21). The divine gift by which Peter knows Jesus' identity obviously does not include a total understanding of what Jesus must do, for he tries to correct (vs. 22) the one he has just called "the Son of the living God" (vs. 16)! Now instead of congratulating him and calling him "Rock," Jesus rebukes him and calls him "Satan," which means adversary or enemy. He calls him "a stumbling block" (vs. 23) instead of a building block! Who Peter is to Jesus is now completely different because his thinking is oriented toward "human things" rather than "divine things."

Now instead of being Jesus' partner Peter is his opponent! This does not totally negate the blessedness of what Peter has been given to understand about Jesus (vs. 17), but it does show how far short of full blessedness he still is. Peter will remain short of full blessedness unless he allows the same One who gave him some insight to give him further insight. Peter needs to let the One who showed him that Jesus is God's Son also show him that God's Son must go to the cross. He needs to let his ideas about Jesus be corrected and completed by what Jesus has to say. He needs to abandon the notion that he can improve on Jesus' plan for doing God's will! If he does not, he will remain a hindrance rather than a help, a stumbling block rather than a building block. The blessing of being able to confess that Jesus is the Son of God will be swallowed up by the curse of being Jesus' enemy. (Peter, of course, did eventually grow in the needed way, although not without pain. Consider, by contrast, what happened to Judas, who might have agreed with Peter that Jesus was God's Son but who, tragically, did not learn to have a mind for the things of God.)

After first congratulating and then rebuking the leader of the Twelve, Jesus now addresses all of his disciples, including us (in vss. 24ff.). Anyone who wants to follow Jesus must embrace the cross which Peter had just tried to avoid. Exactly what it means "to take up" the cross might differ somewhat from one person to another, since we face different challenges. For everyone it means accepting Jesus' cross as God's provision of salvation. Every disciple has to let Jesus serve him or her in this way (per Matt. 20:28). Each disciple also has to serve in some way, but each in the uniqueness of individual situations and opportunities. But for everyone, discipleship means self-denial (vs. 24) instead of self-assertion. For everyone it means putting Jesus' cause before one's own.

Giving priority to your own goals and ways means losing what you really want, which is fulfillment of your reason for being (vs. 25). Ironically, the fulfillment we all want comes only through putting Jesus' fulfillment first, seeking his purposes rather than our own, letting his life agenda be more important than our own. When Jesus' agenda is given priority over our own, we discover something wonderful: his agenda brings us fulfillment, true life. This is why he came—"that it might be fulfilled." As long as we say 'no' to his priorities, we are hurting ourselves. No matter what may seem the short-term gain (vs. 26), we lose our true selves (literally, "soul"). What could possibly be adequate compensation for such loss?

Jesus concludes his teaching on true fulfillment by reminding us that this present world order is not permanent. “For the Son of Man is to come . . . and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (vs. 27). The compensations and consequences for our choices are not limited by this lifetime or by the rewards available in our society, our economy, and our culture. The Kingdom of God is the lasting society, economy, and culture. That’s the one we should invest in most heavily.

To help the disciples discern that lasting Kingdom more vividly, God allowed three of them (Peter, James, and John) to see a more complete manifestation of it on the Mount of Transfiguration (ch. 17). This is what Jesus was referring to in Matt. 16:28: “some standing here . . . will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Matthew 18 and forgiveness

This is another passage included in last week's lesson when we were looking at Jesus' caring and forgiving. It deserves a longer look now in connection with our need to become like Jesus in his capacity to forgive.

The entire chapter is devoted to the topic of relationships within the family of faith, especially the importance of receiving and giving forgiveness. First comes the question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (vs. 1) Jesus answers with the illustration of a child (vss. 2ff.) to make the point that those who want to be great in the Kingdom need to give up the idea of being great! (At least, give up the desire to be "great" as the world defines it.) In the Kingdom, being humble is equated with being great. Being treated as his child by the Heavenly Father is as good as it gets! Likewise, in the Kingdom, treating someone else as a child of the Father is the highest honor you can give (vs. 5).

It is honorable to be treated as God's child and to treat others as God's children. Conversely, it is dangerous not to treat yourself and others as God's children (vss. 6ff.). If Jesus treats with special care "these little ones who believe in me" (vs. 6), I am asking for trouble if I put a "stumbling block" in their path. By "stumbling block" we don't mean just annoying them or offending their sense of taste about church music or something else. We are talking about something that causes them to sin, to stumble and fall in their relationship with the Father. That is clear from the way Jesus tells us to deal with possible causes for stumbling in our own lives (vss. 8ff.), where the alternative results are given: either "to enter life" or "to be thrown into the hell of fire" (vs. 9). The issues are the greatest imaginable; how we treat one another is of the greatest concern to God and to his angels (vs. 10). For my own good (if for no other reason), I need to be concerned about your good.

I need also to be concerned about your good if I care at all about having a heart like that of Jesus and of the heavenly Father. Jesus illustrates the importance of caring enough to go "out of our way" with the parable of the lost sheep (vss. 12-14). While the context here puts emphasis on how we should care for others in the church (vs. 15; cf. Luke 15:3-7, which emphasizes reaching those still outside the church), remember that the best

example of a "good shepherd" is Jesus himself (John 10). What Jesus teaches his church to do in going after the "lost sheep" is exactly what he has done toward us. It was "not the will of your Father in heaven" that you, one of "these little ones" for whom Christ died, "should be lost" (vs. 14). It is not his will that any be lost (2 Peter 3:9), especially among those who are already part of his "flock."

Jesus is urging us not to let sin destroy us or others who are also "the little ones" about whom he cares. Jesus warns us against sinning against each other by causing another person to sin. He also, realistically, tells us what to do about such offenses when they do occur, as inevitably they will (vs. 7; cf. Matt. 6:12). Because offenses are bound to happen, we have to be *ready to forgive* one another, and *ready to ask forgiveness* from one another. Forgiveness is the great antidote that keeps sin from destroying the relationships within the Kingdom.

After the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus continues to teach on the importance of forgiveness for maintaining relationships (vss. 15ff.). If a Christian brother or sister sins against me, I shouldn't just "write them off." God hasn't given up on them; neither should I. I should go to that person and try to resolve the cause of offense. If that is unsuccessful, it is not time yet to give up on them. I should enlist another believer or two to help in this attempt at reconciliation (vs. 16). That may not succeed either, in which case the larger group ("the church," vs. 17) may need to be brought into the matter, first of all for the sake of making yet another appeal to the offending person. Only if the offender refuses the appeal of the entire church can I feel like "I've done what I could." Even now, Jesus tells me to treat such a person as "a Gentile and a tax collector" (vs. 17), i.e., a person who is "outside" the fellowship, but also the kind of person who can still be included again, if repentance is forthcoming (remember Matt. 9:10-13).

Verses 18-20 indicate that the church has power to "bind" and "loose." Historically this has been understood as the authority to exercise discipline. Given its context of emphasizing the importance of forgiveness, we might say it this way: It is vital that individuals receive the forgiveness and acceptance of the community. We know (from experience and from psychology) that persons who don't experience love, care, and forgiveness from other people will be thwarted and stunted in their humanity. People need what only other people can give. The church has authority under the Gospel to tell people that their sins are forgiven, not only by people but by God himself (see also John 20:23). If we don't tell them, how will they know it?

Historically, this passage has at times been abused by those in power in the church to "lord it over" others. Obviously that is a serious distortion of the entire chapter. Forgiveness is not some commodity that the church hierarchy can measure out to those who conform to its merely human demands. *Forgiveness is the life of the church.* As believers in Jesus, *we live by forgiveness*—by receiving it and by offering it. If someone is willing to receive forgiveness we don't really have an option not to extend it, by word and action. But the person who refuses the church's hand of reconciliation is refusing the forgiveness, healing, and restoration that Jesus has placed within the community of faith.

The emphasis of Matthew 18, however, is not on the responsibility of the individual to receive forgiveness. Rather it is on the responsibility of the church and individuals in the church to *offer* forgiveness. That is the clear point of the parable which concludes the chapter (vss. 23-35).

Jesus tells this parable in response to a question from Peter. Peter asks how often he should be prepared to forgive "another member of the church" (literally, "my brother") who "sins against me" (vs. 21). Perhaps Peter thought that "seven times" would be quite generous. Jesus' reply, whether understood as "seventy-seven times" (NRSV, NIV) or as "seventy times seven" (NKJV), effectively says, "Stop counting!" For one thing, if you're keeping score, you aren't really forgiving! The Kingdom of God is not a merely human society that lives by "keeping the books." In the church, where we are to live by the values of the Kingdom, we live by forgiveness, received and shared.

Also we need to understand that the power to forgive in the Kingdom of God is infinite, because it is God's power, not ours. When we forgive someone else, we are only passing on what he has given us out of his infinite resources. Forgiveness in the Kingdom is not limited by human patience or capacities. And if we realize that we are forgiven out of God's infinite resources we will understand why Jesus can tell us to be boundless in our willingness to forgive others. Immeasurable forgiveness is actually what has been offered to us. So it is completely inappropriate for us to be measuring it out to others in a stingy way or in refusing to grant it altogether. Notice, however, that immeasurable, infinite forgiveness is *not unconditional*, a point which is underlined in Jesus' parable.

Jesus says that the Kingdom may be compared to a king who settles accounts with his servants (vs. 23). The "ten thousand talents" (vs. 24) represents an impossible amount, more than anyone could pay, certainly not a servant! The whole point of the amount is the impossibility of its being repaid. In comparison, the "hundred denarii" (vs. 28) represents the wages for a hundred days of work by a common laborer. This is not an insignificant amount, but it is nothing compared to "ten thousand talents"!

The king is perfectly within his rights (in that culture) to order that his impossibly indebted servant be sold, along with all his family and possessions, in order to recover at least some of the debt (vs. 25). In desperation, the servant asks for something truly impossible: he asks for more time to repay (vs. 26)! No amount of time would be sufficient. The servant is making a promise he cannot possibly keep! But the king is moved by pity to forgive the debt and release the servant from the obligation (vs. 27).

Notice that the servant is not forgiven because of the promise he made to "make it up to the king." He is forgiven because of the heart of the king. Here is a king whose life is marked by forgiveness, not by insistence on "balancing the books." But by what standard will this forgiven servant live? Now forgiven an impossible debt, the servant should be filled with gratitude and generosity toward others, but not this servant! He takes hold of a peer, "one of his fellow slaves" (vs. 28), who owed him a relatively small amount, "seizing him by the throat" and demanding to be repaid. When asked for patience and more time (echoing his own plea), he refuses (vss. 29-30). This not only distresses other

fellow servants (vs. 31); it angers the king (vs. 34), who *reinstates* the impossible debt he had previously forgiven.

If the servant is going to insist on living by “balancing the books” with his fellow servants, that is how his master is going to treat him! (See also Matt. 7:1-5.) By refusing to forgive, he is saying ‘no’ to living by forgiveness. Choosing to live by “balancing the books” (insisting that other people “pay” for the things they have done against us) turns out to be a principle that thwarts our own fulfillment, since it means we’ll have to try to pay God for all our debts to him! This is the very opposite of what Jesus teaches as the principle of life for us in the Kingdom: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). To refuse to live by forgiveness is to refuse to be forgiven. To grant forgiveness is to acknowledge that forgiveness is necessary for life. To be a forgiving person is necessary for our own fulfillment.

This parable is a stark reminder of the importance of offering to others the forgiveness we have received from God (cf. Matt. 6:15). In the context of chapter 18, however, it also teaches us how serious our Father is about having children whose hearts are like his own. If we refuse to be given a forgiving heart like our Father's, we are inviting our debts to be reinstated, for Jesus says that "my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matt. 18:35). "From your heart" would mean "because you want to." That doesn't mean we will find it easy in every case, but the key is in wanting to have a heart like the Father's. That's what Jesus revealed as God's will (see Matt. 5:48, which in context is teaching us that it is God's will for us to love our enemies as well as our friends). That's the will of the Father that Jesus came to make possible, that Jesus came to fulfill.

Although we cannot devote adequate space to it in this lesson, we might point out a very practical application. Think how important “living by forgiveness” instead of “living by balancing the books” could be in preventing and/or healing the kind of hurts that lead to divorce, a topic which Jesus addresses in the following chapter (19:3-12). As we allow God’s forgiveness and love to change our hearts, he enables the kind of commitment, patience, understanding, and hope that are needed for people to live in harmony, at home and everywhere. Thus the Kingdom principle of “living by forgiveness” enables the fulfillment of the most important relationships of our lives.

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Six

God's purposes are fulfilled when Jesus is glorified.

In this study we have already observed that our fulfillment depends on Jesus' fulfillment. As he fulfills God's purposes (including predictive prophecies of the OT) he brings fulfillment to our lives. In the same way, our own interests are best served by the glorification of Jesus, rather than by our vain attempts to promote ourselves or fulfill our own dreams. Our goal, then, needs to be the fulfillment of God's will, which is to glorify himself through his Son, Jesus. In this lesson we look at other passages in Matthew which emphasize God's will to glorify Jesus, which is God's way to bless us.

Matthew 3:11-17—Jesus and John the Baptist

The importance of John the Baptist is evident in the attention given to him in all four Gospels (and Acts 1:5 and 19:1-7, where his baptism for repentance and his followers are found as far away as Ephesus). His ministry obviously created quite a stir in Judea, and people were speculating about his possible identity as the Messiah (see the parallel passage in Luke 3:15-18; also John 1: 19-23). But John was careful to point beyond himself and his ministry, to another who would come with greater, more powerful impact: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

Many people were in awe of John, and an angel had even predicted that he would be "great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15). But John himself had a strong sense that he was merely the forerunner of someone so much greater that he was not "worthy to carry his sandals," i.e., to perform the most menial tasks in his service. Obviously what John got to do was a far greater privilege than carrying sandals! It was greater privilege than any prophet before him received: he paved the way for and pointed the people toward the long-expected Messiah in their midst. John was truly privileged, far beyond his sense of entitlement (cf. Matt. 11:11 below).

Indeed this is John's greatest glory--that he gives glory to the One greater than he is. His greatest privilege is to point people away from himself toward the true Source of salvation and divine empowerment--the One who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11). John is intensely involved in his mission, but he recognizes that Someone else has a more important task and a greater gift to offer. Precisely in this recognition and this deferential attitude is John's greatest honor. The fulfillment of his own destiny is to point toward the greater fulfillment of Jesus.

Imagine what could have happened. What if John the Baptist, instead of deferring to Jesus, had viewed him as a competitor? What if John had tried to keep people from leaving his ministry and going after Jesus? (Cf. John 1:35-37) What if John had insisted that his ministry was just as important as that of Jesus? Imagine John whining, "I got

here first! Go find your own place to preach, where you won't steal my congregation!" Of course, that would mean John was deluded, not fully in touch with the reality of his role compared with that of Jesus. But it would also mean missing out on his greatest privilege, being there to point people to the Messiah.

Can we see how this might apply to us? Is it possible for us to allow our self-centered concerns for our comfort, our reputation, or our own fulfillment to get in the way of true fulfillment? Can insecurity or vanity hinder or even prevent our maximum contributions?

Notice how John did not even feel worthy to be the one who baptized Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). This statement further illustrates John's humble acknowledgement, but it also opens up another possibility--that John's humility could get in the way of fulfilling his ordained role. What if John had continued to refuse to baptize Jesus because he (John) was not "good enough"? If John had finally refused, however, it would have been an example of *false humility*—false because it is self-centered and self-absorbed. Ironically, such false humility is really a form of pride! If you really feel unworthy to do a task God calls you to do, you should know that you are not worthy to veto God! You should do as he asks! Feeling unworthy to do a task doesn't qualify you to say 'no' to God! Feelings of unworthiness cannot be used as an excuse for disobedience.

Because John's humility was true humility, he did as Jesus asked him to do (3:15). Through availability and humble obedience, he was greatly privileged to baptize Jesus. He was also greatly privileged by what happened next (vss. 16-17):

¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

To witness this divine affirmation is great privilege indeed! John's privilege is actually emphasized by a detail of Matthew's presentation which you might miss unless you compare it with Mark and Luke. Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22 report what Jesus heard: "You are my Son." Thus Mark and Luke emphasize the personal address and what Jesus took away from this event. Matthew makes it apparent that John the Baptist also heard the voice from heaven: "This is my Son." Jesus heard the voice as a word addressed directly *to himself*; John heard it also as a voice addressed *to him*, but speaking *about Jesus*. (As someone has said, "If you hear God speaking, he is talking to you.") This extraordinary speaking from heaven was God speaking to Jesus, but also God speaking to John. While this Fatherly affirmation was important to Jesus, it was also an enormous affirmation of all that John had been saying about the one who was coming after him.

We can make an application of this episode to ourselves. The most affirming thing we can hear God say is his testimony about the identity and significance of Jesus, his Son (cf. also 1 John 5:6-11). When we hear and believe what God has to say about Jesus, we know we are loved, we know we are secure in that love, and we know that our lives have

wonderful significance to God. Putting the focus on Jesus does not diminish us; it fulfills us. John the Baptist is a good example of finding his highest in recognizing the one who is higher. (John's classic statement on this is John 3:30: "He must increase, but I must decrease.")

Matthew 11:1-19—Did John have second thoughts?

In this passage we gain more insight into John the Baptist, especially by seeing some of his human weakness. John almost sounds disappointed or at least impatient in this question, which he sent to Jesus through some of his followers (11:3): "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

We can certainly sympathize with John. He is in prison and liable to be executed at a moment's notice. It is not hard to imagine John wondering why Jesus doesn't do something, either to free John or to bring down the promised judgement on the corrupt government which had imprisoned him. For what John might have been hoping for, see 3:10-12. John had said, "The ax is lying at the root of the trees," a picture of impending judgement. He had also hailed Jesus as the one who would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire," which John clearly connected also with judgement, as the "chaff" would "burn with unquenchable fire." Now, in the message he sends to Jesus, John is asking, "Are you going to bring the fire or not? Was I wrong? Will it be someone else?" We may have heard the Christian proverb--"Don't question in the dark what God showed you in the light"--but we still can sympathize with John's question.

Jesus responds by referring to the fruit of his ministry (11:5): "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Besides the fact that these deeds were wonderful, they were evidence that Jesus is indeed the promised deliverer, as these words echo a number of prophecies from Isaiah, including 29:18-19 and 35:5-6. The deliverance which Jesus is bringing to others should reassure John the Baptist that he was not wrong earlier when he gave such bold testimony to the identity of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promised Deliverer. Despite the fact that John has not been delivered from prison (and won't be, except in the sense of being delivered by dying), Jesus is the promised Deliverer.

The resolution of John's dilemma will come only in the larger deliverance accomplished by Jesus' death and resurrection. Although John had God-given insight into the identity and significance of Jesus (like Peter later did), he did not understand the whole picture. Not knowing ahead of time just how Jesus was going to fulfill that larger deliverance, John only knows he's in prison and not being delivered. Jesus' reply to John's question was intended to put the focus back on the bigger picture. There is more going on here than just John's circumstances.

After the messengers depart with Jesus' reply, Jesus has further words about John (and about people's responses to John) for anyone who will listen (vss. 7-19). Jesus says that John is a prophet "and more than a prophet." John is the promised, unique forerunner (vss. 9-10). In fact, according to Jesus, no mere human ("those born of women") has ever

been greater than John, although "the least in the kingdom of heaven" has a greater privilege (perhaps because of being "born of the Spirit"; see John 3:6). John fulfills the prophesied role of "Elijah who is to come" before the Messiah (vs. 14, referring to Mal. 4:5-6; see also Matt. 17:10-13.). [Note that this does not mean John was Elijah "reincarnated." Rather Elijah is a "type" or pattern for the ministry of John the Baptist.] Of course not everyone had accepted John as such (vss. 15, 18). In fact, even John the Baptist did not understand himself in precisely that way (see John 1:21, where John said, "No," when asked if he was Elijah). Of course, Jesus' interpretation of John has more authority than John's own interpretation of himself. (Think of that for yourself. What Jesus has to say about you is more true than what you have to say about yourself!)

At the moment John sent this question to Jesus from his confinement in prison, John might have been having second thoughts about Jesus and even about himself. Had he missed it? Had he been wrong to point people to Jesus? Far from castigating John for having questions, Jesus praises him as incomparably great among mere mortals and credits John with fulfilling a role ("Elijah") greater than John's own self-understanding. While John may have been thinking he had "missed it" and fallen short of the intended fulfillment, Jesus was saying John was even more than he thought he was! Present circumstances notwithstanding, John was everything God had said he would be, and more than John had even hoped to be.

Matthew 17:1-8—"Listen to him!"

In Lesson 5, we looked at Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ (Matt. 16:16) and how Peter's God-given understanding of Jesus' identity still required further instruction and correction. It will be helpful to notice how God graciously grants Peter, James, and John still more understanding of Jesus in the extraordinary event of a few days later. The Transfiguration is a revelation of the glory of who Jesus is. Not even all of the Twelve are granted the privilege of witnessing this.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

When Jesus' appearance became so luminous, we could think of it as Jesus' true identity "shining through," but that would not be completely clear without the other elements in this event--the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the voice from the bright cloud. The mere luminescence of Jesus' face would be, in itself, a marvelous mystery--marvelous to

be sure but mysterious as to its cause or significance unless some explanation is provided. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus (and we are not told how the disciples recognized them, or whether they had to be told) makes it apparent that Jesus is receiving divine endorsement. God is allowing two of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament to "visit" with Jesus. Jesus is obviously worthy of some of the best company God's people can offer.

Whatever Peter and the other disciples had thought of Jesus before, seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah would only have impressed them even more. To think that their rabbi ranked up there with Moses and Elijah! Wow! But they quickly learn that they need to re-evaluate even that perception. It is not so much Jesus being honored by a visit from Moses and Elijah; rather, it is Moses and Elijah being honored by getting to visit Jesus!

Peter's impulse to honor the men before him is not wrong (vs. 4); he just needs to have his evaluation adjusted. He suggests that he could "make three dwellings," one for each of them. The implication is that Peter wants to honor all three, more or less equally. God takes this moment, however, as an opportunity to further Peter's education about Jesus. While Peter "was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (vs. 5)

The most important thing is what God says, but what he does not say is also notable and significant. He does not say, "Listen to Moses and Elijah, too." The focus on Jesus is intense, especially in distinction from these noble and highly revered prophets from the past. This focus is emphasized not only by the singling out of Jesus but also by the virtual repetition of the words spoken at Jesus' baptism (cf. 3:17), and dramatically by the fact that "when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone" (vs. 8).

God says, "Listen to him," Jesus the Son. Moses and Elijah were great prophets of God. If you could have them over for dinner, you would not want to dominate the conversation; you would want to hear what they have to say. But in the company of Jesus, God says, "Listen to him!" Clearly it is more important to listen to Jesus than to Moses and Elijah, even though both are validated prophets with powerful ministries.

"Listen to him" can also be heard as God's corrective and guiding word particularly for Peter, who just a few days earlier had tried to correct Jesus (16:22). Jesus' rebuke back to Peter (16:23) would still be fresh in Peter's memory. He now hears God's voice backing up Jesus' interpretation of his course in contrast to Peter's. "Listen to him" would mean also, "Don't be trying to tell Jesus what to do!"

Notice something marvelous and precious in the action and words of Jesus here. The three disciples were terrified by the realization that God was speaking to them from the bright cloud. With good cause "they fell to the ground . . . overcome by fear" (vs. 6). But Jesus touches them and says, "Get up and do not be afraid" (vs. 7). The revelation of God had come so powerfully that they had fallen down with fear, frightened by the voice that told them to listen to Jesus. And what is the first thing he says to them after they

have been terrified by that instruction? "Get up and do not be afraid." The voice that terrified them told them to listen to the voice that tells them not to be afraid.

That seems to be a paradox, but it is like many of our own encounters with God. Our first impulse is often to turn or run away from God's presence or voice, but if we hear him, he is saying, "Don't run away." For these three disciples, the self-preserving instinct might have been to fear and to flee from such manifest glory, but the Lord of glory (cf. Psa. 24:10; 1 Cor. 2:8) says, "Don't fear and don't flee." The revelation may come with what seems to be life-threatening power, but it is actually life-giving power. Most of the time most disciples are not exposed to such overpowering sights and sounds as on the Mount of Transfiguration, but the life-giving word often strikes us initially as life-threatening. That is certainly the case in our next passage.

Matthew 19:16-30--Jesus and the rich young man

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

²⁷Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

This young man's idea of fulfillment seems originally to have included Jesus, at least potentially. Perhaps he entertained the possibility that Jesus had something to offer him, some wisdom and insight that would enrich his life or even assure him of eternal life. That is what he asked about: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16). As it turns out, he decides he is not *seeking* what Jesus *offers* him--a life *freed* from the distractions of his many possessions and *focused* on Jesus alone for his security, now and in the future.

In his quest for eternal life, the young man hopes that Jesus will help him *add* to his life what he needs to be assured of eternal life. But when Jesus asked him to *give up* something he already had, he decided to leave Jesus out of his life. The price was too high. Like we do, he made his decision based on what he thought would be best for him. He thought he would be diminished, not fulfilled, by doing what he needed to do to follow Jesus. Perhaps if Jesus had not asked him to sell everything, perhaps if could have kept his stuff . . . but would he have been able to follow? Jesus did not and does not ask everyone to sell everything, but he does tell everyone to deny self, which means to give up the notion that I know what's best for me.

By his saddening decision (vs. 22), the young man proved that he did not in fact really know what was "good," which is perhaps why Jesus asked him about his knowledge of "good" (vs. 17). The disciples, who don't go away, have an opportunity to let Jesus explain to them what is truly "good."

If life is to be good, it needs to be guided by God's instructions. The young man had been doing that by his obedience to the commandments (vss. 17-20). Yet he realizes that something still is lacking (vs. 20). He has been doing good, but somehow it doesn't seem good enough. Jesus says, "If you wish to be perfect [i.e., if you want to be good enough, for your life to be good enough] go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." To this young man's ears, there is so much bad news in the first part of Jesus' statement that he can't hear the good news about "treasure in heaven" (vs. 21). Nor can he see that following Jesus would be good enough to make the loss of his property seem not so bad. He had asked about doing a "good" thing (vs. 16). This does not sound like a good thing.

Since parting with his goods seemed like a bad idea, he decided that what he had would just have to be good enough. He had come to Jesus hoping to gain something. Jesus seemed to be offering mostly loss. So he goes away sad, but at least he still has the good stuff he started with, right? Experience tells us that he would never be as satisfied with his stuff in the future as he had been in the past. Even then he had felt something was missing. Now he will feel that way even more. Now he has at least been told that there is something better, something truly and lastingly good, and he has said no. He will always wonder about "what could have been." The emptiness he has felt before will now be even worse, because he has deliberately chosen to seek fulfillment in those very things which have failed to fulfill him thus far. If before, those many good things had failed to satisfy him, how can he expect them to do so in the future?

Experience also tells us that the mere parting with property does not produce perfection. Getting rid of all his goods (in itself) will not make this man's life good. In his case, disposing of his properties meant disposing of his distractions. He needed to rid himself of the *many things* in order that he could do the *one thing* which could make his life good: following Jesus.

The disciples (like us) tended to regard wealth as an advantage. That is why they were surprised by Jesus' statement in vss. 23-24. If the obviously advantaged have less chance to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than a camel does to go through the eye of a needle, what about the less advantaged or the disadvantaged? "Then who can be saved?" (vs. 25) Of course the disciples (like us, much of the time) were thinking of advantage and disadvantage in terms of human capacity and resources. And the whole point of the Kingdom of Heaven is not about human resources but heavenly resources, not what people can do but what God can do. The rich young man needed to learn that lesson; so do we all.

The lesson all need to learn is that "for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (vs. 26). Jesus said this with regard not only to the saving of the rich man but also with regard to the saving of anyone. Everyone's salvation--the poor as well as the rich--depends on the very same, non-human resource, God himself. Only God can save you, not your goods or your good deeds. There is no good thing that anyone can do to insure eternal life. Eternal life is God's possibility, and his alone. Only he can "make it happen."

While all need this lesson, all do not learn it the same way. Some are given an opportunity to learn it by being asked to dispose of all their possessions (like the young man in this episode). Others (like Abraham) have to leave home and let God show them where to go, yet take their earthly possessions with them. Others stay at home and some earn a great deal of wealth. But all, without exception, have to learn that the ultimate fulfillment comes from God, not from what they can produce or even from what they can give away. What if the young man in this passage had disposed of all his goods but not followed Jesus? He would still have missed the opportunity for true fulfillment.

What had the young man missed? Among other things, by going away when he did, he missed the opportunity to hear Peter's question and Jesus' reply in vss. 27-29. Peter had left his fishing business and home (although he apparently had not "sold out the business," John 21). "What then will we have?" he asked. Notice that Jesus does not rebuke him for the question. He treats it as an honest and legitimate question. The Twelve disciples, Jesus says, will share in the leadership of the age to come (vs. 28). Jesus also says that those who leave everything for his sake will be more than amply compensated--"a hundredfold," the meaning of which is not mathematical but to emphasize the adequacy of the result. The parallel passages in Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30 explicitly place this adequate compensation in this life.

The most important thing, however, is the "eternal life," which the rich young man had asked about (Matt. 19:16), and which Jesus promises as an inheritance to those who have followed him, whatever the cost (vs. 29). The ultimate result, he assures us, will be the complete reversal of many people's earthly standings: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (vs. 30). In terms of the theme of this series, we could say it this way: "Many who seem to be full now are going to end up empty; many others who seem to have nothing are going to overflow." And this result is for eternity.

Matthew 20:29-34--What do you want?

Just by way of brief contrast, consider this passage:

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. ³⁰There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" ³²Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened."
³⁴Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Look what Jesus' compassionate heart means to the blind: sight. What would his compassionate heart mean to me? What do I need? He asks us to ask him for what we need. Yet this is the same Jesus who can ask us to give up everything! He wants to meet every need, yet he can also ask us to relinquish all we hold dear! Is that consistent? Is it more likely that he is inconsistent or that we are? Is it more likely that he is capricious or that we lack wisdom to chart our own course? In our wisdom, we often prescribe the same thing for everyone; we turn discipleship into a formula which everyone should follow. Notice how Jesus does not do this. The one thing he tells everyone to do is to follow him.

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Seven
Eternal purposes fulfilled in time

In Lesson 1 we observed how the events surrounding Jesus' birth fulfilled OT prophecies, and throughout this series we have considered various aspects of the way Jesus brings fulfillment into our lives by fulfilling the will of God. Among other things we have looked at Jesus' ministry of healing, forgiveness, and restoration, and also how the goals and values he brings are so much greater than our own. In this lesson we focus on those days when Jesus' role as "fulfiller" comes to its most dramatic and important climax. As Jesus experiences the events of his Passion Week--culminating in crucifixion and resurrection--he brings to fulfillment the most important predictions about the deliverance the Messiah would bring. And by so doing, he makes possible our present experience of fulfillment and our assurance of eternal life.

Matthew 21:1-11—Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we call "Palm Sunday" has unique poignancy. On one hand it is so joyous that we naturally wish to be there to join the celebration and praise. On the other hand, because we know the events of the following Friday (the crucifixion), we may feel rather subdued. We may even feel that the crowd was celebrating in blissful ignorance of what would happen on Friday. Then again, considering the triumph of the following Sunday (Resurrection!), we may feel that Palm Sunday's celebration needs to be turned up several notches! But who knew? Who among that happy crowd knew about the dark hours of Friday or the triumph of next Sunday? Only one knew—Jesus.

Jesus knew ahead of time about the availability of the donkey and her colt (vss. 2-3; Mark 11:2 and Luke 19:30 mention only the colt). In this case Jesus seems to be deliberate in fulfilling an OT prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, which is quoted (but not exactly) in Matt. 21:5. The Zechariah text emphasizes the king's triumph more than Matthew's quotation, which puts more emphasis on the humility of the arrival.

The crowd's actions and words welcoming Jesus reveal something of their understanding of his identity and of their expectations. They certainly did not understand completely (as John 12:16 points out), but they clearly regarded Jesus as "the Son of David," the long-awaited Messiah (Matt. 21:9). Convinced of this because of his miracles (Luke 19:37; John 12:17-18), they honored him as Messiah by spreading branches and clothing along the road.

"Hosanna" was originally a cry for salvation: "Lord, save us!" It is used this way in the Hebrew of Psalm 118:25: *hoshia na*. Psalm 118 is one of the "Hallel" or "praise" psalms sung by pilgrims on the way up to Jerusalem for Passover and other celebrations. By the time of the NT, "hosanna" was also used as praise to God for salvation already accomplished: "Praise God for saving us!" It is obviously being used as praise in this

scene. Later, within the temple precincts (Matt. 21:15), the chief priests and scribes criticized Jesus for allowing this praise to be directed toward him.

With "hosanna," the crowd was hailing Jesus as God's agent of salvation, because of the miracles he had already done and because of their expectation of what he would do. They believed that Jesus was about to bring the deliverance for which the nation had long prayed. This enthusiastic crowd, of course, did not know *how* God was going to save them (and us) through the events of that week.

The other part of their salute to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," comes from the very next verse (26) of Psalm 118. As part of the Hallel psalm, this blessing could apply to any person going up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. In this context, however, it is obviously applied specifically to Jesus, "the Son of David" who is coming "in the name of the Lord," i.e., as the Lord's appointed agent to do the will of the Lord. For him to come in the name of the Lord means that the Lord is with him. Again, the reality is far greater than the people could have understood at the time.

This One coming in the name of the Lord *is* the Lord, a fact made plain only by the resurrection a week later. That the crowds do not fully comprehend Jesus' identity is evident in the response they give when questioned (vss. 10-11): "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." As Jesus had once said about John the Baptist (recall Matt. 11:9): "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." This excited crowd was welcoming even more than thought they were when they greeted Jesus with shouts of praise. At best they thought they were welcoming the fulfillment of their national dreams of freedom and blessing; instead, they were welcoming the Savior of the world, the fulfillment of God's dream to bless all the families of the earth (see Gen. 12:1-3).

Matthew 21:12-14—Cleansing the temple

The next event described by Matthew is the cleansing of the temple (21:12), which Mark 11:15 tells us, with more precision, happened on the following day, Monday. This would have been, perhaps, the kind of reform activity the excited crowd of Palm Sunday expected from the Messiah. Certainly this was one more cause of nervousness and resentment among Jesus' opponents, who feared his threat to their power base.

According to John, Jesus had cleansed the temple in a similar fashion much earlier in his ministry (John 2:13-21). On both occasions, quite naturally, Jesus' action sparked controversy and verbal challenges from the authorities. Here in Matthew 21, the chief priests and scribes warn Jesus to stop the people who are crying "Hosanna!" Later the chief priests and elders challenge him directly, demanding to know the source of authority for what he does (21:23). Since they do not recognize John the Baptist's authority, however, Jesus refuses to answer their question (vss. 24-27).

Since we recognize Jesus' authority, we may do what the chief priests, scribes, and elders seem not to have done—concentrate more on the results of Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Jesus did not go through the whole temple driving out animals and moneychangers. This happened in one specific part of the temple precincts—"the Court of the Gentiles," supposedly an area Gentiles could enter to pray to the God of Israel. Instead of its

intended purpose, this area had been converted into a "convenience store" for pilgrims. Instead of bringing their animals from home to sacrifice, they could buy them here, right on the temple precincts. And since it would be inappropriate to honor God with money bearing Caesar's image, Jewish pilgrims from across the Empire could "exchange currencies" to get Jewish money for the temple tax.

Viewed sympathetically, these services were not inherently sinful. Their placement in the Court of the Gentiles, however, was a problem in itself, effectively preventing its use as a place of prayer for Gentiles. This perhaps did not bother the temple "authorities," but it offended Jesus, as Mark 11:17 makes clear ("for all the nations" is quoted from Isa. 56:7, but only by Mark). What is more evident in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is that the business was not only ill placed but dishonest. Jesus said they had turned the temple into "a den of robbers" (Matt. 21:13). Any visitor to a popular tourist site could well imagine the "markup" on goods and services made available for pilgrims, many of whom had traveled a long way from home and did not know where to find better deals. There is a strong suggestion in Jesus' words that the prices are more than too high; there is corruption involved. Who, after all, would decide who got the best spots in the temple precincts? The chief priests, no doubt!

That Jesus was able to overturn the tables and drive out the animals, apparently alone, and no one stopped him, says a lot about the force of his personal presence. But we need to see more than just Jesus cleaning up the place. Look what happens afterward: "The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them" (vs. 14). Is that not what the temple should be for? A place for the hurting to find healing? A place for people to meet God? Perhaps even if there had been no dishonesty in the trading that had been going on, its very presence had been a theft of great magnitude--the people seeking a profit had robbed others of the opportunity to come there to pray, to seek and find God's blessing. Jesus showed by his actions of healing what is a right use of structures devoted to the glory of God.

We can apply this to our lives, too. Sometimes Jesus has to cleanse some part of our lives before it can be used for the purpose God intended. As with the temple in Jerusalem, so with the temple of our individual bodies, and with the temple which we are corporately, the intended purpose is to praise and glorify God, but that also means restoration and healing for humans. God intends our lives to be places where divine resources and human needs come together. God is glorified, and we are blessed. Where his purposes are fulfilled, instead of our self-centered ones, we actually benefit more, and others are also blessed through us.

Matthew 21:42-44--Rejection and fulfillment

After telling a parable indicating he expected the authorities in Jerusalem to put him to death (21:33-41), Jesus cites an OT passage which shows how human rejection becomes part of the divine plan:

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:
'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes'?

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

The OT text quoted in verse 42 is Psalm 118:22-23. Recall that it was Psalm 118:25-26 that provided the words of praise for the triumphal entry. So in the same Psalm which blesses "the one who comes in the name of the Lord" we find also the recognition that human beings don't always approve of God's choices of whom and how to bless. But we also see that God does not allow the human rejection of his choice to have the last word. What human "builders" reject, God can make the most important piece of the whole building.

In the original context of the Psalm, the celebration of God's chosen cornerstone could be applied to Israel as a nation, small and insignificant in the eyes of the world but key to all that God was revealing and doing in the world. In a general way, the contrast of rejection and selection could be applied also to individuals (like David) chosen for key roles in Israel, despite the impression others had of them. But Jesus is the ultimate expression of all that Israel was called to be. In the events to follow in the next few days, Jesus would be definitively rejected by the "builders" of Israel, the chief priests and elders who were the responsible leaders. But just as definitively Jesus would be vindicated by "a higher court," no less than God himself.

The reversal of positions would be "the Lord's doing," manifestly the work of no one less than God. No other event in all of human history has vindicating force equal to that of the resurrection of Jesus, for manifestly no one less than God could give life like this. It is "the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes" (Matt. 21:42). This passage from Psalm 118, first used by Jesus to describe what was about to happen in his crucifixion and resurrection, was an important part of the early church's explanation of the significance of Jesus, along with other "stone passages" from the OT. (You might want to glance at these passages: Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:6-8; Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Rom. 9:33.)

Acceptance or rejection of this "stone" is not simply about what will happen to this stone; it is the determining factor for what will happen to those who accept or reject it. That is, in essence, what it means for this rejected stone to become "the cornerstone." Our relationship to this stone determines our place in the "building" (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-5). Those who deliberately reject him (as the chief priests and elders did) not only forfeit their place as "the builders"; they lose their place in the building (Matt. 21:43-44).

Because this "stone" seemed unlikely at first glance, some would stumble over it and "be broken to pieces" (vs. 44). Even Jesus' disciples could be described as "stumbling over Jesus" at some points, because of limited understanding and misguided expectations (recall Matt. 16:23). But that is not as bad as having this "stone" fall on you in judgment, for "it will crush anyone on whom it falls" (21:44). The alternatives then are to

acknowledge this stone as the cornerstone of God's building or to be judged for rejecting it.

Matthew 26:1-16—The anointing at Bethany

Jesus had been predicting his death at the hands of the Jerusalem authorities since Matthew 16:21. As the event drew nearer he reminded his disciples again of what was about to happen: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified" (26:2). Jesus was more sure of the timing than were the people plotting it. Matthew tells us that they wanted to kill him but "not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people" (vs. 5). At that point, however, they did not foresee that one of Jesus' own disciples would enable them to arrest Jesus at night, when the crowds of his admirers would pose no problem (cf. vss.14-16).

During the daytime of Passion Week Jesus was in Jerusalem, teaching, healing, and occasionally debating his opponents. Nights, however, he spent in Bethany. While there one evening he received an anointing which he interpreted for his disciples as prophetic (26:6-13).

⁶Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. ⁸But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? ⁹For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." ¹⁰But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. ¹¹For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹²By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. ¹³Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

The disciples' anger at "this waste" (vs. 8) shows clearly that they did not understand yet what Jesus was saying about his impending death. Otherwise they could not have thought of her action as extravagant and wasteful. Had she understood what the Twelve had not? We are not told what her conscious motivation was, but Jesus said she had anointed him for burial. He further said that her act would be remembered "wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world" (vs. 13). Ironically, Matthew and Mark (14:3-9) do not give her name, but John does (John 12:1-8). (The somewhat similar incident in Luke 7:36-50 is a different episode entirely.)

This is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. By her costly offering to honor Jesus, who had raised her brother from the dead (John 11), Mary becomes a model for appropriate gestures of thanksgiving which are not only generous but even extravagant, in the eyes of others. After what Jesus had done for her and her family, what could be too much? And in view of what Jesus was about to do, not only for her but for the whole world, what could possibly be an excessive gesture of gratitude? Jesus is about to accomplish a work of salvation so complete, so comprehensive, and so overflowing with grace that nothing we offer him could be considered overdoing it. What expense should be spared in

preparing Jesus for his burial, when his burial means the purchase of life eternal for all who believe in him?

Matthew 26:26-29—The Lord's Supper

Knowing his "time is near" (26:18) and that Judas is about to betray him (vss. 21-25)--the act precipitating a chain of events to follow--Jesus uses the time carefully. His words to the disciples in the upper room are intended to do more than prepare them for what is about to happen. Indeed, nothing can really prepare them for that. Jesus' words before the cross, however, will forever be part of the disciples' memories of these hours, and his words will provide understanding *after the fact* in ways that were impossible before the cross and resurrection. Through these important words, Jesus provided them and us with the frame of reference needed for thinking about the significance of his suffering.

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."
²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

It is truly impossible to imagine exactly how the disciples understood these words at the time. Obviously Jesus makes these solemn declarations in a Passover context (vss. 17-19). That in itself has great significance (in retrospect), for it means that the giving of Jesus' body and blood will accomplish a definitive deliverance, as the events of the first Passover had liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 12). Jesus is offering himself as the ultimate Passover lamb (see 1 Cor. 5:7).

His blood will also seal a "covenant" relationship which provides "forgiveness of sins" (vs. 28). The OT background for this goes beyond Passover to the covenant ceremonies involving Abraham (Gen. 15) and later the entire people of Israel (Exod. 24:7-8). More specifically, Jeremiah 31:31-34 prophesies a "new covenant," unlike the one made in Exodus, which would bring cleansing for sin. When Jesus speaks of his "blood of the covenant" and declares that it brings "forgiveness of sins," he proclaims the arrival of the promised new covenant (Luke 22:20 specifies "new covenant").

Less obvious but just as important is the connection between Jesus' words here and Isaiah 53. The connection is made by the concept of atonement for sins and by the word "many" (vs. 28). "Many" are to be saved by the sacrifice of the one, as prophesied in Isaiah 53:11-12.

You may recall that "many" was a key word in Jesus' earlier prediction of giving his life as a ransom "for many" (Matt. 20:28, discussed in Lesson 4). This passage from Matthew 26 was also dealt with briefly in Lesson 4. Part of the comments there are appropriate to repeat here:

Among the Gospel writers, Matthew is unique in telling us that the blood of the covenant is specifically "for the forgiveness of sins" (vs. 28). In order for God's good purposes (the Kingdom) to be fulfilled in our lives, now and eternally, the barriers to God's blessing must be removed. In particular, those things which hinder our fellowship with God need to be dealt with decisively, so that we can have confidence in the basis of our relationship. If our confidence is based on how well we perform, or what we do to deserve God's blessing, we can never be confident enough to receive all that God wants to give. To give us the confidence, to provide a sure foundation for our relationship with him, God takes the initiative to establish a "covenant" by the shed blood of Jesus (i.e., by his death). God is so determined to give his Kingdom blessings to his children that he deals with the sin problem unilaterally, by sending Jesus to give his life as a ransom, to seal a new covenant by his shed blood. Before you and I had even thought of sinning, God had already provided a remedy for the way sin breaks fellowship. The remedy is in the blood of Jesus which establishes the covenant relationship. The blood of Jesus has a stronger effect to bring us into relationship than the power of sin (once it is confessed) has to separate us.

But if Jesus' blood has the power to remove sin as a hindrance to fellowship with God, this also tells us a great deal about the power of sin to hinder that fellowship. If nothing less than the outpoured blood of the Son of God was needed, then the capacity of sin to block God's good will in our lives must be great indeed. That Jesus was willing to care this much, to give this much, in order to provide forgiveness and blessed fellowship in the new covenant--that is the measure of God's commitment to have his Kingdom and his will on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 26:30-35—Jesus predicts abandonment

After instituting Holy Communion as an ongoing means of presenting and participating in the benefits of his covenant-making death, Jesus and his disciples sing a hymn and then go out to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus will enter into agonizing prayer (vss. 36-44). But first he predicts that all of them will "become deserters" (or "be made to stumble," or "scandalized") thus fulfilling the prophecy from Zechariah 13:7: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matt. 26:31). This is something none of the disciples wants to do (vs. 35; except Judas, already gone). But Jesus knows that, in the crisis, their more noble desires will desert them and they will desert him. Peter objects most strenuously (vss. 33-35), but this brings an even more specific and personal prediction that Peter will deny him three times before the rooster crows in the morning (fulfilled in 26:69-75). The leader among the disciples would lead the way in denial and desertion. It seems that the humiliation of the Savior will be accompanied by the humiliation of those who claim loyalty to him. As he will go through humiliation to become even more exalted, so his followers will walk the same path. (Recall Matt. 16:24-27.)

Let us not miss what seems to have been lost on the disciples at the time. Right in the midst of predictions of his abandonment and the disciples' objections, notice that Jesus also predicts that he will be "raised up" (vs. 32). Unable to comprehend Jesus' talk of

abandonment, betrayal, denial, and death, they seem unable even to respond to words about resurrection.

Matthew 26:47-56—Betrayal and abandonment fulfilled

After Jesus' time of prayer, in which he wrestled with the will of the Father until he was at peace with it (vss. 36-46), Judas arrives with "a large crowd with swords and clubs" (vs. 47). In the darkness and confusion, the familiarity of Jesus to Judas was crucial to their goal—taking Jesus into custody. Even then, Jesus could have tried to escape or to resist (as Peter did in vs. 51, cf. John 18:10). But Jesus was ready to go willingly, even willing to allow Judas to approach and kiss him as the identifying signal (vss. 49-50).

Jesus rebukes the futile attempt to resist with the sword (vss. 52), and he indicates quite clearly that, in surrendering to be arrested, he is not the helpless victim but the obedient Son of the Father to whom he had just been praying (vs. 53). Jesus knows, as no one else there does, that "the scriptures must be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way" (vs. 54; also vs. 56). Not only the ancient predictions of the OT prophets but also the more recent predictions of Jesus himself must be fulfilled: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled" (vs. 56; cf. vs. 31). Some measure of Christ's love for us can be seen in the fact that he went willingly to die for those he knew would run away; indeed, he went to die for those who came to arrest him.

Matthew 27:45-54—Jesus' death, an open temple, and open tombs

Various details of Jesus' trial and his treatment by the Roman soldiers could be observed and correlated with OT prophecies (such as Matt. 27:35 and Psa. 22:18). For purposes of this lesson we will go on, however, to the climactic moment of Jesus' death.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Forsaken?

The darkness in the middle of the day, lasting for three hours (vs. 45), was a sign in nature of what was happening supernaturally. Darkness was exhibiting its power and appeared to be winning. Of course what was really happening was that darkness was being drained of its power, and the light was winning. To the extent that we can, we need

to see that the victory of the light, however, is no easy thing and by no means readily apparent to an observer. It is difficult, indeed impossible, for us to imagine or feel completely what Jesus was experiencing at this time. In terms of our series theme, we can say that Jesus was experiencing profound and inexpressible emptiness “that it might be fulfilled,” that the Father’s will to save might be fulfilled and that our lives might be filled with God’s good purposes.

In the depths of this unnatural darkness, Jesus uttered what has to be the most unnatural cry ever to proceed from human lips (remembering always that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine). "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" is translated as, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (vs. 46). This is a quotation of the opening lines of Psalm 22, which contains a number of prophecies about the suffering of Jesus. In the first instance, however, Psalm 22 expressed the feelings of a human author, someone who had felt forsaken by God, either at the time of composing the psalm or later (the psalm concludes on a more positive note). As many people have felt at times, the psalmist had felt forsaken by God and had naturally expressed that feeling (even to express that feeling to God is, in a sense, an expression of faith, though holding on “by a thread”).

For humans to express feelings of being abandoned by God is not unnatural, given our vulnerabilities, limitations of insight, and even the sins which justify God in leaving us to deal with the consequences of our attitudes and actions (per Rom. 1:24-32, “God gave them up”). But for Jesus to feel abandoned! He had never sinned. He knew going into this ordeal that he would die but that he would also rise. His submission to the ordeal was because he had a sure sense that it was the Father’s will (26:39-44). For Jesus the Son of God to feel forsaken by God—this is unfathomable, but perhaps it is at least an indication (if not the full measure) of the depth and scope of the price for our “ransom” (20:28) and “the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

The most important thing for us to understand about Jesus’ cry of abandonment is that it means, paradoxically, we have not been abandoned. And I mean this in more than the important sense that whatever we feel he has felt. Jesus doesn’t just cry our cry in order that we know that he understands our problems, true though that is. Jesus cries our cry, expresses what must be our situation if God does not come to save us. But when Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, this *is* God coming all the way to the lowest depths of the alienation caused by our sins. This is God bridging the gap that we could not span, and the cry from his lips indicates the pain it costs God to heal our pain. When Jesus cries our cry, he heals our brokenness. (This is the climax of the healing identification with our need which Jesus acted out in receiving baptism from John, even though Jesus had no sins for which to repent. Recall 3:15 in Lesson 2.)

Some have pointed to Jesus' cry—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (vs. 46)--as indicating that Jesus "died spiritually" on the cross, in the sense that he was cut off from fellowship with the Father by his identification with our sins. It would be presumptuous to think that we could totally understand or explain the full reality of what Jesus was experiencing, but a few observations may prevent misunderstandings on this important topic.

First, remember that this was not Jesus' only cry from the cross, nor was it his final cry. In Luke 23:46, Jesus' last words are recorded as follows: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Plainly Jesus was still conscious, right up to the end of his physical life, that God was his Father and that they were in communication with one another. Our reading of Matthew 27:46 cannot be such that it contradicts or negates Luke 23:46. According to John 19:30, Jesus' final words from the cross were "It is finished." This was not a cry of abandonment but of triumph! Jesus did not die defeated! His physical death was a triumph, as Paul also describes it (Col. 2:14-15; 1 Cor. 1:18, 23-25), regardless of how it appeared at the time to those who crucified him or those who wept over him.

For serious theological reasons we need to be careful how we present Jesus' experience on the cross. Did Jesus' substitution for us actually make him an unclean, sinful being, unfit for fellowship with the Father? There are some who would say so, based on 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says that Jesus was made "to be sin" for us so that we could be the "righteousness of God" in him. What does that mean? It means that Jesus was treated as sin deserves to be treated so that we might be treated as righteousness deserves to be treated. It does not mean that Jesus became a sinner, for then he too would need a savior.

We should not think that Jesus' holiness was overcome by our sins, for our only hope of being holy is that his holiness will overcome our sins and our desires for sin as we live in fellowship with him and are changed by his holiness. The price for holiness to triumph over sin was death--*Jesus'* death, because only Jesus' holiness was sufficient for this. Jesus' death was emphatically not the triumph of sin over him, but his triumph over sin. He remained as holy as he had been in all eternity, even at the moment he was bearing the punishment for all the sins of all times. To say that he bore the punishment does not imply that he himself became guilty. Rather, he was the holy, guiltless substitute for the guilty. (Again in terms of the theme of this series, Jesus' emptying of himself is the way by which he fulfills God's purposes for us and fills us with life from God.)

We can see an analogy in the description of the sin offering in Leviticus 6:25-30. Repeatedly the sin offering is called "most holy." Its holiness is such that it must be treated in a very careful manner, but not because its holiness is fragile or easily lost. Quite to the contrary, the holiness of the sin offering makes anyone who touches it holy (vs. 27)! The holiness was powerful, "contagious" to the point that everyone and everything which came in contact with it was affected by it. This awesome holiness was attributed to the sacrificial animals, which were mere types of the "Lamb of God" who would one day come to take away "the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Even more than the OT sacrifices, the final and sufficient sacrifice for our sins remained at every moment "most holy." As our holy high priest, he offered a holy sacrifice (himself) by which he makes us holy (see Hebrews 7:26-27; 10:10, 14).

Jesus never stopped being holy, even while being treated as sin deserves to be treated. Jesus did not stop being God to become a man (John 1:14), nor did he ever stop being

God, even while undergoing death for the sins of all men and women. It makes no sense at all, nor is it biblical in the slightest, to suggest that God the Son had to become less than God in order to save us. If someone or something less than God could have saved us, why would God not send an angel or use an obedient man?

Opening the temple and opening tombs

The profound cry of Jesus, which we struggle to understand, was completely misunderstood by some of the bystanders who heard it. They thought that maybe he was calling for Elijah to save him (27:47-49). But Elijah did not come. “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last” (vs. 50). (This is the cry that Luke records for us in his account: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” Luke 23:46.) Matthew 27:51 and Mark 15:38 both report that this is the moment when the veil in the temple was torn, “from top to bottom.” The direction of the tear is significant, indicating it is the work of God, even though accompanied by what could be (under other circumstances) a natural event—an earthquake. Tearing the veil of the temple means that the way is opened into the most holy place, not only for Jesus to enter on our behalf but also for us to enter (cf. Heb. 6:19-20; 9:11-12; 10:19-20). What Matthew makes clear is the connection between Jesus’ final breath as a mortal and this opening up of the way into the presence of God.

Matthew (uniquely) adds further emphasis to the opening-up effect of Jesus’ death by telling us, “The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (vs. 52). The opening of the tombs occurs at the same time as the tearing of the veil, which is at the same time as Jesus’ last mortal breath.

Matthew telescopes events a bit here, saying that those raised at the time of Jesus’ death “entered the holy city and appeared to many,” but only “after his resurrection” (vs. 53). Since no other Gospel writer reports this, we are limited to what Matthew tells us, and it is not clear whether the actual raising of these unnamed, previously deceased saints came at the time of Jesus’ death or his resurrection. Verse 52 seems to indicate the former; verse 53 the latter. What is clear is Matthew’s intention: we are to understand that Jesus’ exit from this life has created an entrance into eternal life. The earthquake, veil-tearing, and tomb opening all occur with the last breath and cry of Jesus.

Just as clear is the conclusion to draw from these associated events. Like the centurion standing by, we should acknowledge that, “Truly this man was God's Son!” (vs. 54).

Matthew 28—Resurrection and divine directions

All that was said above about the significance of Jesus’ death we can only say because of the resurrection of Jesus. Without that we could not really know that Jesus’ death was a victory, and that he had opened up the way into the presence of God and eternal life.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances differs in only minor details from the other Gospels. He tells us of the empty tomb (vs. 6) and the angelic declaration and interpretation of what had happened (vss. 5-7). For the most part, it is not as interesting as the accounts of Luke and John, who tell us more about the nature of Jesus’

glorified body. Matthew has another focus. He shows how intent Jesus was on reuniting with his disciples in Galilee (28:10; also vs. 7-8). When they gather at the appointed place (vs. 16), Matthew says that “they worshiped him; but some doubted” (vs. 17).

Worship was appropriate (as the women who first met the risen Jesus worshipped him, vs. 9), but how could some still doubt? Is seeing not believing? Perhaps this is Matthew’s abbreviated way of referring to the doubts that Thomas expressed so famously in John 20:25. The Greek word used in Matt. 28:17 for “doubt” does not mean “disbelieve” so much as “hesitate,” much as you might hesitate to step into a street until you had looked both ways. (In contrast Luke 24:41 more strongly says the disciples did not believe what they were seeing, because it made them so joyful.) Here in Matthew, some of the disciples are just not sure what they are seeing! And who can blame them? Nothing like this has ever been seen before! And even if they believe that it really is Jesus (Luke 24:36-43 shows us that Jesus had to demonstrate his identity), what does this mean?

This is the point Matthew wants to make: Jesus tells us what it means! The one who has consistently preached, taught, and manifested the Kingdom of God throughout his ministry has now inaugurated a new stage in that Kingdom, as Matthew reports in the closing words of his Gospel (28:18-20):

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Here is the fulfillment of all that Jesus came to earth to do. By his death and resurrection he has entered into a fullness of authority by which he sends out his disciples into “all nations,” with a commission to make disciples and introduce people into a saving relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the fullness of what Jesus had taught his first disciples is what they (we) are to teach to the new disciples (vs. 20). And one more thing: in seeking to fulfill the Great Commission, we need to know that we are not doing it on our own. The one who fulfills God’s eternal purposes is the one who goes with us “always, to the end of the age.” The Son who fulfills the Father’s will, and who brings fulfillment to our lives, is with us to enable us to fulfill our parts in bringing the task to completion.

That is the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection as Matthew presents it. Jesus has been raised and sends us out into all the world "that it might be fulfilled"—that God might have a people from all nations.

That It Might Be Fulfilled
A Study in Matthew's Gospel
by Dr. Arden C. Autry

Lesson Eight
Purposes still being fulfilled.

While Matthew's Gospel puts a lot of emphasis on OT Scriptures fulfilled in Jesus' coming, we have seen in this series that "fulfillment" is also something that occurs in the present, in our lives, as we allow Jesus to have his way. In this final lesson, we focus on still another dimension of "fulfillment"—the predictions which Jesus made about future events (future from the perspective of when he spoke). How many of these predictions have already been fulfilled is debatable, but on any accounting Jesus spoke of things which have not yet been completely fulfilled. We can say that with certainty because one of the things Jesus predicted is that he would come again with glory to judge the nations. Just as Jesus came the first time "that it might be fulfilled," so he must come again "that it might be fulfilled."

Matthew 24 and 25—Jesus' coming and the end of the world

Since the preaching of Jesus himself, his second coming has been an important part of the church's preaching. In recent centuries, secular attitudes began to prevail in western culture, and the tendency in some parts of the church has been to neglect this teaching. Reacting to this neglect, other parts of the church have perhaps over-emphasized predictive prophecy. At present some denominations (such as the United Methodist Church) have no particular position concerning the manner and time of Christ's return; others require their ministers to teach only one official view. Certain cults and sectarian groups have made their view of the second coming central to their distinctives. To add to the confusion concerning this doctrine, there have been misguided attempts throughout church history to predict the date of Christ's return. Given the natural curiosity of human beings concerning the future, there will probably always be some who will attempt to predict what Jesus himself said could not be predicted.

Given the inherent uncertainties associated with this doctrine, some Christians grow tired of all the speculation and debate and prefer to concentrate on other issues. Others are anything but bored by the speculations and get more enthusiastic about discussing this area than anything else in the Bible. The appropriate balance probably puts more emphasis on Christ's return than the average Christian does. On the other hand, a biblically balanced view will not lead to frantic hysteria, nor to attempts to fix the date (as, for example, happened in the responses by many to the predictions in the widely-discussed booklet of a few years back, "Eighty-eight reasons why Jesus must come back in 1988").

A significant problem for the study of such passages as Matthew 24 is that very often people go to the passage already convinced of a particular scheme of end-time events. With the scheme in mind already, the passage is made to answer questions in a manner destined to confirm the predisposition of the interpreter. This problem of presuppositions is a challenge in all biblical interpretation, of course, but nowhere does it seem to have a

greater effect than in eschatology (the study of end-times). In particular, we need to exercise great care not to force the text to answer questions with which it is not concerned (since we always have more questions about the future than the Bible seems to be willing to answer). The best advice is to be sensitive to the original context of each passage and to the intention of the one speaking or writing in the text. Before you read the discussion which follows, I suggest that you read all the way through Matthew 24 and 25. Then return to this point and read the following comments with the Scripture open before you so that you may refer back to the specific verses and words which are discussed. (At some points I will also make references to the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 21.)

Matthew 24—The Olivet Discourse

Jesus spoke these words on Tuesday afternoon before his crucifixion on Friday. Notice the context immediately preceding in chapter 23. Jesus has been pronouncing woes on the hypocritical religious leaders who had rejected him. Especially note 23:38: “See, your house is left to you, desolate.”

The long discourse of Matthew 24-25 is prompted by Jesus’ statement in 24:2, predicting the destruction of the temple (which took place in August of 70 A.D.). No doubt astonished at what Jesus had said, the disciples ask (vs. 3): “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Their question indicates that they put the destruction of the temple, the end of the world, and Christ’s coming in the glory of the Kingdom all in the same time frame (an understandable viewpoint, given the centrality of the temple in Jewish life at the time). Jesus’ long answer to their question (continuing into ch. 25) seems to indicate that he thought of these events as separated in time but connected in theological significance. From what Jesus says we can see three aspects to the purpose of his words:

1. To warn his disciples *not to be deceived* by false prophets, false messiahs, or falsely drawn conclusions about the end of time based on observation of events in the world (vss. 4, 9, 10, 24).
2. To encourage his disciples *to endure* trials and persecution and to be ready for his return by being obedient and faithful to his purposes in the meantime (vss. 13, 44, 45ff. and into the next chapter).
3. Not to give us a *timetable* but to keep our focus on the *agenda*--world evangelization and faithful Christian living (vs. 14, 36, 42).

24:4—The first part of Jesus’ answer is a warning. Jesus is far more concerned that we not be taken in by deceivers than he is to give us clues by which to predict the time of his return.

24:5—By the time of 1 John 2:18 “many antichrists” had already appeared (probably written in the 90s A.D.). Throughout church history certain people have made extravagant claims for themselves and their spiritual importance, even if they did not use the term “Christ” for themselves. Jesus predicted accurately that such people would often be successful in gaining a following. Especially in times of crisis (such as the destruction

of the temple in 70 A.D.) offers of salvation from almost any source find a ready audience because people are desperate.

24:6-8—"Wars and rumors of wars" are not signs that the end has come or that it will come in the immediate future. How many wars have God's people and the rest of the world had to endure since Jesus said these words? Indeed, in human history, wars and rumors of wars are more common than extended periods of peace. If anything, wars, famines, earthquakes, and other crises are *signs that the end has not yet come*. Jesus is saying, "Don't panic!" Panic makes one more susceptible to the lure of false messiahs and false prophets.

24:9-14—Besides the turmoil among the nations, the disciples are warned to expect persecution directed against them because of their identification with Jesus. This persecution will cause some to fall away from the faith ("fall away" here is "be scandalized," the same word used in 13:21) and even to betray other believers. To be abandoned and betrayed by those who were once part of the church will itself be part of the true disciples' trials in this age.

In connection with the predictions of "many false prophets," see 1 John 4:1. The predicted "increase of lawlessness" (or "wickedness," NIV) may be prelude to the coming of the "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2.

Verse 14 may be read as a prediction of the one thing that must happen before the return of Christ. Some, however, argue that the verse can be understood in such a way that "the world" (*oikoumene*, understood as the "known world" of that time) has already been evangelized. If so, Jesus could come at any time. Surely "all nations" (in the sense of "all people groups") have not heard the witness yet. But does that necessarily mean that Jesus cannot return until we have completed our assignment as the church? This verse was probably not intended to give us a clue to the timing of Jesus' coming (as though we could be positive he won't come until we have finished the job). Perhaps that is true, but in the context the verse serves principally to remind us of our *agenda* rather than to give us a *timetable* or order of events. If Jesus comes before the end of the year, he will not need to apologize to us for violating this verse (of which he knows the meaning, even if we are reading it wrong). The real question is whether we will have to apologize to him for not having heeded this verse, which so clearly tells us what our job is until he comes. In other words, we should read the verse as giving us our instructions until the second coming, rather than as giving us a way to calculate the time of the second coming.

24:15—The verses prior to this one (warning of persecutions, false messiahs, and turmoil in the world) are so general that they can apply to the entire period between Jesus' first and second comings. With this verse, however, Jesus is clearly talking about the destruction of the Jewish temple which took place in 70 A.D. He describes it as "the desolating sacrilege" (or "the abomination that causes desolation"), an expression from Daniel 9:27. (Compare this with Luke 21:20-24, where the connection with the events of 70 A.D. is even clearer.)

By using the expression from Daniel, Jesus places the 70 A.D. destruction of the temple in parallel to the desecration of the temple in 168 B.C. by Antiochus Epiphanes. Daniel's prophecy referred first of all to that event. The similarity between the two events lies in the profaning of the central shrine of Judaism, making it unusable for the worship of God. Obviously what happened in 70 A.D. was much worse in degree because the temple was not only profaned but destroyed, and it has not been rebuilt.

Recurrent speculation about rebuilding the temple in our own day involves this passage in Matthew and others, mostly in Ezekiel. There is nothing in this passage, however, which calls for the temple to be destroyed twice--once in 70 and again at some date still future to us. Any end-time event which could be put in similar parallel to the events of 168 B.C. and 70 A.D. would not necessarily have to involve a physical temple in Jerusalem, although of course it could. In this connection C.E.B. Cranfield, commenting on Mark 13 (The Gospel according to St Mark, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, ed. C.F.D. Moule, Cambridge: University Press, 1972, p. 404), said: "Antichrist was indeed present in the fierce nationalism of the Jews and the pride of Rome and thus incarnate stood 'where he ought not.'" According to Cranfield, however, Jesus was also referring to events beyond those of 70 A.D. In a real sense, Antichrist has come again and again in history (see 1 John 2:18), manifesting himself "in proud and sacrilegious men." Cranfield continues (pp. 404-5):

Thus in the crises of history the eschatological is foreshadowed. The divine judgments in history are, so to speak, rehearsals of the last judgment, and successive incarnations of Antichrist are foreshadowings of the last supreme concentration of the rebelliousness of the devil before the End. So for us the fulfillment of these verses is past, present and future, and they are rightly included under the heading 'Signs of the End' or 'Characteristics of the Last Times'. The key to their understanding is the recognition that there is here a double reference. The impending judgement on Jerusalem and the events connected with it are for Jesus as it were a transparent object in the foreground through which he sees the last events before the End, which they indeed foreshadow.

24:16—The Christian Jews did flee from Jerusalem before the Roman army destroyed the city in 70 A.D.

24:23-28—Repeated warnings not to be deceived by false claims concerning Christ's coming. "Signs and omens" wrought by religious figures do not necessarily serve as valid endorsements of their teachings (see also 2 Thess. 2:9). Jesus specifically warns the disciples not to believe those who claim to be able to direct us to the place where Jesus has secretly returned, or where we need to be in order to meet him when he comes—"in the wilderness" or "in the inner rooms." (During the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66-70 A.D., there were rival "messianic" parties who maintained that "the Messiah" either had come already and was waiting for the people to join him in the wilderness or that he would come to the rescue of those who took their stand in the holy precincts of the temple.)

When Christ returns, no one will have to tell you it has happened! It will be as self-evident as the lightning in the sky or the circling of the vultures above the dead or dying animal on the ground. Nothing secret about these, so don't be taken in by those claiming to have secret knowledge concerning the return of Christ. The circling of the vultures would also refer to the Roman legions' symbol of the eagle. When the city was surrounded by the Romans, its position was like that of the carcass below the circling vultures.

Notice that Jesus, in predicting a very specific event that occurred in 70 A.D., carefully and repeatedly warned his disciples not to be influenced by that event into thinking that the second coming was surely at hand. He repeatedly and emphatically said (in effect), "Don't get carried away with the hysteria! Don't jump to conclusions! Don't panic! Don't be deceived by those who exploit the confusion and fear and make false claims for themselves or their 'revelation'! Don't be taken in by false prophets!" If Jesus had not given this warning to the early church, what would they have thought about the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.? They probably would have drawn the erroneous conclusion that the end of the world must surely be upon them! They would likely have done this because the early Christians were people just like people today—we tend to be overcome with confusion when events are so "out of control" that it seems like the world is crashing to an end.

Often throughout history people have been so terrified or perplexed by threatening events that some have concluded that the world was about to end. Trying to understand, to interpret the events of their day, they could see no other possibility. This still happens today. In recent times, events in the Middle East (remember when Iraq fired missiles at Israel during the Gulf War) caused some to speculate out loud that this might be the end or at least the prelude to the end of history. That of course was and still is possible. We need to remember, however, that it is also possible that history will go on for another hundred years or even another thousand years. We do not know the time of Christ's return, and we cannot interpret current events in an infallible way that enables us to predict the time of the second coming. The fact is that historical events as such are always ambiguous—capable of being interpreted in more than one way. For example, the threat or the outbreak of war in the Middle East could mean that the coming of Christ is soon, but it does not necessarily mean that. This is what Jesus was warning about: don't jump to conclusions about the end of the world because of threatening events.

In contrast to the ambiguity of historical events such as wars, famines, and earthquakes, Jesus makes it very clear that his return will be unambiguous. No one will have to tell you that Jesus has returned! That means that it is unnecessary to speculate about how current events are paving the way for the second coming, although it is virtually inevitable that people will continue to engage in such speculation. The speculation is not completely bad, since it does produce one positive result—it makes people think about the second coming, the judgment, and having to answer to God for their lives. Wars and rumors of war, and the other "signs" should make us think about the second coming, realizing that such threats will recur until Jesus does return. The events themselves do not provide a timetable, but they do provide a reminder.

24:29-35—This is the most difficult and debated part of the chapter. Verses 15-28 are clearly about the events of 70 A.D. and serve to warn Jesus' disciples not to be deceived by the false claims which would accompany that crisis. Verses 36 and following seem just as clearly to refer to the second coming and how we can be ready for it. But what about verses 29-35? Do they apply to the events of 70 or to the very end? Could they somehow be applied to both? Three expressions in particular stand at the center of the competing interpretations: “immediately” (vs. 29); “the elect” (vs. 31); and “this generation” (vs. 34).

“Immediately” (vs. 29)

If verses 29-35 are talking about the second coming, is Jesus saying that it will happen “immediately” after the destruction of the temple? If so, he was apparently wrong. Coming back almost 2000 years after that event could hardly be called “immediately.”

Another suggestion is that the temple will be rebuilt (just so that it can be destroyed again?) during the tribulation period, and that Jesus was here discussing its second destruction, which would be just prior to his return. This cannot be ruled out as a possibility, but it seems like special pleading, since nothing in this context seems to point to two future events involving the temple. This interpretation also tends to ignore or minimize the problem of “this generation” (see below).

Some have suggested that “immediately” be translated “suddenly,” giving the following meaning: The age of tribulation (which is very long, but includes the destruction of the temple as typical of the trauma of the entire age) will not end until the sudden appearance of Christ, which will catch the world off guard. This is possible too, but it is not the most natural meaning of the word, which is usually translated “immediately.”

“The elect” (vs. 31)

Dispute about the meaning of this expression arises among those who have different views concerning whether the church will be “raptured” out of the earth before the “Great Tribulation” or will have to go through that trial as we have gone through earlier times of testing and persecution. It is evident that “the elect” are gathered *after* the “desolating sacrilege” (or, “abomination of desolation”) and *after* “the suffering” (“the distress” or “tribulation”; see also vss. 22, 24). Hence, those who take a “pre-tribulation” view have to define the “elect” here as either the Jews (i.e., not the church at all; this is the view of Dispensationalism) or perhaps as people who get converted too late to make the rapture. The most natural meaning, however, is the meaning this word consistently has in the NT: those who have faith in Jesus and are part of the church. Certainly anyone will look in vain in this passage for any indication that the church has been removed before the “desolating sacrilege,” before the tribulation, or before the gathering of the “elect.”

“This generation” (vs. 34)

These two words cause as big a problem as “immediately.” If vss. 29-35 are about the second coming at all, it would not seem possible to read “this generation” in its most usual sense, which would refer to the people alive at the time Jesus spoke the words.

That “generation” would see the destruction of the temple (less than forty years in the future) but not the second coming.

Some have felt free to say that Jesus really thought that "this generation" would see both the destruction of the temple and his glorious return, but that he was simply wrong. Others have suggested that "this generation" could be taken to mean "family" or "race," as in referring to the survival of the Jewish people through the centuries, despite the loss of nationhood. Clearly "generation" can be used in a non-chronological sense, as it is in Psalm 24:6 (NIV), where it means "a kind of people." Closer to the present context, however, "generation" seems to be chronological in Matthew 23:36.

A very popular interpretation among American evangelicals has been that the generation which saw the recovery of Israel’s nationhood (in 1948), would be the generation to see the second coming. The basis for this interpretation has been a rather arbitrary reading of the fig tree parable (vss. 32-33) as a coded reference to the events of 1948 (or perhaps 1967, when the old part of Jerusalem was recaptured by the Israelis). This text and the data of recent history have figured in many popular books and sermons on the subject of the return of Christ, many of them assuming (without bothering to prove) that Jesus was referring to the modern state of Israel when he spoke of the fig tree.

I have searched in vain for any compelling biblical precedent for seeing the fig tree as a symbol of the nation of Israel. Furthermore, in the parallel passage of Luke 21:29, the words “and all the trees” are added. If the fig tree means Israel, what do “all the trees” represent? It seems better to take this illustration in a more straightforward manner, as a reference once again to the self-evident nature of the events he is describing. “When it happens, you’ll know it” seems to be the idea, just as anyone knows that when the plants turn green, summer is on the way. Jesus is saying, in effect, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by the ‘vultures’ of Rome, you won’t have to guess what is going to happen to the city and the temple, and you shouldn’t fall victim to those who will try to mislead you into thinking that some secret return of Christ is happening at a location known only to them.”

Finally, the popular interpretation of the fig tree as Israel does not really solve the problem about “this generation.” If Jesus had been speaking about some distant time when Israel would recover its status as a nation and rebuild the temple, he should have said “that generation.” The fact remains that the temple was destroyed within a generation of Jesus’ prediction. Since that generation died, no other generation has seen or could see “all these things” (vs. 34). The only way out of this problem is to take “generation” in some non-chronological sense (as suggested above) or else regard vss. 29-35 as being about the destruction of Jerusalem and not about the second coming. This is the approach taken by Richard France, and it has a lot to commend it. [Richard T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985]

The approach taken by France (pp. 343-46) does not require any unusual translation or interpretation of “immediately” or “this generation,” but it does offer a rather different

understanding of vss. 29-31 than one usually hears. The shaking of the cosmos, the appearance of “the sign of the Son of Man,” and the gathering of “the elect” are taken by France to refer to the significance of the events of 70 A.D. and following, rather than as descriptions of the second coming. France notes several examples in the OT in which political upheavals on earth are described metaphorically as disturbances in the heavenly realms, apparently as a way of emphasizing the catastrophic effects of the events. He specifically mentions Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10; and Amos 8:9. In each of these texts, the context indicates that the fall of some earthly kingdom or some other temporal event was being predicted (pp. 343-45). In light of this terminology and descriptive language from the OT, France explains Matt. 24:29-31 as “a highly symbolic description of the theological significance of the coming destruction of the temple and its consequences” (pp. 345-46).

The “theological significance” includes the vindication of the authority of Jesus, who was rejected by the religious leaders of the nation and who predicted Jerusalem’s destruction (see Matt. 23:37-38). The vindication of Jesus by the events of 70 A.D. is how France interprets the “apocalyptic” language of vs. 30, against the backdrop of Daniel 7:13-14, which France reads as describing a revelation of Jesus’ enthronement in heaven rather than his return to earth (p. 344). In this connection, see also Matt. 16:28, which, if taken out of context, might seem to be an unfulfilled prophecy that some of Jesus’ disciples would live to see the second coming. In context, however, “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” refers to the revelation of Jesus’ identity and glory in the transfiguration in chapter 17, which “some” of the disciples certainly lived to see, since it was six days later (17:1). Perhaps we should let this passage help us in reading Matt. 24:30 as something other than a reference to the second coming. (Cf. Matt. 26:64.)

Verse 31, with its mention of the gathering of “the elect” by the “angels” would seem to be the most difficult for France’s approach. On his interpretation, this must be either a reference to the human messengers (a possible meaning for the Greek word *angelos*) who evangelize the elect, or possibly a reference to the “supernatural power which lies behind such preaching” (p. 345). This prediction, then, would be that the elect would be gathered into the church rather than taken to heaven.

While France’s interpretation of verse 31 may not seem the most obvious way to read that verse, his arguments should not be dismissed. His explanation of vss. 29-30 is very much in line with the way apocalyptic language was previously used in the OT passages mentioned above. Furthermore, France’s position that vss. 29-35 are about the events of 70 A.D. (with the shift to Christ’s return not coming until vs. 36) has the enormous advantage of explaining in the most natural fashion the meaning of “immediately” (vs. 29) and “this generation” (vs. 34). On the opposing view that vss. 29-35 are about the second coming, “immediately” and “this generation” create more interpretive problems than “angels” and “gather” do for France’s interpretation.

Every interpretation seems to have its problems. Perhaps the best course is to concentrate on the certain teachings of the passage and acknowledge the unclear nature of some parts. France’s interpretation has been given special attention here because it is different from

the one most evangelicals and pentecostals have heard, and also because it is a good—if not perfect—attempt to deal with some of the problems in the passage which are often passed over by traditional interpretations. France may be right, although his interpretation of vs. 31 would seem to be the weak spot in his scheme.

24:36—Whether vss. 29-35 should be applied to the second coming or only to the events of 70 A.D., vs. 36 clearly refers to the unknown time of Jesus' return. The plain meaning of this verse and the cumulative effect of the entire chapter and especially of the following parables would seem to be sufficient to warn against the tendency to try to figure out when Christ is returning. We should all heed the warning—including those of us who say that “this generation” (who have seen Israel restored to nationhood) is “the generation to see the return of the Lord.” The warning applies to us all, not only to those who have foolishly tried to name a date.

24:37-41—Life will be going on as usual when Christ returns. If we want to see “signs of the second coming,” we should look at routine behavior: people eating and drinking (what could be more routine?); getting married (expecting a future); working in the field; grinding at the mill. Ironically, many speculative books and sermons about the second coming concentrate on just those events which Jesus warned us not to equate with his return (wars, famines, earthquakes, etc., vss. 6-8). We Christians have a tendency to become excited about the second coming when momentous events are transpiring—a tendency which is not altogether bad—but we also have reason to remember the second coming when we are doing our laundry or going back to work after coffee break. When the second coming happens, it will interrupt whatever is going on all over the world, and much of it will be routine. This paragraph in the Scripture emphasizes the unexpected nature of the second coming and the radical separation of the end-time judgment (see 13:24-30).

The rest of chapter 24 and chapter 25

Since we do not know when Christ is returning (24:42-44), we need to stay ready all the time (and, of course, being ready for the second coming will keep us ready for death). As will be illustrated by the following parables and exhortations (24:45-25:46), the way to stay ready is not by constantly gazing into the sky to catch the first glimpse of Jesus as he descends. Rather our readiness consists of faithfully obeying his will for our lives, discharging our duties in a manner that will serve well whether Jesus comes back *sooner than we expected* (24:45-51) or *later than we expected* (25:1-13).

Whether our resources seem great or small when compared with those of others, everyone has been given opportunities (25:14-30), and everyone will be called to give account for how the opportunities have been used or wasted. The opportunities which seem to count most at the judgment involve opportunities to help those in need (25:31-46).

Notice that the judgment is presided over by “the king” (25:34), and the verdict involves entry into or exclusion from “the kingdom.” The Kingdom of God has been here in reality but not in fullness since the first coming of Jesus. His second coming will bring

the fullness of the Kingdom and a welcome into the Kingdom for those who have already welcomed it, as shown by their Kingdom lifestyle of Christian love and compassion.

Those who allow a growing fullness of the Kingdom in their lives now are those who are best prepared for the ultimate fullness of the Kingdom when Christ returns. In the meantime, we should take Matthew 24:14 as an “agenda” verse until the second coming, because that accords with the Great Commission, which we know Jesus has given to the church for this age:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [Matt. 28:18-20]

While it is natural enough for us to wonder how and when Jesus will come and bring the ultimate fulfillment of the Kingdom’s blessings, our primary responsibility is to be about the business of fulfilling the task he has given us. If we are faithful to take care of our assignments, we need not be concerned how or when he will take care of the final fulfillment.

For this lesson I have included some material on the following pages that I use on transparencies. You can make your own transparencies for any or all of the following pages, as you find helpful.

Matthew 24 "The Olivet Discourse" *(Mark 13 references in italics)*

--context

- Jesus' prediction (24:2) *(13:2)***
- the disciples' question (24:3) *(13:4)***

the destruction of the Temple
the sign of your coming ("*these things*")
the end of the age

Three aspects of Jesus' answer to his disciples

- 1. warning against being deceived**
24:4, 9, 10, 24 *(13:5-6, 21-22)*
- 2. encouragement to endure difficulties**
24:13, 44, 45 ff. and into ch. 25
(13:9-13)
- 3. faithfulness to an agenda,**
not focus on a timetable
24:14, 36, 42 *(13:10, 32-35)*

Matthew 24 (*Mark 13*)

**up through 24:14--warnings for all times
(13:13)**

**24:15-28--events of 70 A.D.
(13:14-23)**

**24:29-35--events of 70 A.D.?
(13:24-31)**

**--apply to time of second coming?
--apply to both times?**

**24:36 ff.--second coming of Christ
(13:32-37)**

**24:29-35
(13:24-31)**

"immediately" 24:29

"the elect" 24:31 (13:27)

"this generation" 24:34 (13:30)

**Disciples ask, “When?” (Matt. 24:3;
Mk. 13:4)**

Jesus asks, “Who?” (Matt. 24:45)

Which question is more important?

How to be ready?

Faithfulness to assigned responsibilities.

Jesus may come sooner than expected.

Matt. 24:45-51

Jesus may come later than expected.

Matt. 25:1-13

Use the opportunities you have.

Matt. 25:14-30

**Significant opportunities involve
people in need.**

Matt. 25:31-46

Should the Beatitudes be heard as “entrance requirements” or as “results of the arrival”?

Are the Beatitudes given to us so that we may “qualify” for the Kingdom of God?

Are the Beatitudes given to announce who is blessed by the Kingdom’s arrival?

Are they “entrance requirements” for getting into the Kingdom?

Are they results of letting the Kingdom into us?

**The Beatitudes don’t bring the Kingdom.
The Kingdom brings the Beatitudes.**

**Keeping the Beatitudes does not
bring the Kingdom.**

**Welcoming the Kingdom brings the
blessings of the Beatitudes.**

Matthew 3:11-17

**John's mission and baptism:
to prepare people for the Kingdom**

**Jesus' mission and baptism:
to empower people for the Kingdom**

Jesus identifies with those he comes to fill.

Matthew 3:15

2 Cor. 5:21

Exod. 32:31-32

Hosea

Isaiah 6

**Jesus makes our baptism (for repentance)
his to share.**

He makes our needs his to meet.

He makes our debt his to pay.

He makes our death his to bear.

**He makes his life ours to enjoy
and to glorify God.**

**Jesus embodies God's agenda
and our situation
(the Word became flesh).**

**Jesus identifies with us
so that we can identify with him.**

**His identifying with us
fulfills all righteousness because
it's how God makes us righteous.**

**God says, "These are my people"
before we act like it.
He speaks and acts to claim us as his own.**

Matthew 5:17-20

**If 5:20 is true you need 5:17 to be true.
You need Jesus' transforming fulfillment.**

**Who can live by the standards
of God's Kingdom?**

**Only those who are being changed
by the King.
(What Jesus teaches he empowers.)**

**His reign fulfills
the Law and the Prophets.**

When?

**Every time his transforming presence
enables us truly to do the Father's will.
(cf. Rom. 8:1-4)**

**lowering the standards
raising the standards
raising people to the standards
by coming to us where we are**

Matthew 19:3-9

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" 4He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 5and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 7They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" 8He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery."

**What *God* has joined together
let not *man* put asunder.**

let not = cannot?

**Deuteronomy 24:1-4
(Jere. 3:1)**

**God does not pretend
that divorce does not occur.
(God does not pretend that murder does
not occur, but he tells us not to do it.)**

**God is concerned for more than legalities.
God is concerned for the heart.**

**The Law of Moses makes allowances
for hardness of heart
(limiting the effects of evil).**

**The Kingdom of God comes
to change our hearts
(curing the causes of evil).**

What if you don't kill but you hate?

**What if you don't commit adultery
but you have it in your heart?**

**What if you don't divorce (legally)
but you want to?**

**What if you have killed or hated,
can you be forgiven?**

**What if you have committed adultery,
physically or in your heart,
can you be forgiven?**

**What if you are divorced
(and remarried),
what is God's will for you now?**

**What if you have fallen short
of God's will?**

What is God's will for you now?

**If all hearts were free of
anger (Matt. 5:21ff.),
contempt (5:22--"you fool"),
and unlawful lust (5:27ff.),
what would be the role of
divorce laws? (5:31ff.)**

**If hearts were filled with forgiveness
(Matt. 18:23-35),
would they be looking for ways
to divorce? (19:3ff.)**

**Divorces will happen as long as hearts
are hard (resistant to God's will).
Kingdom hearts are not hard but are
open and receptive to God's will.**

So what do we need?

Stricter laws?

Kingdom hearts!

Matthew 24 "The Olivet Discourse"

(Mark 13)

--context

--Jesus' prediction (24:2) *(13:2)*

--the disciples' question (24:3) *(13:4)*

the destruction of the Temple

the sign of your coming (*"these things"*)

the end of the age

Three aspects to Jesus' answer to his disciples

1. warning against being deceived

24:4, 9, 10, 24 *(13:5-6, 21-22)*

2. encouragement to endure difficulties

24:13, 44, 45 ff. and into ch. 25

(13:9-13)

3. faithfulness to an agenda,

not focus on a timetable

24:14, 36, 42 *(13:10, 32-35)*

Matthew 24 (*Mark 13*)

**up through 24:14--warnings for all times
(13:13)**

24:15-28--events of 70 A.D.

(13:14-23)

24:29-35--events of 70 A.D.?

(13:24-31) --apply to time of second coming?

--apply to both times?

24:36 ff.--second coming of Christ

(13:32-37)

24:29-35

(13:24-31)

"immediately" 24:29

"the elect" 24:31 (13:27)

"this generation" 24:34 (13:30)

Disciples ask, “When?” (Matt. 24:3; *Mk. 13:4*)

Jesus asks, “Who?” (Matt. 24:45)

Which question is more important?

How to be ready?

Faithfulness to assigned responsibilities.

Jesus may come sooner than expected.

Matt. 24:45-51

Jesus may come later than expected.

Matt. 25:1-13

Use the opportunities you have.

Matt. 25:14-30

**Significant opportunities involve
people in need.**

Matt. 25:31-46

Lesson 8

God takes care of timetables.

Your job is the agenda he gives you.

Whole series "That It Might Be Fulfilled"

**God is intensely and persistently
interested in fulfillment.**

**His faithfulness to his purposes
is our assurance of ultimate fulfillment.**

God takes care of fulfillment.

Your job is faithfulness.

**If you do your job, you don't have to worry
whether he will do his!**

**The question is not whether God will be
faithful but whether we will be.**

**Your faithfulness will be most encouraged and
strengthened by concentrating your attention
on God's faithfulness. The more you know
and appreciate his faithfulness the stronger
your faithfulness will be.**