THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The King Nobody Expected

Matthew, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Nobody Expected: The Gospel of Matthew, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

There's an old saying: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all."

Funny, right? Also a little rude. But here's the thing. It's at least partly a compliment. People your age are sharp. You can spot a fake from across the room. You can tell when an adult is talking down to you, and you hate being handed easy answers to hard questions. Good. Hold on to that. You're going to need it for this book.

Because this is the story of a lot of people who knew it all, and missed the most important thing that ever happened.

The Gospel of Matthew is full of experts. Scholars who could quote the Scriptures from memory. Religious leaders with the best reputations in the nation. A king with an army. A Roman governor with the power of life and death. They were smart, informed, and confident. And when God showed up in person, most of them didn't recognize Him.

Meanwhile, the people who got it were the ones nobody expected: fishermen, a tax collector, foreigners, a desperate mother, a Roman soldier, kids shouting in the temple. What they had in common wasn't intelligence or background. It was that they knew they needed something they didn't have.

So this book has a small challenge for you, and it's not "turn off your brain." It's the opposite. Bring your brain. Ask hard questions. Check the details. Push back. Just be willing to let Jesus push back

too. The most dangerous thing a smart person can say about Jesus isn't "I don't believe it." It's "I already know all that."

If you grew up in church, you've probably heard most of these stories. Maybe so many times they feel like wallpaper. Try reading them like it's the first time. If you didn't grow up in church, even better. You get to meet Jesus without the reruns.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 28 chapters of Matthew, in order, in 28 short chapters. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world Jesus lived in (Roman occupation, religious parties, Passover, crucifixion), and points out what Matthew wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it. Read the actual chapters of Matthew. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. If you're a parent, grandparent, or youth leader, you already know that this age group can smell a sermon coming a mile away. So I've tried to write the way good youth workers talk: honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for how much these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole Gospel of Matthew, all 28 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

I haven't sanded off the hard edges. Jesus confronts hypocrisy head-on. He calls people to costly discipleship. Herod's massacre, John's execution, Judas' suicide, and the cross are all here, told truthfully but without graphic excess. Teenagers are already facing a hard world; they deserve a Jesus who is big enough for it.

A recurring thread runs through the book: in Matthew, the people who thought they had God figured out often missed Him, and the humble recognized Him. It's aimed at the proud heart in all of us,

not at teenagers in particular, and I've tried hard not to talk down to the reader.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus, the King nobody expected.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

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CHAPTER 1

Don’t Skip the Family Tree

Matthew 1

Most people skip the first seventeen verses of Matthew. It’s a list of names, half of which are hard to pronounce, and it reads like the credits at the end of a movie. But Matthew put it first on purpose. For his original readers, this list was the hook.

Matthew was a Jewish writer, and he was writing mainly for Jewish readers. Those readers had been waiting centuries for the Messiah, the King God had promised. They knew two things about Him: He would be a descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, and He would come from the royal family of King David. So the very first line of the book is a bold claim: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Translation: the King you’ve been waiting for has arrived, and here’s the paperwork.

Matthew even arranges the list into three sets of fourteen generations: Abraham to David, David to the exile in Babylon, and the exile to Jesus. History, he’s saying, hasn’t been random. God has been steering it toward this moment.

Then look at who made the list. In that culture genealogies usually traced fathers, yet Matthew goes out of his way to name four women besides Mary: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, who appears only as “Uriah’s wife”. Rahab and Ruth were foreigners. Tamar’s

story and Bathsheba's story involve some of the messiest scandals in the Old Testament. Matthew could have quietly left them out. He didn't. From page one, he's telling you that Jesus' family tree is full of outsiders and broken stories, and God worked through all of it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why "Christ" Isn't Jesus' Last Name**
>
> "Christ" comes from the Greek word for "anointed one." "Messiah" is the same idea in Hebrew. In Israel, kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. So "Jesus Christ" really means "Jesus the King," and Matthew will spend 28 chapters proving it. That's also why the NIV, the translation quoted in this book, often simply says "the Messiah."

Now the story itself. A young woman named Mary is engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. In their world, engagement was nearly as binding as marriage; breaking it off required a formal divorce. Then Mary turns out to be pregnant, and Joseph knows the baby isn't his.

Think about what Joseph could have done. He had every legal right to make a public example of her. Instead Matthew says he was "faithful to the law," and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so he decided to end the engagement quietly, to protect her from disgrace. Before he can act, an angel appears to him in a dream. The child, the angel says, is from the Holy Spirit. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name matters. "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua (Joshua), which means "the LORD saves." His name is His mission statement.

Then Matthew does something he will do again and again: he stops the story to point back to the Old Testament. This happened, he says, to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah wrote: the virgin will give birth to a son, and He will be called Immanuel, "God with us."

Watch for this pattern. Matthew quotes or alludes to the Hebrew Scriptures dozens of times. He's building a case, like a lawyer presenting evidence, that Jesus is exactly who the prophets said would come.

Joseph wakes up and does what God told him to do, even though it costs him his reputation. People would talk, and he knew it. No speeches, no arguments. Joseph never says a single word in the entire Gospel. He just obeys. It's a quiet start for a King, and that's the point. Nothing about this King is going to look the way people expected.

KEY VERSE

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:21 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Matthew includes outsiders and people with scandalous pasts in Jesus' family tree. What does that suggest about who God is willing to work through?
2. Joseph obeyed God even though it would cost him socially. What is something that obeying God might cost someone your age?
3. Jesus' name means "the LORD saves." Saves from what, according to the angel? Why do you think that is the first thing we're told about His mission?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 1:1-17 out loud, scandalous names and all. Pick one of the four women and look up her story this week.*

CHAPTER 2

Two Kings, One Throne

Matthew 2

Some time after Jesus is born in Bethlehem, a group of visitors shows up in Jerusalem asking an awkward question. Matthew calls them magi, often translated "wise men." They were probably scholars from the East, possibly Persia or Babylon, who studied the stars. They have traveled a long way, and they want to know: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"

Asking that question in Herod's city was like walking into a royal palace and asking where the real king lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Meet Herod the Great**
>
> Herod ruled Judea as a "client king," which means Rome let him wear a crown as long as he kept the region under control. He was a brilliant builder; he massively expanded the temple in Jerusalem. He was also famously paranoid. Ancient historians record that he had one of his wives and several of his own sons executed because he suspected them of plotting against him. A rival "King of the Jews"? Herod was not going to take that well.

Herod is "troubled," Matthew says, "and all Jerusalem with him." He calls in the chief priests and the scribes, the official Bible experts, and asks where the Messiah is supposed to be born. They answer instantly: Bethlehem. They even quote the prophet Micah to prove it.

Notice what just happened. The experts knew the exact answer. They had the address. And not one of them made the six-mile trip to go see. Meanwhile, foreigners who didn't have the Scriptures crossed hundreds of miles to worship. That's a pattern you'll see all through Matthew: the people who knew the most often missed Jesus, and the people nobody expected were the ones who found Him.

Herod secretly meets the magi and asks them to report back once they find the child, "so that I too may go and worship him." He's lying. The magi follow the star to the house where Jesus is, and they are overjoyed. They bow down and worship Him, and give gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was fit for a king. Frankincense was used in worship. Myrrh was used, among other things, in preparing bodies for burial. Whether or not the magi understood it, those gifts tell the whole story in advance.

Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the magi go home another way. Joseph is warned in a dream too: take the child and His mother and run to Egypt. He leaves that same night.

What happens next is one of the darkest scenes in the Bible, and Matthew doesn't soften it. When Herod realizes he's been outsmarted, he orders soldiers to kill every boy in Bethlehem and its surrounding area two years old and younger. Bethlehem was a small town, so the number was probably not huge, but for those families it was devastating. Matthew connects it to Jeremiah's words about Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted.

Why include something so painful? Because Matthew is honest about the world Jesus was born into. It wasn't a peaceful greeting card. It was a world where powerful men crushed anyone who

threatened them. Jesus came into that world, not around it. And from the beginning, the powers of this world wanted Him dead.

After Herod dies, an angel tells Joseph it's safe to go back. Matthew sees another fulfillment here: "Out of Egypt I called my son," from the prophet Hosea. Originally that line was about Israel being rescued from slavery in Egypt. Matthew's point is that Jesus is reliving Israel's story, and this time getting it right. Joseph avoids Judea, where Herod's son Archelaus now rules, and settles the family in an unimpressive northern village called Nazareth.

Two kings. One was in a palace and would do anything to keep his throne. The other was a toddler who had to flee as a refugee. Only one of them is still worshiped today.

KEY VERSE

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Matthew 2:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The chief priests and scribes knew exactly where the Messiah would be born but didn't go. How is it possible to know a lot about God and still not care?
2. Herod saw Jesus as a threat to his power. In what ways can Jesus feel like a threat to the "throne" people want to keep in their own lives?
3. Why do you think Matthew included the painful story of the children of Bethlehem instead of leaving it out?

CHAPTER 3

The Wild Man by the River

Matthew 3

Roughly thirty years pass between chapters 2 and 3. When the story picks back up, the spotlight is on a man named John the Baptist, and John is not subtle.

He lives in the wilderness of Judea. He wears clothes made of camel's hair with a leather belt, and he eats locusts and wild honey. If that outfit sounds strange, Matthew's Jewish readers would have caught the reference immediately: the great prophet Elijah dressed almost exactly the same way. The Old Testament ended with a promise that God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Here comes a man who looks the part.

His message is one sentence long: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." To repent means more than feeling bad. It means to change your mind and turn around, to stop walking one direction and start walking the other way. Matthew says John is the voice Isaiah talked about, calling in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why "Kingdom of Heaven"?**
>
> Mark and Luke usually say "Kingdom of God." Matthew usually says "Kingdom of Heaven." Same idea. Many Jews of Matthew's day avoided saying God's name out of deep reverence, and sometimes used "heaven" in its place.

> Matthew is writing in a way his Jewish audience would recognize. Either way, the "Kingdom" means God's rule, God being King, breaking into the world.

Crowds pour out from Jerusalem and the whole region to hear John. People confess their sins and get baptized in the Jordan River. Baptism here was a public act of humility: you were admitting you needed to be washed clean.

Then some Pharisees and Sadducees show up. These were the religious elite. The Pharisees were known for strict devotion to God's law and the traditions around it. The Sadducees were the wealthy, priestly upper class connected to the temple. They didn't agree with each other on much, but they were the people who were supposed to have God figured out.

John looks at them and calls them a "brood of vipers." Then he says this: "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

That's a stunning thing to say. These men were counting on their family background and religious status. John says God is not impressed by your pedigree. He's looking for fruit, a changed life. Being raised around religion is not the same as knowing God. That's a word worth hearing if you grew up in church and feel like you've heard it all.

John also tells them that someone far greater is coming after him. John says he isn't worthy even to carry His sandals. This coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and He'll separate wheat from chaff.

Then Jesus arrives from Galilee and asks to be baptized. John tries to stop Him: I need to be baptized by You, and You are coming to

me? It's a fair question. Jesus had no sin to repent of. But Jesus says it is fitting "to fulfill all righteousness." He is stepping into the water alongside sinners, identifying with the very people He came to save. From the start, He puts Himself where we are.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open. The Spirit of God descends like a dove and rests on Him. And a voice from heaven speaks. In one scene, you have the Father speaking, the Son being baptized, and the Spirit descending. Christians later used the word "Trinity" to describe this: one God in three persons. Matthew doesn't explain it here. He just shows it.

Notice what the Father says. Jesus hasn't preached a sermon or performed a single miracle yet. And the Father's verdict is already in.

KEY VERSE

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Matthew 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. John told religious leaders that their background and family wouldn't save them. What "background" might people today rely on instead of actually following God?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose to be baptized when He had no sin to confess?
3. The Father says He's pleased with Jesus before Jesus has done any public ministry. What does that tell you about where identity comes from?

TRY THIS *Write down one area of your life where "turning around" would actually look like something specific this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Forty Days, Three Offers

Matthew 4:1–11

Right after the heavens open and the Father calls Jesus His beloved Son, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil." Not exactly the celebration you'd expect after a moment like that. But Matthew wants you to see something: being loved by God doesn't mean you'll never be tested. Sometimes it means you're about to be.

Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. If you know your Old Testament, forty should ring a bell. Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years after leaving Egypt, and they failed test after test. They complained about food. They put God to the test. They worshiped a golden calf. Now Jesus, God's Son, enters the wilderness to face the same kinds of tests Israel failed.

And at the end of those forty days, Matthew says, with classic understatement, "he was hungry."

Test one: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Notice the "if." The devil is poking at the identity the Father just announced. Prove it. Use Your power for Yourself. Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus

is starving, and He still won't take a shortcut around His Father's will.

Test two: the devil takes Him to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and says, go ahead, jump. Then the devil quotes Scripture himself, Psalm 91, about angels catching you so you won't strike your foot against a stone. That should get your attention. The devil knows the Bible. He can quote it accurately and twist its meaning completely. Knowing verses is not the same as knowing God. Jesus answers with Scripture used correctly: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Trusting God is different from trying to force His hand.

Test three: the devil shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "All this I will give you," he says, "if you will bow down and worship me." This is the big one. Jesus came to be King. Here's a way to get the crown without the cross. No suffering, no rejection, no nails. Just one small act of bowing to the wrong master.

Jesus refuses: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" And the devil leaves. Angels come and take care of Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Jesus Kept Quoting Deuteronomy**
>
> All three of Jesus' answers come from Deuteronomy 6 and 8, part of Moses' instructions to Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. These were passages about the very wilderness tests Israel failed. Jesus isn't just pulling random verses. He's showing that where Israel fell, He stands. Matthew's Jewish readers would have caught it.

Look at the shape of these temptations. Satisfy yourself. Prove yourself. Promote yourself. They're not ancient problems; they're the same three pressures you see on any feed today. Get what you

want right now. Make people see that you're special. Gain the world on terms that cost you your soul.

There are a few honest takeaways here. First, temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted, and He never sinned. Feeling the pull is not the same as giving in. Second, Jesus fought back with Scripture He actually knew, understood, and believed. He didn't win by trying harder in the moment. He won because His mind was already full of God's words. Third, the devil's offers always sound reasonable. They usually come right when you're tired and hungry, and they always include a small "if."

And finally: Jesus passed the test we keep failing. That matters more than we can see yet. Matthew is setting up something huge. The King doesn't just give us an example; He stands in our place.

KEY VERSE

It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Matthew 4:4 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The devil quoted Scripture but twisted it. How can people today use the Bible to justify what they already wanted to do?
2. Which of the three temptations (satisfy yourself, prove yourself, promote yourself) feels most relevant to your generation? Why?
3. Jesus fought temptation with Scripture He already knew. If you were tempted tomorrow, what truth from God would you actually have ready?

TRY THIS *Pick one verse that speaks to a temptation you face and memorize it this week, word for word.*

CHAPTER 5

Fishermen, Not Scholars

Matthew 4:12–25

After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus moves to Capernaum, a fishing town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew, of course, connects this to prophecy: Isaiah had said that the people of Galilee, the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, who sat in darkness, would see a great light.

That might not sound dramatic, but it was. Galilee was the north, far from Jerusalem and the temple, and many people in Jerusalem looked down on it. Jesus could have launched His ministry in the capital, among the influencers of His day. Instead He started in the place the important people overlooked.

His message picks up right where John's left off: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Galilee Under Rome**
>
> By Jesus' time, the land of Israel was under Roman control. After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split among his sons; Herod Antipas ruled Galilee, and Judea was eventually governed directly by Roman officials. Taxes were heavy. Roman soldiers were a common sight. Many Jews hoped the Messiah would be a military leader who would drive Rome out. Keep that in mind; it explains a lot of confusion later in the story.

Then comes one of the most famous calls in history. Walking along the shore, Jesus sees two brothers, Simon (who will be called Peter) and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. They're professional fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus says, "and I will send you out to fish for people." And Matthew says that "at once they left their nets and followed him." A little farther along, He sees two more brothers, James and John, in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their nets. He calls them too, and they immediately leave the boat and their father and follow.

To feel the weight of this, it helps to know how teachers usually worked back then. A Jewish rabbi didn't usually go recruiting. Students applied. The brightest young men studied for years and tried to attach themselves to a famous teacher. These four were not that. They were working guys with fish on their hands. Jesus skipped the honors students and went to the docks.

That's not because education is bad. It's because the Kingdom doesn't start with your résumé. Jesus didn't ask them what they knew. He told them what He would do with them. "I will send you out" is a promise that the real transformation is His work, not theirs.

The call also cost something. Nets were their livelihood. Zebedee was their dad. Following Jesus wasn't added to their schedule; it reorganized their whole life. That's going to be a theme in Matthew. Jesus doesn't ask for an hour a week. He asks for everything, and promises something better than what you give up.

Next, Matthew gives us a summary of Jesus' early ministry. He travels throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and sickness among the people. News spreads all the way to Syria.

People bring everyone who is sick: those in severe pain, those oppressed by demons, people with seizures, people who are paralyzed. And He heals them.

Huge crowds start following Him from Galilee, from the Decapolis (a cluster of Greek-speaking cities), from Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. The fishermen who dropped their nets now find themselves at the center of the biggest movement in the region.

Here is a question to sit with: Why would four grown men walk away from their jobs for someone they'd just met? Matthew doesn't give us their inner thoughts. Maybe they had heard Jesus before; other Gospels suggest some of them had. Either way, Matthew's point is clear. When Jesus calls, the right response is not to negotiate. It's to follow.

It's also worth noticing who Jesus didn't call first: the scribes, the priests, the people with the best reputation for knowing God. Not because He didn't care about them, but because the ones who already think they're qualified usually don't feel any need to follow anyone.

KEY VERSE

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Matthew 4:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus didn't call the most educated or impressive people first. Why might that be good news for you?
2. Peter, Andrew, James, and John left their nets "immediately." What "nets" make it hard for people today to follow Jesus fully?
3. Jesus said, "I will send you out to fish for people." How does it change things to know that following Jesus is about what He does in you, not just what you do for Him?

CHAPTER 6

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Matthew 5:1–16

Matthew 5–7 is called the Sermon on the Mount, and it may be the most famous speech ever given. Even people who don't follow Jesus quote it. Jesus goes up on a mountain, sits down (the normal posture for a Jewish teacher), and begins to teach. If you know the Old Testament, the picture is deliberate: Moses went up a mountain to receive God's law. Now Jesus goes up a mountain and teaches with His own authority.

He starts with a series of statements we call the Beatitudes, from the Latin word for "blessed." And right away, He flips everything.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the gentle. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Read that list again and compare it to the list the world would write. Blessed are the confident. Blessed are the popular. Blessed are the people who never let anyone see them sweat. Blessed are the ones who win the argument. Jesus' list sounds almost backwards.

"Poor in spirit" doesn't mean having low self-esteem. It means knowing you are spiritually bankrupt on your own; you have

nothing to bring to God that earns His approval. That's the doorway into the whole Kingdom. And notice it's the first one. The Kingdom of Heaven doesn't start with people who have it all together. It starts with people who know they don't.

That's a hard sell for anyone who thinks they have life figured out. It always has been. The people in Jesus' day who were most sure of their own righteousness were the ones who struggled most to receive Him. The ones who knew they were empty got filled.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What "Blessed" Really Means**
>
> The Greek word is makarios. It doesn't mean "lucky" or "happy" in a shallow sense. It describes someone who is in a good place before God, whose life is ultimately well, even if their circumstances don't look like it yet. Each Beatitude includes a promise: they will be comforted, they will be filled, they will see God. The blessing is real, even when it isn't visible yet.

"Those who mourn" includes people grieving loss, but it also points to people who are honestly broken over sin and the brokenness of the world. "The meek" (sometimes translated "the gentle") are not weak. Meekness is strength under control: someone who could retaliate but doesn't. Jesus says those are the people who will inherit the earth. Not the loudest. Not the most aggressive.

The last Beatitude is the most surprising: blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. Jesus is not promising His followers an easy life. He is promising that if they suffer for Him, they're in good company: the prophets were treated the same way.

Then Jesus turns to identity. "You are the salt of the earth." In the ancient world, salt was precious. It preserved food from rotting and gave it flavor. Jesus' followers are meant to slow down decay and

bring something good to the world around them. But salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing.

"You are the light of the world." A city on a hill can't be hidden, and nobody lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. Light exists to be seen. Then He adds the reason: let your light shine so people see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Not so they'll be impressed with you. So they'll be pointed to God.

Notice what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say "try to become salt" or "work hard to become light." He says you are. Identity comes first; behavior follows. Jesus is describing what His people are, and then calling them to live like it.

KEY VERSE

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

Matthew 5:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which Beatitude seems most "upside down" compared to what our culture celebrates? Why?
2. Why might being "poor in spirit" be the starting point for everything else in the Kingdom?
3. Jesus says His followers are salt and light. What would it look like for your group of friends or your school to actually notice the difference?

TRY THIS *Rewrite the Beatitudes the way the world would write them. Then compare the two lists side by side.*

CHAPTER 7

Higher Than the Rules

Matthew 5:17–48

If you were listening to Jesus for the first time, you might start to wonder whether He was throwing out the Bible. So He addresses it directly: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Then He says something that would have shocked the crowd: unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees were the most careful rule-keepers anyone knew. If they weren't good enough, who was? Jesus is about to show that God's standard goes far deeper than the rules. It goes all the way to the heart.

He does this with six statements that follow a pattern: "You have heard that it was said… But I tell you…" That second part is astonishing. Rabbis usually quoted other rabbis. Jesus quotes no one. He speaks as if He has the authority to say what God's law really means. Because He does.

Anger. You've heard "You shall not murder." But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be in danger of judgment. Calling someone "Raca" (an Aramaic insult meaning something like "empty-head") or "You fool!" puts you in danger too. Jesus traces murder back to its root: contempt. Most people have

never killed anyone. Almost everyone has looked down on someone and written them off. Jesus says that's the same disease at an earlier stage. He even says that if you're about to worship and remember someone has something against you, leave your offering, go make it right, and then come back. Reconciliation is more urgent than religious activity.

Lust. You've heard "You shall not commit adultery." But I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart. In a world where explicit content is a click away, that may be one of the most countercultural sentences in the Bible. Jesus then says that if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it's better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. He is using hyperbole, deliberate exaggeration, not prescribing self-harm. His point is that sin is serious enough to take drastic action against. Delete the app. Change the habit. Walk away from the situation. Whatever it takes.

Marriage. Some teachers of the day allowed a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason. Jesus pushes back hard, treating marriage as a covenant that is not to be tossed aside casually. He'll come back to this in chapter 19.

Promises. People in Jesus' day had elaborate systems for oaths: swearing by heaven, by Jerusalem, by your own head, with loopholes for which oaths "counted." Jesus cuts through it: let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. Be the kind of person whose word doesn't need backup.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Second Mile**
>
> Under Roman occupation, a soldier could legally force a civilian to carry his gear for one mile. Imagine a Roman soldier ordering you to drop what you're doing and haul his pack. Jesus says: go with him two. It was a startling way to

> respond to the occupying enemy, refusing both hatred and helplessness by choosing to give more than was demanded.

Revenge. “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” was originally a law meant to keep courts from punishing too harshly. People had turned it into a personal license for payback. Jesus says don’t retaliate against an evildoer. If someone slaps your right cheek (in that culture, often a backhanded insult), turn the other also. If someone forces you to go a mile, go two.

Enemies. You’ve heard “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” The Old Testament never actually commands hating your enemy, but some people had concluded it was allowed. Jesus says love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. God sends sun and rain on good and evil people alike. Anyone can love people who love them back. Even tax collectors do that.

He ends with a line that should stop every know-it-all cold: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Not “pretty good.” Perfect. If you read this section honestly, it’s not a self-improvement plan. It’s a mirror. Nobody measures up, not the Pharisees, not you, not me. Which is exactly the point. We are going to need more than better rule-keeping. We are going to need a Savior.

KEY VERSE

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Matthew 5:44 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus traces murder back to anger and adultery back to lust. Why does He focus on the heart instead of just behavior?
2. Which of Jesus' "But I tell you" statements is hardest for you personally? Be honest.
3. If nobody can be "perfect" like the Father, why would Jesus say it? What does that reveal about our need for Him?

TRY THIS *Pray by name for someone who has treated you badly, every day this week. Ask God to bless them.*

CHAPTER 8

Performing for an Audience

Matthew 6

The English word “hypocrite” comes from a Greek word for a stage actor, someone who performed behind a mask. In Matthew 6, Jesus takes aim at religious people who treat their faith like a performance.

He starts with a warning: be careful not to do your good deeds in front of people in order to be seen by them. If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Then He gives three examples, the three big religious practices of His day: giving, praying, and fasting.

Giving. When you give to the needy, don’t “announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do”. Whether or not anyone literally blew a horn, the image is clear: they wanted everyone to notice. Jesus says those people “have received their reward.” They wanted applause, and they got it. That’s all they’ll get. Instead, give so quietly that your left hand doesn’t know what your right hand is doing.

If Jesus were teaching today, He might ask how many good deeds would still happen if nobody could post about them.

Prayer. The hypocrites love to pray standing in the synagogues and on street corners so people can see them. Jesus says to go into your

room, shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret. He also warns against babbling on and on, as if God is impressed by word count. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Then He gives His followers a model, what we call the Lord's Prayer. It begins with God, not us: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Only then does it move to our needs: daily bread, forgiveness, protection from temptation and the evil one. Notice the word "daily." Jesus teaches us to depend on God one day at a time, not to stockpile.

Right after the prayer, Jesus emphasizes one line: if you forgive others, your Father will forgive you; if you don't forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you. Forgiveness isn't a bonus feature. A heart that refuses to forgive is a heart that hasn't understood how much it has been forgiven.

Fasting. When you fast, don't put on a gloomy face to let everyone know how spiritual you are. Wash your face and look normal. God sees what's done in secret.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Pharisees: Not Cartoon Villains**
>
> It's easy to picture the Pharisees as mustache-twirling bad guys. They weren't. They were serious, disciplined, devoted people who memorized Scripture and tried hard to obey God in everyday life. Many ordinary Jews admired them. That's what makes Jesus' warnings so sobering: hypocrisy usually doesn't feel like hypocrisy from the inside. It feels like being a good person. Anyone who takes religion seriously, including church kids, is at risk of the same thing.

Then Jesus turns to money. Don't store up treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Store up treasures in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there your heart

will be also." Your spending, your attention, and your time are a map of what you actually love.

He says something even more pointed: "No one can serve two masters… You cannot serve both God and money." The word behind "money" is the Aramaic mammon, wealth or possessions. Jesus talks about money as if it's a rival god competing for your loyalty, because it is.

And then He addresses something every generation deals with: worry. Don't worry about what you'll eat, drink, or wear. Look at the birds; they don't plant or harvest, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they are? Look at the wildflowers; even King Solomon in all his glory wasn't dressed like one of these. Then comes an honest question: Can any of you add one moment to your life by worrying?

Jesus isn't saying planning is wrong or that real problems aren't real. He's saying that anxiety assumes God isn't paying attention. He is. So He gives a different focus: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." And He ends with a line that is almost funny in its realism: don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

KEY VERSE

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How does social media make it easier to "perform" our faith or our goodness? Is it ever possible to share something good without performing?
2. Jesus says your treasure reveals your heart. If someone looked at how you spend your money, time, and attention, what would they conclude you treasure?
3. What do people your age worry about most? What would "seek first his kingdom" look like in one of those areas?

TRY THIS *Do one genuinely good thing this week that no one will ever find out about. Don't tell anyone. Not even later.*

CHAPTER 9

Specks, Logs, and Sand

Matthew 7

The last chapter of the Sermon on the Mount opens with one of the most quoted and most misused verses in the Bible: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

People often use that line to mean “nobody can ever say anything I do is wrong.” That’s not what Jesus means. A few verses later He tells His followers to watch out for false prophets and to recognize them by their fruit, which takes discernment. What Jesus is targeting is a condemning, self-righteous spirit: the person who loves pointing out everyone else’s faults while ignoring their own.

He makes the point with a picture that’s meant to be ridiculous. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye but ignore the beam (a huge wooden plank) in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you’ll see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s.

Picture someone with a two-by-four sticking out of their face offering to help with your eyelash. That’s how we look when we’re harsh about other people’s sins and relaxed about our own. Notice, though, that Jesus doesn’t say “never help anyone with their speck.” He says deal with yourself first, and then you’ll be able to help with humility.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rabbis and Their Authority**

When Jesus finishes this sermon, Matthew says the crowds were "amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." Teachers of the law usually built their teaching on earlier authorities: "Rabbi so-and-so says..." Jesus kept saying "But I tell you." He didn't cite experts. He spoke like the One the Scriptures were about.

Then Jesus talks about prayer again. Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. If human parents, who are flawed, know how to give good gifts to their kids, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him? God is not reluctant. He's not looking for loopholes to avoid answering you.

Next comes what's often called the Golden Rule: whatever you want people to do to you, do the same to them. Plenty of ancient teachers had a negative version: don't do to others what you don't want done to you. Jesus' version is active. It's not just "don't hurt people." It's "go out of your way to do good."

Then the sermon takes a serious turn. Jesus describes two gates. The gate that leads to destruction is wide and the road is easy, and many go that way. The gate that leads to life is narrow, and few find it. Following Jesus isn't the path of least resistance. It never has been.

He warns about false prophets who come dressed like sheep but inside are hungry wolves. You'll know them by their fruit. A healthy tree produces good fruit; a diseased tree produces bad fruit. Charisma and big claims are not the test. Character is.

And then come some of the most frightening words Jesus ever spoke. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father

who is in heaven." On that day many will say, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, cast out demons, and do many mighty works? And Jesus will say, "I never knew you."

Read that slowly. These people had religious language, religious activity, and maybe even impressive results. What they didn't have was a real relationship with Jesus. They knew about Him. He didn't know them. It's possible to be around church your whole life, know all the answers, and still miss Jesus.

He closes with a story. Two men build houses. One builds on rock, the other on sand. From the street, they probably looked the same. Then the storm hits: rain, floods, wind. The house on the rock stands. The house on the sand collapses, "and it fell with a great crash." The difference wasn't what they heard. Both heard Jesus' words. The difference was that one of them did what Jesus said.

Knowing is not enough. The storm always reveals the foundation.

KEY VERSE

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Matthew 7:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between the judging Jesus condemns and the discernment He expects His followers to have?
2. Jesus warns that some people who said "Lord, Lord" never actually knew Him. What's the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Him?
3. Both builders heard the same words. What's one thing Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that you know but aren't actually doing?

CHAPTER 10

Who Has This Kind of Authority?

Matthew 8–9

The Sermon on the Mount showed Jesus' authority in words. Chapters 8 and 9 show it in action. Matthew stacks story after story, and the question running through all of them is the one the disciples ask in the middle of a storm: "What kind of man is this?"

It starts with a man with leprosy, a skin disease that made people ritually unclean under the law. Lepers had to live separated from everyone else. This man may not have felt human contact in years. He kneels and says, Lord, if You want to, You can make me clean. Jesus reaches out and touches him. Normally touching a leper would make you unclean. With Jesus, it worked the other way. His touch made the leper clean.

Then a Roman centurion, an officer in the occupying army, asks Jesus to heal his servant. He tells Jesus not to bother coming to his house; just say the word, because he understands authority. Jesus is amazed. "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Jesus then says that many will come from east and west to share the feast in the Kingdom, while some who assumed they belonged will be thrown out. A Roman soldier understood who Jesus was better than many religious insiders.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tax Collectors: The Most Hated Job in Town**
> Rome collected taxes through local contractors. Tax collectors often charged extra and pocketed the difference, and they did it with Roman backing. To many Jews, a tax collector was both a thief and a traitor working for the enemy. Pharisees lumped them in with "sinners." Now remember: the man who wrote this Gospel was one of them.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. Two would-be followers make big promises, and Jesus answers with blunt realism: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Following Him isn't a comfortable upgrade.

Then the famous storm. Jesus is asleep in the boat while waves crash over it. The disciples wake Him, terrified. He rebukes them for their little faith, then rebukes the wind and the sea, and there's a great calm. In the Old Testament, only God commands the seas. The disciples are left staring at each other.

On the other side of the lake, two violently demon-possessed men come out of the tombs. The demons recognize Jesus instantly: what do we have to do with You, Son of God? Jesus sends them into a herd of pigs that rushes into the sea. The whole town comes out and asks Jesus to leave. They seem more upset about their pigs than amazed that two men are free.

Back home, friends bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. Jesus looks at him and says, your sins are forgiven. Some teachers of the law say to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" They're right about one thing: only God can forgive sins. So Jesus proves He has that authority by telling the man to get up and walk. And he does.

Then Jesus walks past a tax booth and sees a man named Matthew. "Follow me." Matthew gets up and follows. That evening many tax collectors and sinners come and eat with Jesus. The Pharisees ask,

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Then He quotes the prophet Hosea: God desires mercy, not sacrifice. He came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Here's the sting. Everybody needs the doctor. The question is who's willing to admit they're sick. The Pharisees thought they were healthy. Matthew knew he wasn't.

More stories follow. A local ruler's daughter has died, and Jesus raises her. A woman who has suffered from bleeding for twelve years touches the edge of His cloak, and Jesus says her faith has made her well. Two blind men call Him "Son of David," a royal Messiah title, and He restores their sight. He casts a demon out of a man who couldn't speak. The crowds say nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. The Pharisees have a different explanation: He does it by the prince of demons.

Same miracles. Opposite conclusions. The evidence was right in front of them. It wasn't a lack of information that kept the Pharisees from Jesus. It was their hearts.

Matthew ends the section with Jesus looking at the crowds with compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."

KEY VERSE

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Matthew 9:12–13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Pharisees and the crowds saw the same miracles and reached opposite conclusions. Why doesn't more evidence always lead to more faith?
2. Matthew, a tax collector, wrote this Gospel. How does that change the way you read Jesus' words about calling sinners?
3. The town asked Jesus to leave after He freed two men. Why might people prefer to keep Jesus at a distance even after seeing what He can do?

CHAPTER 11

Sheep Among Wolves

Matthew 10

Up to now, the disciples have mostly watched. In chapter 10, Jesus sends them out. Matthew lists the twelve apostles by name, and it's a strange group. There are fishermen, including Peter, Andrew, James, and John. There's Matthew, labeled "the tax collector." There's Simon "the Zealot," a name usually understood to mean he was associated with fierce Jewish nationalism. And there's Judas Iscariot, "who betrayed him."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **A Tax Collector and a Zealot Walk Into a Room...**
>
> Zealots, broadly speaking, were people zealous for Israel's independence, and some later turned to violent revolt against Rome. Tax collectors worked for Rome. Putting Matthew and Simon the Zealot on the same team would be like putting bitter political enemies in the same group chat and telling them to love each other. Only Jesus could hold a group like that together.

Jesus gives them authority to heal the sick and cast out demons, and sends them first to "the lost sheep of Israel." They're to proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Freely you have received, He says; freely give. No packing extra money or gear. Depend on God and on the hospitality of the people who welcome you.

Then Jesus gives them the most honest recruitment speech ever given. “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.” Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. People will hand you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues. You’ll stand before governors and kings because of Me. Families will turn against each other. You will be hated by everyone because of My name. But whoever endures to the end will be saved.

Most leaders trying to build a movement oversell the benefits and hide the costs. Jesus does the opposite. He tells them up front that following Him could cost them everything. History shows He wasn’t exaggerating. According to early Christian tradition, most of these men would eventually die for their faith.

Why would anyone sign up for that? Jesus gives them reasons not to be afraid. First, if they called the master of the house “Beelzebul,” they’ll do the same to His servants. Being mistreated for Jesus means you’re in His company. Second, the truth will come out. Everything hidden will be revealed. Third, and this is the big one: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” The worst people can do is limited. God’s authority is not.

And then, right after that sobering line, comes one of the most tender things Jesus ever said. Two sparrows sell for a tiny coin, yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father. Even the hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Fear God, and you don’t have to fear anything else. Know that God sees you down to the hair, and you can face a hostile world.

Then the cost gets personal. Jesus says that whoever acknowledges Him before others, He will acknowledge before His Father, and

whoever denies Him before others, He will deny before His Father. He says He didn't come to bring peace but a sword. He doesn't mean violence; He means that following Him will divide people, sometimes even families. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than Jesus isn't worthy of Him. Whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow isn't worthy of Him.

In Roman-occupied Israel, everyone knew what it meant when a man was seen carrying a cross. He was on his way to die. Jesus uses that image long before His own crucifixion. Following Him means dying to your own plans and control.

But then He flips it again: whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it. The life you try to protect at all costs is the one you'll lose. The life you hand over to Jesus is the one you'll actually get to keep.

He ends with a quiet promise. Even someone who gives one of His followers a cup of cold water won't lose their reward. Nothing done for Jesus is wasted.

KEY VERSE

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus put a tax collector and a Zealot on the same team. Who would be the hardest person for you to be "on the same team" with? What would it take?
2. Jesus was brutally honest about the cost of following Him. Why do you think He didn't hide it?
3. Jesus said, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." What does that look like in normal life?

TRY THIS *Look up which countries today are hardest places to be a Christian. Pray for believers there by name this week.*

CHAPTER 12

Hidden from the Experts

Matthew 11–12

John the Baptist is in prison, and he's having doubts. He sends messengers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" This is the same John who baptized Jesus and heard the voice from heaven. If you've ever had doubts, you're in good company.

Jesus doesn't scold him. He tells the messengers to report what they see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news. Those are echoes of Isaiah's prophecies about what would happen when God came to save. Jesus is saying: look at the evidence and connect it to the Scriptures. Then He turns to the crowd and praises John. Among those born of women, no one has risen greater.

Then He calls out the crowd itself. They're like kids in the marketplace complaining that nobody will play their game. John came fasting, and people said he had a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking, and they called Him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Some people will always find a reason to dismiss God's messengers. The problem isn't the messenger; it's that they don't want the message.

He warns towns like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, which saw many of His miracles and still didn't repent. Then He prays something remarkable: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

Here's the thread of the whole book, said out loud. God isn't against intelligence. The "wise and learned" here are people who are wise in their own eyes, who think they've already got God figured out. The "little children" are the humble, the ones willing to receive. Truth about God isn't reserved for the experts. It's given to the teachable.

Then comes one of the most beautiful invitations in Scripture: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. My yoke is easy, My burden is light.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What's a Yoke?**
>
> A yoke was a wooden frame that joined animals together to pull a plow. Rabbis spoke of taking on "the yoke" of the law, the whole system of religious obligations. Many people felt crushed by the rules the religious leaders kept adding. Jesus offers a different yoke: still a real commitment, but one that fits, shared with Someone who carries the weight with you.

Chapter 12 shows exactly what kind of burdens Jesus meant. His disciples are hungry and pick some grain on the Sabbath, the day of rest. The Pharisees object that it's unlawful. Jesus points out that David ate holy bread when he was hungry, and priests work in the temple on the Sabbath. Then He says, "Something greater than the temple is here." And, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Then He heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had been watching to catch Him. Jesus asks:

if your sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull it out? How much more valuable is a person? It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Their response? The Pharisees go out and plot how to destroy Him. Think about that. A man's hand was just healed in front of them, and their reaction was to plan a murder.

Later, when Jesus heals a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute, the Pharisees again claim He is working by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Jesus shows how illogical that is: a kingdom divided against itself can't stand. Why would Satan fight Satan? Then He gives a serious warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which in context means looking straight at the Spirit's work and deliberately calling it evil. Worried that you've committed it? That worry is itself a sign your heart is still soft toward God. These men were hardening themselves against the truth with their eyes wide open.

They then demand a sign. Jesus says the only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah: just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. It's a preview of His death and resurrection. Even pagan Nineveh repented when Jonah preached, He says, and "something greater than Jonah is here."

KEY VERSE

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

Matthew 11:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus didn't rebuke John for doubting; He pointed him to evidence. How should Christians handle honest doubts?
2. What's the difference between being smart and being "wise in your own eyes"? Can a smart person also be humble?
3. The Pharisees saw a miracle and plotted murder. How can religious rules become more important to someone than people?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 11:28-30 every morning this week before you look at your phone.*

CHAPTER 13

Stories with a Hidden Edge

Matthew 13

Jesus was a master storyteller. In Matthew 13, He teaches the crowds using parables, short stories drawn from everyday life like farming, fishing, baking, and business, that carry a deeper meaning about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The disciples ask Him a good question: why do You speak to them in parables? Jesus' answer is surprising. Parables reveal and conceal at the same time. To people who are hungry to understand, the stories open up the truth. To people who have already decided they don't want it, the stories stay closed. Jesus quotes Isaiah: they keep on hearing but never understand, because their hearts have grown dull. A parable is a test of the listener. Will you lean in and ask, or shrug and walk away?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Farming Stories?**
>
> Most of Jesus' listeners were farmers, fishermen, or laborers. Ancient farmers often scattered seed by hand across the field, and some of it inevitably landed on paths, rocky patches, or among weeds. Everyone in the crowd had seen it a hundred times. Jesus took the most ordinary scenes in their lives and made them windows into eternal truth.

The first story is the Parable of the Sower. A farmer scatters seed. Some falls on the path, and birds eat it. Some falls on rocky ground,

sprouts quickly, but dies in the sun because it has no root. Some falls among thorns that choke it. Some falls on good soil and produces a huge crop, thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown.

Jesus explains it. The seed is the message of the Kingdom. The path is someone who hears but doesn't understand, and the evil one snatches it away. The rocky ground is someone who receives the message with joy, but when trouble or persecution comes, they fall away. The thorns are someone in whom "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word." The good soil is someone who hears, understands, and bears fruit.

Notice that the seed is the same in every case. The difference is the soil. Same sermon, same Bible, same youth group, and wildly different results. The question isn't whether you've heard the message. It's what kind of heart it landed in.

Next, the Parable of the Weeds. A farmer sows good seed, but an enemy sneaks in at night and sows weeds. The servants want to pull them out, but the master says no. You might uproot the wheat with them. Wait until the harvest, then sort them out. Jesus explains that at the end of the age, God will separate the righteous from the evildoers. In the meantime, good and evil grow side by side. That's a realistic picture. The Kingdom has come, but not yet in its fullness. God is patient, and judgment will come in His timing, not ours.

Then come a few quick snapshots. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed, among the smallest seeds people planted, that grows into a plant so big birds nest in its branches. It's like yeast that a woman works into a large batch of flour until all of it is leavened. The Kingdom starts small and quiet, and it grows until it fills everything.

Twelve ordinary followers in a corner of the Roman Empire grew into a faith that has spread throughout the world.

Two more parables make the same point from different angles. A man finds treasure hidden in a field, and in his joy he sells everything he has to buy that field. A merchant finds one pearl of great value and sells everything to get it. Notice: neither man is sad about what he gave up. They're thrilled. Following Jesus costs everything, but when you see what He's worth, it doesn't feel like a loss.

A final parable compares the Kingdom to a fishing net that catches everything, good and bad, and gets sorted at the end. Then Jesus asks His disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" They say yes. (Bold claim. They'll prove later that they hadn't quite.)

The chapter ends back in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The people are amazed at His teaching, but then they start asking: isn't this the carpenter's son? Don't we know His mother and brothers? "And they took offense at him." Jesus says, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home." And He did not do many miracles there "because of their lack of faith."

They thought they already knew all about Jesus. That familiarity kept them from seeing Him.

KEY VERSE

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Matthew 13:44 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. In the Parable of the Sower, which type of soil do you think is most common among people your age? Which one describes you honestly right now?
2. The people of Nazareth thought they already knew all about Jesus. How can growing up around Jesus make it harder to really see Him?
3. The man who found the treasure sold everything "in his joy." Why might following Jesus feel more like a loss than a treasure to some people?

CHAPTER 14

Bread in the Desert, Feet on the Water

Matthew 14

Chapter 14 opens with a flashback. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee, hears about Jesus and is terrified. He thinks Jesus is John the Baptist come back from the dead. Why would he think that? Because Herod had John killed.

Here's the backstory. John had publicly told Herod that it wasn't lawful for him to have Herodias, who had been his brother's wife. Herod arrested John, and he wanted to kill him, but he was afraid of the crowds, who considered John a prophet. Then, at Herod's birthday party, Herodias' daughter danced and pleased him so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she asked for John's head on a platter.

Matthew says Herod was sorry, but because of his oath and his dinner guests, he ordered it done. John was beheaded in prison, and his head was brought out on a platter.

Think about why Herod did it. He didn't want to. He did it because he had made a reckless promise in front of important people and was too proud to back down. A man with all the power in Galilee

was controlled by what his guests would think. Peer pressure doesn't stop when you grow up. Sometimes it gets deadlier.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Herod Family Tree**
>
> Herod the Great (Matthew 2) tried to kill baby Jesus. His son Herod Antipas (Matthew 14) killed John the Baptist. Later, in the book of Acts, his grandson Herod Agrippa I executed the apostle James. Different Herods, same pattern: power that felt threatened by God's messengers.

When Jesus hears the news, He withdraws by boat to a remote place by Himself. Even Jesus needed space to grieve. But the crowds follow Him on foot. When He sees them, Matthew says, He had compassion on them and healed their sick. He set aside His own need to meet theirs.

As evening comes, the disciples suggest a practical solution: send the crowds away so they can buy food in the villages. Jesus says, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." The disciples point out the obvious: they have only five loaves and two fish. Jesus says, bring them here to Me.

He has the people sit on the grass, takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples to hand out. Everyone eats and is satisfied, and they pick up twelve baskets of leftovers. Matthew notes that about five thousand men ate, "besides women and children," so the actual number was likely much larger.

Jewish readers would have thought of Moses and the manna God provided in the wilderness. Here was someone feeding God's people in a deserted place again. Notice the method, too. Jesus didn't bypass the disciples. He took what little they had, blessed it, and put

it back in their hands to give away. That's still how He tends to work.

Right after this, Jesus sends the disciples ahead by boat and goes up a mountain alone to pray. During the night, the wind turns against the boat, and the disciples are struggling far from shore. Between three and six in the morning, Jesus comes to them, walking on the sea.

They panic and think He's a ghost. Jesus says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then Peter, being Peter, says: Lord, if it's You, command me to come to You on the water. Jesus says, "Come." And Peter steps out of the boat and actually walks on water toward Jesus.

Then he notices the wind. He gets scared, starts to sink, and cries out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reaches out, grabs him, and says, "You of little faith… why did you doubt?"

Give Peter some credit. He was the only one who got out of the boat. His faith was real and also small, bold and also shaky. He took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the storm. That's when he sank. But even his sinking ended in being rescued. When they climb into the boat, the wind stops, and the disciples worship Jesus: "Truly you are the Son of God."

KEY VERSE

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.
"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

Matthew 14:31 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Herod killed John because he was too proud to back down in front of his guests. Where do you see that kind of pressure in your own life?
2. Jesus took five loaves and two fish, a ridiculously small amount, and fed thousands. What "small" thing could you offer Him?
3. Peter walked on water and then sank. Is he an example of great faith or little faith? Could he be both?

CHAPTER 15

Clean Hands, Dirty Hearts

Matthew 15

A delegation of Pharisees and scribes travels all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to confront Jesus. Their complaint? His disciples don't wash their hands before they eat.

This wasn't about germs. Nobody knew about germs yet. It was about the "tradition of the elders," a large body of religious rules that had grown up around the law of Moses. Ceremonial handwashing was one of those traditions. The Pharisees treated these traditions as nearly equal to Scripture.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The "Fence Around the Law"**
>
> Many Jewish teachers wanted to protect people from accidentally breaking God's commands, so they added extra rules around them, like a fence around a cliff. The motive was often good. The problem was that over time, the fence started to matter more than the cliff, and human rules began to override God's actual commands.

Jesus answers their question with a question: "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" Then He gives an example. God said, "Honor your father and mother." But some people had found a loophole. They could declare their money "devoted to God," and then claim they couldn't use it to support

their aging parents. It sounded super spiritual. It was really a way to dodge responsibility while looking holy.

Jesus doesn't hold back. "You hypocrites!" Then He quotes Isaiah: these people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. They worship Me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were doctrine.

Then He turns to the crowd and makes it simple: it's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; it's what comes out of your mouth. The disciples, a little nervous, tell Jesus the Pharisees were offended. Jesus is not worried. "Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Peter asks Him to explain. Jesus does: food goes into your stomach and passes out of your body. But what comes out of your mouth comes from the heart. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. Those are what make a person unclean, not eating with unwashed hands.

This might be the most important point in the chapter. The problem with people isn't on the outside. You can't fix a heart problem with a handwashing ritual, a dress code, or a list of rules. Rules can shape behavior, but they can't change hearts. Only God can do that.

Then Jesus goes north, into Gentile territory near Tyre and Sidon, and something happens that can be uncomfortable to read. A Canaanite woman comes to Him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel. Notice what she calls Him: "Son of David," the royal Messiah title. She knows who He is.

At first Jesus doesn't answer her. The disciples want her sent away. Jesus says He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. She kneels and says, "Lord, help me." Jesus says it isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

That sounds harsh. But watch the woman. She doesn't storm off. She answers with humble persistence and a quick mind: yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. She isn't demanding a seat at the table. She just knows that even a crumb from Jesus is enough.

Jesus answers, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." Her daughter is healed that very hour.

Jesus seems to have been drawing out her faith and teaching His disciples something in the process. The religious leaders from Jerusalem, who had every advantage, came to criticize Him. A Gentile woman with no religious credentials came begging and walked away with Jesus praising her "great faith." The insiders missed it. The outsider got it.

The chapter ends with Jesus healing crowds by the Sea of Galilee: the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute. Then He feeds another huge crowd, four thousand men besides women and children, with seven loaves and a few small fish. Seven baskets of leftovers. Once again, Jesus has more than enough.

KEY VERSE

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Matthew 15:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Pharisees used religious loopholes to avoid caring for their parents. What are some modern ways people use religion to look good while avoiding what God actually asks?
2. Jesus says evil comes from the heart, not from outside. Do you agree that the main problem with people is internal? What does that mean for how they can be changed?
3. The Canaanite woman had no religious background but showed "great faith." What can we learn from her humility and persistence?

CHAPTER 16

The Question That Changes Everything

Matthew 16

The Pharisees and Sadducees, who usually couldn't stand each other, team up to test Jesus. They demand a sign from heaven. Jesus has just healed crowds and fed thousands. They want more.

Jesus points out the irony. You know how to read the sky: red sky at night means fair weather; red sky in the morning means a storm is coming. "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." They were experts on weather and Scripture, and somehow couldn't recognize the Messiah standing in front of them. The only sign they'll get, He says again, is the sign of Jonah.

Later, Jesus warns His disciples: beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples look at each other and conclude He's upset because they forgot to bring bread. It's almost funny. Jesus has just fed two massive crowds with practically nothing, and they're worried about lunch. He reminds them of the miracles and explains that He means their teaching, which spreads through people like yeast through dough.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caesarea Philippi**

Next Jesus takes His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The area had a famous shrine to the Greek god Pan, and the city had been rebuilt by Herod's son Philip and named in honor of Caesar. Pagan gods. Roman power. In that setting, Jesus asks the most important question in history.

He starts with a survey: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples report the rumors. Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Everybody had an opinion.

Then Jesus gets personal. "But what about you?" He asks. "Who do you say I am?"

It's still the question. Not what your parents think, not what your pastor thinks, not what the internet says. What do you say?

Simon Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus calls him blessed, and points out that "this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." Peter didn't figure it out by being clever. God showed him.

Then Jesus says, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." "Peter" means "rock." Christians have debated the details of this verse for centuries, but everyone agrees on the big picture: Jesus is going to build His church, His people, and death itself won't be able to stop it.

Jesus then tells the disciples not to tell anyone yet that He is the Messiah. Why? Because people had the wrong idea of what the Messiah would do. Most were expecting a political warrior king. And now Jesus reveals what kind of King He actually is.

He begins to explain that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised on the third day.

Peter, fresh off the best answer of his life, decides he knows better. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. "Never, Lord!" he says. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turns around and says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Five verses earlier, Peter received a revelation from the Father. Now he's echoing the devil's temptation from the wilderness: the crown without the cross. Within minutes, Peter goes from inspired to rebuked. Getting one thing right doesn't mean you understand everything. It's a lesson anyone who feels confident should take seriously.

Then Jesus spells out what following Him means for everyone: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Deny yourself means saying no to your own desire to be in charge. Take up your cross means being willing to die for Him. Follow means going where He goes.

Then the logic of the upside-down Kingdom: whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Jesus will find it. "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" You could have everything: followers, money, influence, the dream career. And if you lose your soul, you've made the worst trade imaginable.

KEY VERSE

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who do people at your school say Jesus is? How would you answer His question, "Who do you say I am?"
2. Peter went from giving the right answer to being called "Satan" in a few verses. What does that teach about spiritual pride?
3. Jesus asks, what good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul? What are some ways people "trade their soul" for things that don't last?

CHAPTER 17

The Curtain Pulled Back

Matthew 17

Six days after Peter's confession, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. And there, in front of them, He is transfigured. His face shines like the sun, and His clothes become as white as light.

For a moment, the curtain is pulled back. The disciples had walked with Jesus for months, eating meals with Him, watching Him get tired and hungry. Now they see a glimpse of the glory that had been there all along. This is who Jesus really is.

Then two more figures appear: Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Moses represents the Law; Elijah represents the Prophets. Together they stand for the entire Old Testament. Both of them had encountered God on a mountain. And here they are, talking with Jesus, as if to say: all of it was pointing to Him.

Peter, true to form, feels he has to say something. "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Maybe he wanted to make the moment last. Maybe he didn't know what else to do. But his suggestion puts Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah: three great men, three equal tents.

Matthew says that "while he was still speaking," a bright cloud covers them and a voice comes from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

God the Father interrupts Peter mid-sentence.

It's the same words the Father spoke at Jesus' baptism, with one addition: "Listen to him." Peter, stop talking. This isn't a moment for your plans. Moses and Elijah were great, but Jesus is in a category by Himself.

The disciples fall face down, terrified. Then Jesus comes, touches them, and says, get up, and don't be afraid. When they look up, they see no one except Jesus alone.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Elijah Matters**
>
> The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, promised that God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Jewish people still leave a place for Elijah at the Passover meal. On the way down the mountain, the disciples ask about this. Jesus explains that Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him; they did what they wanted to him. The disciples understand He's talking about John the Baptist.

At the bottom of the mountain, there's a mess waiting. A man kneels before Jesus and begs Him to have mercy on his son, who has seizures and suffers terribly, often falling into fire or water. He brought the boy to the disciples, but they couldn't heal him.

Jesus' response shows real frustration: "You unbelieving and perverse generation… how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Then He rebukes the demon, and the boy is healed instantly.

Afterward, the disciples ask privately, why couldn't we cast it out? Jesus says, because of your little faith. If you have faith as small as a

mustard seed, you could tell a mountain to move, and it would. Nothing would be impossible for you.

Notice the contrast. On the mountain, three disciples saw Jesus in glory. In the valley, the rest of them were failing at a task they'd done before. That's real life. Mountaintop moments are amazing, but most of life is lived in the valley, where faith gets tested. And Jesus' point isn't that you need huge faith. It's that even tiny faith in a huge God is enough.

As they gather in Galilee, Jesus tells them again that He will be betrayed, killed, and raised on the third day. This time Matthew says "the disciples were filled with grief." They're starting to hear the first part. The third-day part doesn't seem to be landing yet.

The chapter ends with an odd story. In Capernaum, collectors of the temple tax ask Peter if his teacher pays it. Jesus explains that, as the Son, He's actually exempt; kings don't tax their own children. But so as not to cause offense, He tells Peter to go fishing. The first fish he catches will have a coin in its mouth, enough to pay the tax for both of them. The Son of God, owner of the temple, pays the temple tax anyway, and provides Peter's too.

KEY VERSE

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!

Matthew 17:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter wanted to put up three shelters, treating Jesus like one great man among others. How do people today put Jesus on the same level as other teachers or leaders?
2. God interrupted Peter with "Listen to him." What gets in the way of you actually listening to Jesus?
3. The mountaintop was glorious, but the valley was full of failure. How do you hold onto faith in the "valley" seasons of life?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes this week in total silence, no phone, no music, and read Matthew 17:1-8. Just listen.*

CHAPTER 18

Who's the Greatest? (Wrong Question)

Matthew 18

The disciples come to Jesus with a question that reveals exactly what they've been talking about: "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

You can imagine the conversation leading up to it. Peter just walked on water. Peter, James, and John got the special mountaintop invite. Somebody had to be number one.

Jesus answers by calling over a little child and standing the child in the middle of them. "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

This isn't about being cute or innocent. In the ancient world, children had almost no status. They couldn't earn, couldn't vote, couldn't argue their case in court. They were dependent. They knew they needed help. Jesus says that's the posture of the Kingdom. The way in isn't by climbing; it's by kneeling.

Then He warns that anyone who causes "one of these little ones" who believe in Him to stumble would be better off thrown into the

sea with a huge millstone tied around his neck. Jesus takes it extremely seriously when people lead others, especially the vulnerable, into sin or away from faith.

He repeats His earlier warning, in dramatic exaggeration: if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, get rid of it. Sin is not something to manage casually. It's something to fight.

Next comes the Parable of the Lost Sheep. If a man has a hundred sheep and one wanders off, won't he leave the ninety-nine and go looking for the one? And when he finds it, he rejoices over it more than the ninety-nine that never wandered. It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Shepherds in the Ancient World**
>
> Shepherds were not glamorous. The work was dirty, dangerous, and lonely. But the Old Testament repeatedly pictures God as the shepherd of His people, and in Ezekiel 34, God condemns Israel's leaders as bad shepherds who don't look for the lost, and promises to search for His sheep Himself. When Jesus describes a shepherd who goes after the one, His Jewish listeners would have recognized God's own promise.

Then Jesus addresses something every friend group and church eventually faces: conflict. If someone sins against you, go and talk to them privately. Don't post about it. Don't vent to everyone else first. Go to the person. If they listen, you've won them back. If not, take one or two others along. If they still refuse, bring it to the church. The goal at every step is restoration, not winning.

Peter, wanting to show he's been paying attention, asks a question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Some rabbis taught that forgiving someone three times was enough. Peter more than doubles it. He probably expected praise.

Jesus says: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Some translations read “seventy times seven.”) He isn’t giving Peter a number to track. He’s saying stop counting.

Then He tells a story to explain why. A king wants to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owes him ten thousand talents. A talent was an enormous amount of money, worth something like fifteen to twenty years of a laborer’s wages. Ten thousand talents was a deliberately absurd number, a debt the servant could never repay in a thousand lifetimes. The servant begs for patience, and the king does something shocking: he cancels the entire debt.

That same servant then goes out, finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, roughly a hundred days’ wages, and starts choking him, demanding payment. The fellow servant begs for patience, using almost the same words. But the forgiven servant has him thrown into prison.

When the king hears about it, he is furious. “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” And he hands the man over to be punished.

Jesus’ point is clear. Every one of us owes God a debt we could never pay. If God has forgiven us that, how can we refuse to forgive others for the much smaller debts they owe us? Forgiveness doesn’t mean pretending something didn’t hurt, and it doesn’t always mean trusting someone right away. But it does mean releasing your right to get even.

KEY VERSE

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jesus used a child to answer the question "Who, then, is the greatest?"
2. Jesus says to go to someone privately when they sin against you. Why is that so rare today? What usually happens instead?
3. In the parable, why is the forgiven servant's behavior so outrageous? Is there anyone you're holding a "debt" against right now?

TRY THIS *If there's someone you need to forgive or have a hard conversation with, take the first step this week, privately and in person if you can.*

CHAPTER 19

The Guy Who Had It All Covered

Matthew 19–20

Some Pharisees try to trap Jesus with a hot-button issue: divorce. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason? Jesus takes them back to the beginning, to Genesis: God made them male and female, and the two become one flesh. "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Moses allowed divorce because of hardened hearts, He says, but it wasn't that way from the beginning. Marriage, in Jesus' view, is not a contract you cancel when it gets inconvenient. It's a covenant.

Then people bring little children to Jesus so He can lay His hands on them and pray. The disciples scold them. Jesus says, let the little children come to Me, and don't stop them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to ones like these. Again: the Kingdom belongs to people who know they're small.

And then, right on cue, a young man arrives who doesn't think he's small at all.

He comes to Jesus with a question: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Notice the framing. What can I do? What's the checklist? Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man asks, which ones? Jesus lists several: don't murder, don't

commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, honor your father and mother, love your neighbor as yourself.

The young man's response is the moment the whole chapter turns on: "All these I have kept... What do I still lack?"

He's young, rich, moral, and confident. He has kept the rules. He has it covered. And yet something in him knows it's not enough, or he wouldn't be asking.

Jesus puts His finger right on it. "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me."

Jesus doesn't ask everyone to sell everything. But He knew exactly what this young man loved most. The man had obeyed the commandments about how to treat other people, but he had never obeyed the first commandment: to have no other gods. His wealth was his god. Jesus wasn't adding one more item to his checklist. He was asking for the one thing the checklist had never touched: his heart.

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

He's one of the very few people in the Gospels who hear Jesus personally say "follow Me" and walk away. Not angry. Just sad. He wanted eternal life, but not more than he wanted his stuff.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Camel and the Needle**
>
> Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. You may hear claims that there was a small gate in Jerusalem called "the Eye of the Needle." There's no solid evidence for that. Jesus was using deliberate, almost comical exaggeration: the largest

> animal in the region and the smallest opening imaginable. The point: it's not just hard. It's impossible, humanly speaking.

The disciples are stunned. In their world, wealth was often seen as a sign of God's blessing. If a rich, law-keeping man can't make it, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looks at them and says, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

That's the key to the whole passage. Nobody, not rich or poor, can earn eternal life with a checklist. Salvation isn't something you achieve. It's something God does.

Peter then reminds Jesus that the disciples have left everything. What will they get? Jesus promises that everyone who has left homes or family or fields for His sake will receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life. "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

He illustrates with a parable. A vineyard owner hires workers at dawn for a denarius, a day's wage. He hires more at nine, noon, three, and even five in the afternoon. At the end of the day, he pays everyone the same. The all-day workers are furious: "you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." The owner answers: I didn't cheat you. "Or are you envious because I am generous?" Grace isn't fair. It's better than fair. And the people who feel most entitled tend to resent it the most.

Jesus then predicts His death for the third time, adding that He'll be handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and raised on the third day. Right after this, the mother of James and John asks Jesus to give her sons the top two seats in His Kingdom. Jesus asks the brothers if they can drink the cup He is

about to drink. “We can,” they answer, with zero idea what they’re signing up for. The other ten are angry, probably because they wanted those seats too.

So Jesus gathers them and explains true greatness. The rulers of the nations lord it over people. “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.” Then He says it all: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

KEY VERSE

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Matthew 19:26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The rich young man had kept the rules but still asked, “What do I still lack?” Why do you think rule-keeping didn’t satisfy him?
2. If Jesus asked you to give up the one thing you love most besides Him, what would it be? Is that a sign of anything?
3. In the vineyard parable, why do the all-day workers feel cheated? When have you felt like God’s grace to someone else was “unfair”?

CHAPTER 20

The King Rides In

Matthew 21

Jesus and His disciples approach Jerusalem as the Passover festival nears. The city is packed with pilgrims. Jesus sends two disciples to a nearby village to bring a donkey and her colt. Matthew explains why: this fulfills the prophet Zechariah, who wrote that Zion's King would come to her "gentle and riding on a donkey."

Kings and generals usually entered cities on war horses. A donkey made a different statement. This King comes in peace. He's royal, but humble.

The crowds spread their cloaks and palm branches on the road, like rolling out a red carpet. They shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" "Hosanna" originally meant "save us, please," a cry from Psalm 118, and became a shout of praise. They're openly welcoming Jesus as the royal Messiah.

The whole city is stirred up, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds answer that it's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Passover in Jerusalem**
>
> Passover celebrated God rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, when the blood of a lamb on the doorposts caused judgment to "pass over" their homes. Every year, large numbers of pilgrims crowded into Jerusalem.

> Roman authorities were on high alert during the festival because a celebration of freedom from a foreign oppressor could easily turn into a revolt. Into that tense atmosphere rides a man being hailed as King.

Then Jesus goes into the temple and does something shocking. He drives out everyone buying and selling there. He overturns the money changers' tables and the seats of the people selling doves. "It is written," He says, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

Pilgrims needed animals for sacrifice and had to exchange their money into temple currency. A huge business had grown up in the temple courts, likely in the outer court where Gentiles could come to pray. The place meant to bring people to God had become a marketplace. Jesus acts with the authority of the owner of the house.

Then the blind and the lame come to Him in the temple, and He heals them. Children are running around shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and teachers of the law are indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they ask. Jesus answers, "Yes… have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?"

That's the thread again. The most educated religious leaders in the nation were scandalized. Kids got it right.

The next morning, Jesus curses a fig tree that has leaves but no fruit, and it withers. It's a living parable: lots of leaves, the appearance of life, but no fruit. That was the temple system. It looked impressive from a distance. Up close, there was no fruit for God.

When Jesus returns to the temple, the chief priests and elders confront Him: by what authority are You doing these things? He answers with a question of His own. Was John's baptism from heaven, or of human origin? They huddle up and realize they're trapped. If they say "from heaven," He'll ask why they didn't believe John. If they say "of human origin," the crowd will turn on them, since everyone believed John was a prophet. So they say, "We don't know."

The religious experts, the people whose whole job was to know, publicly claim ignorance to protect themselves. Jesus says, then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things.

He then tells three stories. In the first, a father tells two sons to work in his vineyard. One says no but later changes his mind and goes. The other says yes but never goes. Which one did his father's will? Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." People who said no to God and then repented are ahead of religious people who said yes and never meant it.

In the second, tenants in a vineyard beat and kill the owner's servants, and finally kill his son, thinking they'll take the inheritance. Jesus quotes Psalm 118: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The leaders rejected Jesus, but God would make Him the cornerstone of everything.

Matthew adds, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them." They understood exactly what He meant. They wanted to arrest Him, but they feared the crowds.

KEY VERSE

Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?

Matthew 21:42 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus rode in on a donkey instead of a war horse. What does that tell you about the kind of King He is?
2. The children praised Jesus while the experts were indignant. Why do you think humble people often recognize truth faster than proud people?
3. In the story of the two sons, which son are you more like? What would it look like to actually go into the vineyard?

CHAPTER 21

Trick Questions

Matthew 22

Jesus' enemies are done arguing in public and losing. Now they try to trap Him with carefully designed questions. Each group sends its best.

First, Jesus tells one more parable, about a king who throws a wedding banquet for his son. The invited guests refuse to come; some even kill his servants. So the king sends his servants out to the streets to invite everyone they can find, good and bad, until the hall is full. The insiders refused the invitation. The outsiders filled the room. It's Matthew's thread in story form.

Then the Pharisees plot to trap Him. They send some of their followers along with Herodians, supporters of Herod's family, who cooperated with Rome. These groups normally didn't get along, but they had a common enemy. They begin with flattery: Teacher, we know You are honest and You don't care what anyone thinks. Then they spring the trap: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Coin Trap**
>
> Paying taxes to Rome was a deeply painful issue. If Jesus said "Yes, pay," He'd look like a Roman collaborator, and the crowds hoping for freedom would turn on Him. If He said "No," the Herodians could report Him to Rome as a rebel. The tax coin, a denarius, carried the image of the emperor and an

> inscription calling him divine. Many devout Jews found the coin itself offensive.

Jesus sees right through it. “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” He asks them to show Him the coin used for the tax. Notice: they have one on them. He asks, whose image and inscription is this? “Caesar’s.” Then He says, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

They’re amazed and walk away. But there’s a deeper layer. The coin had Caesar’s image on it, so give it back to him. But what has God’s image on it? According to Genesis, you do. Humans are made in the image of God. Give Caesar his coin. Give God yourself.

Next, the Sadducees try. Remember, the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. They pose a hypothetical: a woman marries seven brothers in a row, each of whom dies. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? It’s meant to make the resurrection look ridiculous.

Jesus’ answer is one of the most direct put-downs in the Gospels: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.”

These were the priestly aristocracy, the guardians of the temple. And Jesus tells them they don’t know the Bible or God. He explains that in the resurrection, people won’t marry; they will be like the angels. Then He goes to the books the Sadducees themselves accepted, the books of Moses, and quotes God speaking to Moses at the burning bush: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Notice the present tense: not “I was,” but “I am.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive to God. The crowd is astonished.

Then the Pharisees try again. An expert in the law asks: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? The rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Torah, and people debated which ones were weightiest.

Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6, a passage devout Jews prayed daily: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That's the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself," from Leviticus 19. The whole Law and the Prophets hang on these two.

Every rule in Scripture, Jesus says, is ultimately about love: love for God that takes all of you, and love for others that's as real as your concern for yourself. Of course, nobody loves God with all their heart, soul, and mind all the time. Once again, the standard drives us to Jesus.

Then Jesus turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question. "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They answer correctly: "Of David." Then Jesus quotes Psalm 110, where David calls the Messiah "my Lord." If David calls Him Lord, how can He be just his son? The answer, which Matthew has been showing since chapter one, is that the Messiah is more than David's descendant. He is the Son of God.

"No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."

The people who thought they knew it all just got schooled, by someone who knew their own Scriptures better than they did.

KEY VERSE

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Matthew 22:37–39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said give Caesar what's Caesar's and God what's God's. If you are made in God's image, what does it mean to "give yourself" to God?
2. Jesus told the Sadducees they didn't know the Scriptures or the power of God. Is it possible to know a lot about the Bible but not really know it? How?
3. Why do you think Jesus summarized all of God's law as love? What would change in your life this week if you took that seriously?

CHAPTER 22

Seven Woes

Matthew 23

If you've ever thought of Jesus as only soft-spoken and gentle, Matthew 23 will surprise you. This is Jesus at His most confrontational. He speaks to the crowds and His disciples about the scribes and Pharisees, and then directly to the religious leaders themselves. It's not a polite debate. It's a prophet's warning.

He begins in a way you might not expect: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." In other words, they teach the law of Moses, so do what they tell you from it. "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

That's the core problem. They talked a good game. They tied heavy burdens on people's shoulders, piling up rules, but wouldn't lift a finger to help anyone carry them. "Everything they do is done for people to see." They wore extra-wide phylacteries, small boxes containing Scripture verses strapped to the forehead and arm, and made the tassels on their robes extra long. They loved the best seats at banquets and in synagogues, being greeted with respect in public, and being called "Rabbi."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Status Symbols, Then and Now**
>
> Phylacteries and tassels came from real commands in the law; there was nothing wrong with them. The problem was turning them into a way to

> display how holy you were. Every culture has its version. Jesus' warning applies to anything we use to make ourselves look spiritual or important.

Jesus tells His followers not to chase titles and status. You have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Then He turns directly to the religious leaders and pronounces a series of "woes." "Woe" is a prophet's word, like a funeral cry. It means: you're heading for disaster. Each one begins the same way: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

Woe, because you shut the door of the Kingdom in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you block those who are trying to.

Woe, because you travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and then make him twice as fit for hell as you are.

Woe, you blind guides, because you've invented elaborate rules about which oaths count and which don't. Swear by the temple, it means nothing; swear by the gold of the temple, you're bound. Jesus calls it foolishness. You've missed the point that everything belongs to God.

Woe, because you tithe your mint, dill, and cumin (tiny garden herbs, giving God a precise tenth of your spice rack) "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." Then one of Jesus' most vivid images: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Some people strained their drinks through cloth so they wouldn't accidentally swallow an unclean insect. Picture someone carefully filtering out a gnat and then gulping down a camel, hump and all.

Woe, because you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you're full of greed and self-indulgence. Clean the inside first.

Woe, because "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean." Touching a grave made a person ritually unclean, so tombs were often whitewashed to make them easy to spot and avoid, especially when pilgrims crowded into Jerusalem for the festivals. They looked bright and clean. Inside, they were full of death.

Woe, because you build monuments to the prophets and say, if we had lived back then, we never would have killed them. But you're the descendants of those who did, and you're about to finish what they started.

Then come the hardest words: "You snakes! You brood of vipers!" It's the same phrase John the Baptist used back in chapter 3.

Why is Jesus so harsh? Because these were the people responsible for leading others to God, and they were leading them away. Their hypocrisy wasn't just a private flaw; it was blocking the door for everyone else. Jesus is fiercest with religious people who misuse their position, not with the sinners who knew they needed help.

But don't miss how the chapter ends. Jesus' anger turns into grief. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Those aren't the words of someone who enjoys condemning people. They're the words of someone heartbroken that people He loved

refused to come to Him. Behind every woe is an invitation that was turned down.

It's easy to read this chapter and think, "Yeah, those Pharisees were terrible." But that thought, being proud that you're not like the proud people, is exactly how hypocrisy starts. The safer question is: where is this me?

KEY VERSE

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 23:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus says the Pharisees "do not practice what they preach." Where is the gap between what you say you believe and how you actually live?
2. "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." What are some small things Christians sometimes obsess over while ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness?
3. Jesus ends with grief, not just anger. What does that tell you about how He feels toward people who reject Him?

TRY THIS *Ask someone who knows you well: "Where do you see a gap between what I say and what I do?" Then just listen.*

CHAPTER 23

Ready or Not

Matthew 24–25

As Jesus and His disciples leave the temple, the disciples point out how impressive the buildings are. And they were. Herod the Great's renovation of the temple was one of the most spectacular building projects in the ancient world, with massive white stones and gold decorations that gleamed in the sun.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

That would have sounded unthinkable. But in AD 70, about forty years later, after a Jewish revolt against Rome, Roman armies under the general Titus besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. It has never been rebuilt.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Horizons**
>
> Jesus' words in chapters 24 and 25 are known as the Olivet Discourse because He gave them on the Mount of Olives. They weave together two events: the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70, and His own return at the end of history, which is still to come. Bible-believing Christians have discussed exactly how these two fit together for centuries. Jesus' main point isn't to give us a timeline to argue about. It's to make us ready.

The disciples ask: when will this happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age? Jesus' first words are

telling: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Many will come claiming to be the Christ and deceive many. There will be wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes. But don’t panic. These are only the beginning of birth pains.

He warns that His followers will be persecuted and hated by all nations because of His name. Many will fall away and betray one another. False prophets will deceive many. Because lawlessness will increase, the love of many will grow cold. “But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” And “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

He describes a time of great distress, and warns again about false messiahs. If someone says the Christ is out in the wilderness or in a secret room, don’t believe it. When Jesus returns, it won’t be a secret; it will be like lightning flashing from east to west. Everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory.

Then, after all of that detail, He says something every prediction-maker should read twice: “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” So if anyone claims to have the date figured out, Jesus has already told you: they don’t.

It will be like the days of Noah, He says. People were eating, drinking, marrying, living normal lives, until the flood came and swept them all away. Life will feel normal right up until it isn’t. So: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

In chapter 25, Jesus tells three stories about what "being ready" looks like.

The ten virgins. Ten bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom at night. Five bring extra oil for their lamps; five don't. The groom is delayed, and they all fall asleep. At midnight, the shout goes up: he's here! The five without oil rush off to buy more, and while they're gone, the door is shut. When they come back and beg to be let in, the groom says, I don't know you. Readiness can't be borrowed from someone else at the last minute. Nobody can believe for you.

The talents. A man going on a journey entrusts his servants with his money: five talents to one, two to another, one to a third, each according to his ability. The first two invest and double it. The third buries his in the ground. When the master returns, he tells the first two, "Well done, good and faithful servant." The third explains himself: "Master… I knew that you are a hard man… So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground."

Notice his words: "I knew that you are a hard man." He was sure he knew what the master was like, and he was wrong. His false picture of the master led to fear, and fear led to doing nothing. The master calls him wicked and lazy. What God has given you, time, abilities, opportunities, is meant to be used for Him, not buried.

The sheep and the goats. When the Son of Man comes in glory, He will sit on His throne, and all nations will be gathered before Him. He'll separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. To those on His right He says: come, inherit the Kingdom, for I was hungry and you fed Me, thirsty and you gave Me drink, a stranger and you welcomed Me, naked and you clothed Me, sick and you visited Me, in prison and you came to Me.

They're confused: when did we do that? And the King answers: whenever you did it for one of the least of these My brothers, you did it for Me. Those on His left, who ignored people in need, are just as surprised to learn they ignored Jesus Himself.

This isn't salvation by good deeds; the whole Gospel has made clear that's impossible. It's a picture of what real faith looks like. People who truly belong to the King start to love like the King, often without even noticing they're doing it.

KEY VERSE

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Matthew 25:40 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour of His return. Why do you think people keep trying to predict it anyway?
2. The servant with one talent said, "I knew that you are a hard man," but he had the master all wrong. How can a wrong picture of God keep people from serving Him?
3. Who are "the least of these" in your school or community? What would it look like to treat them as if they were Jesus?

TRY THIS *This week, do something concrete for someone who can't pay you back: a lonely classmate, a homeless shelter, a sick neighbor.*

CHAPTER 24

The Last Supper

Matthew 26:1–35

Jesus tells His disciples plainly: in two days it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. Meanwhile, the chief priests and elders meet in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. They plot to arrest Jesus secretly and kill Him, but "not during the festival," they agree, or the people might riot.

In the nearby village of Bethany, Jesus is at dinner when a woman comes to Him with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment and pours it over His head. The disciples are indignant. "Why this waste?" That could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor.

Jesus defends her. She has done a beautiful thing for Me, He says. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have Me. In pouring this on My body, she has prepared Me for burial. And He adds that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she did will be told in memory of her.

The disciples saw waste. Jesus saw worship. She seems to have grasped what they still couldn't: He was about to die.

Right after this, Matthew tells us, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, goes to the chief priests and asks, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" They pay him thirty pieces of silver. In

the law of Moses, thirty shekels of silver was the compensation for a slave who was killed, and the prophet Zechariah describes a shepherd being valued at the same insulting price. From then on, Judas looks for an opportunity to betray Him.

Matthew doesn't give us a full explanation of Judas' motives. Some have suggested disappointment that Jesus wasn't the political Messiah he wanted; Matthew mostly lets the facts speak. What's chilling is that Judas had been there for everything. He'd heard the Sermon on the Mount, seen the miracles, been sent out with the others. Being close to Jesus is not the same as belonging to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Was Passover?**
>
> Passover remembered the night God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. God told each family to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts. That night, judgment fell on Egypt, but it "passed over" every house marked by the blood. Each year, Jewish families ate a meal with lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and cups of wine, retelling the story. Jesus chose this meal, of all meals, to explain His death.

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples prepare the Passover meal. That evening, as they eat, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples are deeply upset. One by one, they ask, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Then Judas asks, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answers, "You have said so."

Notice the difference. The others call Him "Lord." Judas calls Him "Rabbi," teacher. A small word, but a revealing one.

Then, during the meal, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples: "Take and eat; this is my body." Then He takes the cup, gives thanks, and says, "Drink from it, all of you.

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

For centuries, the Passover lamb had pointed back to rescue from Egypt. Now Jesus says the meal is about Him. He is the Lamb. His blood would mark people for rescue, not from Pharaoh, but from sin and judgment. The prophet Jeremiah had promised a "new covenant" in which God would write His law on people's hearts and forgive their sins. Jesus says: it's happening, and it will be sealed with My blood. Christians still share this meal, called Communion or the Lord's Supper, because He told them to.

After singing a hymn, they go out to the Mount of Olives. On the way, Jesus quotes Zechariah: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." He tells them all of them will fall away that night.

And here comes Peter. "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

Read that slowly. Peter isn't just saying he'll be faithful. He's saying he's more faithful than everyone else in the room. Even if they all fail, not me.

Jesus tells him: tonight, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.

Peter doubles down. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And Matthew adds a detail that's easy to miss: "And all the other disciples said the same."

Every one of them was certain. Every one of them was sincere. And every one of them was wrong. Confidence in yourself is not the same as faithfulness. Sometimes the people who are most sure they'll never fall are the ones standing closest to the edge.

KEY VERSE

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The disciples called the woman's gift a "waste." What might people today consider "wasted" on Jesus? Why did Jesus see it so differently?
2. Judas was with Jesus for years but still betrayed Him. What does that say about the difference between being around Jesus and truly following Him?
3. Peter said, "Even if all... I will never." What's the danger in being overconfident about your own faithfulness?

CHAPTER 25

The Garden, the Kiss, and the Rooster

Matthew 26:36–75

Jesus brings His disciples to an olive grove called Gethsemane. The name likely means "oil press," a place where olives were crushed. He tells most of them to sit while He goes ahead to pray, and takes Peter, James, and John further with Him.

Then Matthew lets us see something staggering. Jesus "began to be sorrowful and troubled." He tells His three closest friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

This is the same Jesus who calmed storms and raised the dead. Now He's overwhelmed with grief, and He asks His friends to stay close. Jesus was fully God, but He was also fully human. He felt dread. He wanted company.

He goes a little further, falls on His face, and prays: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was "the Cup"?**
>
> In the Old Testament, the "cup" often stood for God's judgment against sin, the cup of His wrath. Jesus wasn't just dreading physical pain, although

> crucifixion was horrific. He was facing the weight of the world's sin and the judgment it deserved. That is what made Gethsemane so agonizing.

He comes back and finds the disciples asleep. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" Then the line that applies to every one of us: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Peter had just sworn he'd die for Jesus. He couldn't stay awake for Him.

Jesus prays a second time, and you can hear His acceptance growing: "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Again He finds them sleeping. He prays a third time, saying the same words. Then He wakes them: the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Here comes My betrayer.

While He's still speaking, Judas arrives with a large crowd carrying swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and elders. Judas had arranged a signal: the one I kiss is the man. He walks up to Jesus, says, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kisses Him. A kiss was a normal greeting between a student and his teacher, a sign of respect and affection. Judas turned it into a weapon.

Jesus' response is almost unbearable: "Do what you came for, friend." Even now, He calls him friend.

They seize Jesus. One of the men with Jesus draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus tells him to put it away: "For all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Don't you think I could ask My Father, and He'd send more than twelve legions of angels? (A Roman legion was several thousand soldiers.) But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled?

Jesus isn't arrested because He's powerless. He's arrested because He's choosing to go.

Then Matthew writes one of the saddest sentences in the Bible: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."

All of them. The ones who said "We can." The ones who said they would die with Him.

Jesus is taken to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and elders have gathered. It was a nighttime hearing, which many historians consider highly irregular for a capital case. They look for false testimony to justify putting Him to death, but even with many false witnesses, they can't make anything stick. Finally two witnesses twist something Jesus had said about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days.

Jesus stays silent. Finally the high priest says, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

Jesus replies, "You have said so… But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." He's combining Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, two passages about a divine King who rules at God's right hand. There's no mistaking the claim. The high priest tears his robes and declares it blasphemy. The council answers: "He is worthy of death!" Then they spit in His face, hit Him with their fists, and slap Him, mocking, "Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

Meanwhile, Peter has followed at a distance and is sitting in the high priest's courtyard with the guards, waiting to see how it ends. A servant girl says, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." Peter denies

it in front of everyone: "I don't know what you're talking about." He moves to the gateway. Another girl says he was with Jesus of Nazareth. This time he denies it with an oath: "I don't know the man." A little later, bystanders press him: you're one of them; your accent gives you away. Peter's Galilean accent was a dead giveaway in Jerusalem. He begins to curse and swear: "I don't know the man!"

Immediately the rooster crows.

Peter remembers what Jesus said. "And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Before you judge Peter, remember: he was the only one who followed Jesus as far as the courtyard. The others had already run. Peter's failure is a mirror for anyone who has ever been sure they'd never fail. But this is not the end of Peter's story. Not even close.

KEY VERSE

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

Matthew 26:39 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus prayed, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Have you ever had to pray that? What made it hard?
2. Peter promised to die for Jesus and then denied knowing Him to a servant girl. Why do you think it was so easy to deny Jesus in that moment?
3. Jesus said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." What practical things help you stay strong when it actually matters?

CHAPTER 26

The Innocent One Condemned

Matthew 27:1–31

Early in the morning, the chief priests and elders formally decide to put Jesus to death. They tie Him up and hand Him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Pilate?**
>
> Under Roman rule, the Jewish council could handle religious matters, but it generally did not have authority to carry out executions; that power belonged to the Roman governor. So the religious leaders needed Pilate. Pilate governed Judea from about AD 26 to 36. Ancient sources describe him as harsh and willing to use violence against crowds. He wasn't a gentle judge who got pushed around. But he was a politician who didn't want trouble.

Meanwhile, Judas sees that Jesus has been condemned, and he "was seized with remorse." He brings the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders: "I have sinned… for I have betrayed innocent blood." Their answer is ice cold: "What is that to us?… That's your responsibility."

That's what the people who used Judas thought of him once he wasn't useful anymore. Judas throws the silver into the temple and goes out and hangs himself.

The chief priests pick up the money and, with careful religious precision, decide they can't put it in the temple treasury because it's

"blood money." Notice the irony: they're scrupulous about where to deposit blood money, but not about having paid it. They use it to buy a potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. Matthew connects this to the prophets, as he has done all along.

Here it's worth comparing Judas and Peter. Both failed Jesus terribly on the same night. Both felt deep regret. But Judas took his regret to the priests, and then to despair. Peter, as we'll see, would be restored to Jesus. The difference wasn't the size of their sin. It was where they went with it. If you've done something you think is unforgivable, the story of Judas is not God's verdict on you. Run to Jesus, not away from Him.

Jesus stands before Pilate. Pilate asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "You have said so." When the chief priests and elders accuse Him, He says nothing. Pilate is amazed at His silence. Isaiah had written about the Suffering Servant who would be like a lamb before its shearers, silent, not opening His mouth.

At the festival, the governor had a custom of releasing one prisoner the crowd chose. There was a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. Pilate asks the crowd: "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Matthew says Pilate knew that the leaders had handed Jesus over out of envy.

While Pilate is on the judgment seat, his wife sends him a message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

But the chief priests and elders persuade the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus destroyed. Pilate asks again, which one? "Barabbas!" Then Pilate asks the question every person eventually

has to answer: “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” They all shout, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?” Pilate asks. They shout louder. “Crucify him!”

Pilate sees that a riot is starting. So he takes water and washes his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood… It is your responsibility!” The people answer, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

That verse deserves an honest word. Tragically, over the centuries, some people who called themselves Christians used it as an excuse to hate and persecute Jewish people. That is a terrible evil and a complete betrayal of Jesus, who was Himself Jewish, as were Matthew and all the apostles. The New Testament teaches that Jesus died because of the sins of all humanity. Pilate was a Roman. The soldiers were Gentiles. The leaders who pushed for it were Jewish. Every kind of person was represented. In a real sense, all of us put Him there. And He went willingly, for all of us.

Pilate releases Barabbas. Think about that exchange: a guilty man walks free, and an innocent man takes His place. That is the gospel in one scene.

Then Pilate has Jesus flogged. Roman flogging used whips with pieces of bone or metal and could tear flesh to the bone. Then the soldiers take Him into the governor’s headquarters and gather the whole battalion. They strip Him, put a scarlet robe on Him, twist together a crown of thorns and press it onto His head, and put a reed in His right hand as a fake scepter. They kneel in front of Him and mock, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They spit on Him and beat Him on the head with the reed.

The soldiers thought they were staging a parody of a coronation. They had no idea that the man they were mocking really was the King.

KEY VERSE

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!"

Matthew 27:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter and Judas both failed Jesus on the same night. What made the difference in how their stories ended?
2. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but gave in to the crowd. Where do you see the pressure to go along with the crowd even when you know it's wrong?
3. Barabbas, a guilty man, went free while Jesus, an innocent man, was condemned. How is that a picture of what Jesus does for us?

CHAPTER 27

The Cross

Matthew 27:32–66

The Roman writer Cicero described crucifixion as the most cruel and disgusting of punishments. Rome reserved it mainly for slaves, rebels, and the worst criminals. It was designed not just to kill, but to humiliate, publicly and slowly. Victims were stripped and displayed along busy roads as a warning: this is what happens to those who defy Rome. Roman citizens generally could not be crucified. It was considered too shameful.

That's the death Jesus walked toward.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **How Crucifixion Worked**
>
> The victim was usually forced to carry the crossbeam to the execution site. He was nailed or tied to it, raised up, and left to hang. Breathing became harder and harder, and victims could suffer for hours or even days, dying from exhaustion, blood loss, and suffocation. A sign listing the charge was often posted above the victim's head.

As they leave the city, the soldiers force a man from Cyrene named Simon to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus, after the flogging, apparently couldn't carry it Himself. They come to Golgotha, which means "the place of the skull." They offer Him wine mixed with gall, a bitter mixture, but after tasting it, He refuses to drink.

They crucify Him. Matthew describes it in a few words. He doesn't linger on the gruesome details, perhaps because his first readers knew them all too well. Then the soldiers divide His clothes by casting lots, a detail that echoes Psalm 22, written by David a thousand years earlier.

Over His head they post the charge against Him: "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS." It was meant as mockery. It was the truth. Matthew opened his Gospel with the magi asking, where is the one born King of the Jews? Here is the answer, nailed above a cross.

Two robbers are crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left. Remember when James and John asked for the seats on Jesus' right and left in His Kingdom? Jesus told them they didn't know what they were asking. This is what the right and left of His throne looked like on this day.

Then the mocking starts. People passing by shake their heads and insult Him: "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" Notice that "if." It's the devil's line from the wilderness.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders join in: "He saved others… but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Even the robbers insult Him.

They thought they knew exactly what a Messiah should do: come down and prove Himself. They had it backwards. He could have come down. He stayed because He was saving others. He couldn't save Himself and save us at the same time. He chose us.

From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness covers the whole land. Then, at about three o'clock, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" That is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These are the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm that begins in anguish and ends in victory. On the cross, Jesus experienced the full weight of separation from God that sin deserves. The Son, who had known the Father's love forever, took the place of sinners. The Bible later explains it this way: God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us. That's the heart of what happened at the cross.

Some bystanders think He's calling for Elijah. Someone runs and offers Him sour wine on a sponge. The others say wait, let's see if Elijah comes to save Him. Then Jesus cries out again with a loud voice and gives up His spirit. Notice how Matthew phrases it: He yielded up His spirit. Even in death, Jesus is not a victim of circumstances.

At that moment, the curtain of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. That curtain separated the Most Holy Place, God's special presence, from everyone else. Only the high priest could enter, once a year, with sacrificial blood. Now it's torn open, from the top down, as if by God's own hand. The way to God is open.

The earth shakes, rocks split, and tombs open. Matthew records that many holy people who had died were raised and, after Jesus' resurrection, went into the holy city and appeared to many. It's a mysterious detail, and Matthew reports it without explanation: death itself was starting to lose its grip.

A Roman centurion and the soldiers guarding Jesus see the earthquake and everything that happened, and they're terrified.

They say, “Surely he was the Son of God!” A Gentile soldier, one of the executioners, sees what the religious leaders refused to see.

Many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee are watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene. The male disciples are nowhere to be found. That evening, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, asks Pilate for the body. He wraps it in clean linen and places it in his own new tomb cut in the rock, and rolls a large stone across the entrance.

The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate. They remember that “that deceiver” said He would rise after three days. They ask for the tomb to be secured so the disciples can’t steal the body. Pilate gives them a guard. They seal the stone and post soldiers.

The people who refused to believe Him remembered His promise to rise better than His own disciples did.

KEY VERSE

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Matthew 27:54 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The leaders said, "Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Why didn't Jesus come down? What would we have lost if He had?
2. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What does that tell you about what He experienced on the cross for us?
3. The temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. What does that mean for how people can approach God now?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 22 in one sitting. Note every line that sounds like Matthew 27.*

CHAPTER 28

He Is Not Here

Matthew 28

Early on Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week is dawning, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" go to see the tomb. They're expecting a dead body.

Suddenly there's a great earthquake. An angel of the Lord comes down from heaven, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning, and his clothes are white as snow. The guards are so terrified that they shake and become like dead men. The soldiers posted to keep a dead man in the tomb are the ones who end up looking dead.

The angel speaks to the women: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Just like He said. Jesus had told them, again and again, that He would be killed and raised on the third day. They hadn't understood. Now here it is.

The stone wasn't rolled away to let Jesus out. It was rolled away to let the witnesses in.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Women Matter**
>
> In that culture, a woman's testimony was often given less weight than a man's, and in many settings it wasn't accepted in court. If someone in the first

> century were making up a resurrection story, the women would be the last people they'd choose as the first witnesses. All four Gospels name women as the first to find the empty tomb. Historians who study these texts often point out that it's exactly the kind of detail people wouldn't invent.

The angel tells them to go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and is going ahead of them to Galilee. They run from the tomb "afraid yet filled with joy." And on the way, Jesus Himself meets them. "Rejoice!" He says. They take hold of His feet and worship Him. A ghost doesn't have feet you can grab. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Notice what He calls the disciples: "my brothers." The same men who ran, who slept, who denied Him. Not "those traitors." Brothers. That's grace.

Meanwhile, some of the guards go into the city and report everything to the chief priests. The religious leaders meet with the elders and come up with a plan. They pay the soldiers a large amount of money and tell them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" If the governor hears about it, they promise to keep the soldiers out of trouble.

Think about how strange that story is. If the soldiers were asleep, how would they know who took the body? And sleeping on duty could get a Roman soldier severely punished. Matthew adds that this story was still being told among some people in his own day. Even the official cover-up admitted the most important fact: the tomb was empty.

So here's where the religious experts end up. They knew the Scriptures. They had Jesus' promise memorized well enough to post guards. They received an eyewitness report from their own soldiers. And they chose to pay for a lie rather than face the truth. Knowing everything doesn't help if you refuse to believe what you know.

Then the eleven disciples go to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus told them to go. When they see Him, they worship Him. And Matthew includes one of the most honest lines in the Bible: "but some doubted."

He could have left that out. He didn't. The resurrection wasn't something the disciples were primed to believe. They had to be convinced. And notice that Jesus doesn't send the doubters away. He comes closer.

Then Jesus speaks the words that close Matthew's Gospel, known as the Great Commission. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Think about where the story began. A family tree proving Jesus was the son of Abraham, through whom God promised to bless all nations. Foreign magi coming to worship. A Roman centurion praised for his faith. A Canaanite woman commended. A Roman soldier at the cross confessing Him as the Son of God. Now Jesus sends His followers to all nations. The King of the Jews is King of the whole world.

And the book that began with Immanuel, "God with us," ends with Jesus promising, "I am with you always."

Here's the last thing to notice. Jesus didn't hand His mission to scholars or experts or people who had it all together. He gave it to eleven ordinary men, including a denier, a former tax collector, and some doubters. He still does. The question isn't whether you're qualified. The question is whether you'll go.

KEY VERSE

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The religious leaders paid the soldiers to spread a lie. Why do you think some people refuse to believe even when the evidence is strong?
2. Matthew admits that "some doubted," even after seeing Jesus. Why is it encouraging that he included that?
3. Jesus sent ordinary, flawed people to make disciples of all nations. What would it look like for you to take part in that mission, starting where you are?

TRY THIS *Tell one person this week, in your own words, why the resurrection matters to you.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole Gospel of Matthew. You've seen Jesus born as a refugee King, teach like nobody else, take on the experts, heal the outcasts, die on a Roman cross, and walk out of a sealed tomb. Now the question Jesus asked His disciples is the question He asks you: "Who do you say I am?"

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and God is King.

You weren't an accident. God created you to know Him, love Him, and live under His good rule. That's what the "Kingdom of Heaven" is about.

2 We've all rebelled.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount? Anger is murder at the heart level. Lust is adultery at the heart level. "Be perfect." Nobody passes that test. Not the Pharisees, not the disciples, not you or me. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it.

On the cross, Jesus, the only person who ever lived a perfect life, took our place. Like Barabbas, the guilty go free because the innocent one is condemned. Jesus said He came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Then He rose from the dead, proving His payment was accepted and death was beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Remember the rich young man who asked, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Following Jesus means turning around.

John and Jesus both preached, "Repent." That means turning from running your own life and turning to Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. Peter failed spectacularly, and Jesus restored Him. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Jesus isn't impressed by fancy prayers; remember the Pharisees. You can

talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus is Your Son, the King, that He died on the cross for my sins, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Change me from the inside out. Thank You that You are with me always. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Following Jesus was never meant to be a solo project.

Read the real thing. Go back and read Matthew straight through in a Bible. Then keep going.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized; it's the first step Jesus gave His followers in the Great Commission.

Talk to God every day. Use the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6 as a guide. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Matthew himself admits that even on the mountain with the risen Jesus, "some doubted." Jesus didn't send them away. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because the people in Matthew who thought they knew it all missed Him. Don't be one of them.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Jesus, Matthew 28:20 (NIV)