**January 31 – Matthew 9**

Today we bring January to a close.

**Synoptics**

The word ‘synoptic’ simply means ‘the same’ or ‘similar.’ Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the synoptic gospels because they cover much of the same material. In fact, almost every single verse in the book of Mark is covered in one way or another in either Matthew or Luke. We will eventually cover all three of the synoptic gospel accounts of Christ over the course of this year. I have spread them out across the calendar instead of hitting them all back to back. Since many of these events are also located in other books, I will wait to highlight some of them until we reach them in Mark or Luke. However, please don’t feel like you are unable to ask questions about anything. I have loved all of the questions that you have sent to me and have been delighted to be able to discuss the Word with you in that way.

**Matthew / Levi**

Many have noticed the discrepancy between the disciple who was called a tax collector’s name here as opposed to other places. Here he is called Matthew, in Mark and Luke’s account of this story, he is called Levi. This is simple to clear up. First, Mark and Luke also refer to this man as Matthew, just not at this time. Secondly, it was common for Jewish men to have a second name that would identify them. Third, it is possible (maybe even likely) that Jesus changed Matthew’s name from Levi to Matthew, just like He changed Simon to Peter. It would make sense that Matthew (who authored this book) would refer to himself by his preferred new name rather than the name he used before Christ.

**The Lord of the Harvest**

Jesus often uses agrarian terminology when speaking about salvation. The people in that culture would have understood and related well to farming and harvesting metaphors. Sometimes we, who are far removed from first century farming practices, fail to see the simple meaning in a passage like we find here at the end of Matthew 9. When the harvest time came, it was an all- hands-on-deck situation. Everyone in the family and household would feverishly work to quickly bring in all of the crops before they were harmed by weather, or animals, or rot. It was ridiculously tiresome work that nobody would dream of doing alone.

Jesus describes the unsaved masses as people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus highlights the great harvest that is available in front of them. But, He also says to pray for more laborers because they are few. Levittown (and the surrounding area) is filled with people. We don’t know what God is doing in them behind the scenes. We don’t know when someone is nearing the point of salvation. All we know is that we are called to go into the fields and seek to harvest. As I often say, evangelism is a lifestyle, not an event. Your field that you work is unique. Nobody else shares all of the connections and influence that you have. Your job, your neighborhood, your family, your childhood friends; these are just a few examples of categories of people that God has ordained that you would be connected to so that you might be the light of Christ to them. Let’s be faithful harvesters, and pray to the Lord of the harvest that He will bring the increase.

**For your prayer life:** Let’s pray that the Lord would raise up more laborers, both locally and globally. In particular, let’s join our voices together in prayer for the Christians who live in persecuted nations, that they might stand firm and that their number would grow. Here is an article about the top 10 most persecuted nations as of January 1, 2022. May it help to guide your prayers.   
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/countries-dangerous-christian/>

**February 1 – Matthew 10**

Today we have arrived at an interesting turning point in the book of Matthew. Jesus has brought all twelve disciples on board. Now, He prepares them to go out from Him and carry His message to the people of Israel. Here are a few important things to remember as you study this passage.

1. The instructions for ministry are unique to this time and event. For example, in verses 9-10 Jesus informs them exactly what to pack in their luggage. In verse 5, Jesus prohibited them from preaching to the Gentiles. These instructions are not for us. They were specific to this event.
2. There are many principles of ministry, evangelism, and discipleship that Jesus teaches in this chapter which are applicable beyond this short-term mission trip on which the disciples were sent. For example, none of the persecution that Jesus warns about occurred on this trip. Rather, it took place after the resurrection of Christ and we find it most explicitly chronicled in the book of Acts.
3. So how do you know which of these things are for you to apply, and which of these things were commands explicitly for the disciples? Here is a simple question to keep in mind as you make your way through this passage. **Do these disciples or other New Testament saints continue to be constrained by these commands or abiding by these principles in later passages?**
   1. In some cases no: Clearly these same men ministered to the Gentiles and Samaritans (we see that for example in Acts 8 and 15). We see that Paul traveled with some of these prohibited items.
   2. In some cases yes: Paul refers to being sheep sent amongst wolves (Romans 8). Hebrews teaches us that those who endure to the end will be saved. And, many passages carry the command to preach the good news.

Let’s consider a single, simple, practical, fundamental applications from this passage.

**Fear not!**

This command is specifically spoken in regards to speaking to people about the gospel. If you are anything like me, there is a moment of terror that wells up inside of you when you are about to share the gospel. But Jesus Himself encourages us, don’t be afraid!

Even when “they deliver you over, do not be anxious about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.” (vs. 19) This is not an excuse to be ignorant of the Word of God, or to be lazy in your pursuit of doctrine, or to intentionally walk into conversations without first thinking of how to explain the gospel. Rather, it is to say that when God desires you to stand for Him, even in the most extreme situations, He will provide you with the words to say. Anecdotally, I have seen this happen many times in my own life. When I start a conversation with someone about the Lord I am not sure what to say. But every time, the Lord gives the words.

Just a few weeks ago I met with a missionary family who serve in an Islamic nation. They shared a story about a high school boy who was handed over to the federal government by his own parents because he had become a Christian. The federal government told him that all of the torture he was experiencing could go away if he simple denied Christ. His response, “If I acknowledge my Lord before men, He will acknowledge me before the Father in heaven.” By God’s grace that young man was released, but he is still under extreme supervision and needs much prayer.

Perhaps you envision yourself saying the same thing if your life was being threatened. But, if you are unable or unwilling to stand for Christ when the stakes are as low as your reputation, how would you stand when your life or that of your family is threatened? Be faithful with little, and you will grow to be faithful with much.

How do you stop fear? Remember that Christ is with you in every one of those conversations. He will never leave you or forsake you. Greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world. Here are a few verses that reveal why you can stand fearless – because God is with you.

Genesis 26:24

And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. **Fear** **not**, **for I am with you** and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.”

Deuteronomy 31:8

Be strong and courageous. **Do not fear** or be in dread of them, **for it is the Lord your God who goes with you.** He will **not** leave you or forsake you.

Isaiah 41:10

**Fear** **not**, **for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God**; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

**For your edification:** If you want to hear an excellent sermon on fear, I highly recommend taking the time to listen to this sermon by my friend Brian Davis. <https://www.ns-bc.org/sermons/sermon/2017-06-28/walking-on-water-john-6:16-21>

**February 2 – Matthew 11**

Has your faith ever waivered? Maybe you heard an argument against the Bible that you found difficult to explain. Maybe you were being drawn back into your former religious background. Perhaps God simply felt far from you and you began to question if your faith was genuine. In Matthew 11 we find Jesus graciously answer John the Baptist’s doubts.

John had been arrested and was going to be executed for preaching against the incestuous practices of the Herod family. This same John who declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” in John 1:29 is now asking, “Are you the one? Or should we look for another?”

Jesus responds to that question by listing off a various miracles that He had performed. At first, that seems like an odd way for Jesus to make His case. But, if you examine a little closer, you will see that Jesus was making reference to various Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. For example, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” (Isaiah 61:1) Also, “And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf.” (Isaiah 35:5)

By referencing these and several other Old Testament texts, Jesus was not only affirming John of His messiahship, He was also pointing John back to the scriptures. He was helping John to renew His faith by digging into the very promises of God. Perhaps that is what you need today. Perhaps your faith, like John’s, is being tested. Doubt due to external sources like John’s prison experience, or internal sources like depression, discouragement, or temptation. Regardless, look to the Word of God and Christ will reveal to you afresh exactly who He is.

Jesus did not condemn John for his moment of doubt. Instead, He gently encouraged him, strengthened him, and grounded him in truth. If you need prayer for this kind of help, I would love to know so I can pray for you. And I know that there are others in the church who would be blessed to walk through any moment of doubt by pointing you to Christ.

Two final encouragements from this chapter:

1. **Be humbled that God revealed Himself to you.**

In verse 25, we learn that God has hidden truths about Christ from “the wise and understanding.” Yet, in His great wisdom and mercy, God has graciously “revealed them to little children.” Jesus describes the reasoning for this decision to be that it was “your (the Father’s) gracious will.” Jesus further presses this point by declaring that “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”

Why did God choose to reveal the truth about Himself to you? Why did He choose to convict your heart by the Holy Spirit and open your understanding to the gospel? Is it because you have earned it or deserved it? Absolutely not. God has revealed Himself to you because He has graciously chosen you. Let that humble your heart today.

1. **Be reminded that Jesus’ burden is easy and His yoke is light**

Many of you read through the book ‘Gentle and Lowly’ last year. (If you have not, I strongly encourage you to start it today. If you need a copy I would love to give you one for free.) Consider the language of these final verses of the chapter. When you take a yoke upon your neck, that imagery is one of great weight. It not only means that the wooden apparatus around your body would be physically overwhelming; it also means that the you are now required to pull that farm equipment through a field and rip out any rocks or stumps or other stubborn materials that do not wish to be dislodged from the dirt.

But Jesus says that He Himself is gentle and lowly, and the yoke that He gives us to pull is one of freedom rather than slavery. He promises that this yoke, this symbol of intense labor and extreme effort, will actually produce rest for your souls.

**For your joy:** Here is a great song that nicely exhorts us to consider our Savior, gentle and lowly. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ5AwZquvVE>

**February 3 – Matthew 12**

Wow, it is chapters like this that make it so difficult to keep these shepherding notes to one page per day. But, I promise today to do my best to keep focused. I realize that there is so much more in this text, but let’s just zoom in on 3 key difficult passages in this text and see if I can help shed a little light on what may prove to be a bit confusing.

1. **Lord of the Sabbath**

We could spend pages describing the abuses that the Pharisees had invented concerning the Sabbath. But, notice that Jesus does not tell them that they are wrong about picking the heads of grain. Rather, He takes a different approach. He uses historical Sabbath law to display His kingship.

Consider the question, why was it not wrong for David to eat the bread that was only for the Priest? Because he was the king that ruled over the nation and he genuinely needed it to live. Likewise, why weren’t the priests condemned for working every Sabbath day? Because their minister in the temple which has need of care that day. So why is it that Jesus and His followers able to do these things? Because Jesus is King of the Sabbath, and He is the true temple that needs care.

1. **Demonology**

I find that people (myself included) read a text like the one we find in vs. 43-45 and we get very intrigued by questions about the supernatural world. I encourage you not to set your primary focus of a glorious chapter like this one on demonology. I also encourage you not to think little of it or ignore it. What is it speaking about? Was Jesus declaring His exorcisms to be worthless? Or what’s more, was He even making it worse by allowing these demons to leave for a time only to bring back a pack of roommates in the near future? Simply put, no. It does seem that Jesus was informing that casting out a demon is fruitless, unless the heart of the individual is protected from their return. A saved person cannot be possessed, so this is clearly a reference to what would occur in the event that an unsaved person had a demon removed. But, regardless of the demonology of it all, this passage is not really about exorcisms at all. It is a condemnation of that generation of Israel. Jesus was not speaking about a single person here, but a nation. Israel had Jesus in their presence. He was making their world immensely better. But, after His ascension He promised that it would be seven times worse. Whether this is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, or if this is a reference to the rapid decline and downfall of the priesthood, or if it is a reference to something else is difficult to say.

1. Jesus’s Family

Roman Catholics idolize Mary. They declare that she is the mother of God. But who did Jesus see to be His mother? And what emphasis or priority did he put on that position? He declares you and I to be the His closest relatives. Those who, through faith, obey the Lord are genuinely part of His family. Christ has made us part of His family, and in doing so, He has made us family with one another.

I really tried to keep it at a page, I promise. ☺

**For your clarity:** Some have read the passage on a tree and its fruits and thought of it as a works-based righteousness. If I just do good works, it makes me a good tree. That is backwards, the tree comes first, and then the fruit. Here is a good article about how good works relate to your salvation by John Piper. https://www.9marks.org/article/are-there-varied-rewards-waiting-for-us-in-heaven-yes-because-god-is-gracious/

**February 4 – Matthew 13**

Today we begin one of the most famous parables of Jesus’ ministry. However, this is a series of connected parables that deal with the nature of salvation. Today, we are actually going to focus in on a portion of the parables that are exclusive to Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 44-46, 47-50, 52).

**Weeds**

Verses 24-30 is another example of Matthew’s focus on the fact that there are going to be some who claim to be Christian, but will not stand in the judgment. In this case, these incognito unbelievers are referred to as weeds that have infested the field of God’s church. This parable is a reminder that God is not mocked, nor is He fooled. He knows exactly who belongs to Him. At the end, He will separate out the wheat from the weeds. Jesus explains this to His disciples in verses 36-43 and makes clear to them that Jesus is the one who is going to rule over the judgment itself.

**Treasure**

My favorite parables in Matthew are the tiny back-to-back illustrations in vs. 44-46. One of these parables is about a man who doesn’t seem to own much. It seems that he is a common field worker who happened across buried treasure. The other man was a merchant and it seems that his background is to trade in something valuable (probably jewelry since he was able to ascertain the value of the pearl). By contrasting these two men, it helps us to stop thinking about our treasure in terms of how high we can count. It wasn’t that one of these men had a small pile of treasure and the other had a large pile of treasure. They both treasured their stuff 100%. That is, until something else that was better, more valuable, and of greater worth than all of their other goods.

These parables also teach us that it is one or the other. You can either treasure all of the things the world promises, or you can treasure what is truly valuable, Jesus Himself. Jesus is worth all that you have.

**The Net**

Just like the parable of the weeds, the parable of the net is primarily about the fact that God will judge the hearts of His people on the last day. (Later we will see a similar separation passage regarding the sheep and the goats – this is very common in Matthew.)

**Treasures – New and Old**

In this passage, Jesus asks the disciples if they understand. They say ‘yes.’ For this reason, Jesus now refers to them as scribes. They might not be professionally trained in the law, like the official scribes who worked in the temple. But, they were now “trained for the kingdom of heaven.” John Broadus explains it nicely like this, “A man with ample stores flings out garments or articles of food in profusion, some recently acquired, others long on hand, each class having its peculiar value. A good housekeeper would make frequent additions to his stores, while carefully preserving the old. The Jewish Scribes gloried in teaching only old things, but the Christian Scribe learned such new lessons as these parables have just been giving, and so could fling out things new and old.”

**For your prayer life:** Pray that Gateway would be a church without weeds. Pray that when that net is finally cast that every member of our church would be kept, not those that well be thrown into the furnace to be burned. Pray that there would be many future conversions of people coming out of death and into life.

**February 6 – Matthew 14**

Today we reach the halfway mark of Matthew’s gospel account. Let’s consider in this chapter trial, tragedy, triumph, not necessarily in that order.

**Scene 1: John is beheaded**

Trial: Trial that John experienced is implied in this text. Why was he in prison? Because He had stood firmly against Herod’s sinful practices. There was no freedom of speech in Herod’s kingdom. So, when John publicly denounced Herod the tetrarch stealing away his living brother’s wife, Herod had him arrested. We are blessed to be able to preach, teach, and spread the gospel with incredible freedom. That freedom seems to be slowly being dissolved in America. When under trial, will you stand with John for what is right and good?

Tragedy: John was executed because he had offended Herodias. As we have seen many times in Scripture, the righteous is persecuted by the unrighteous. The wicked wield what little power they have in an attempt to snuff out the truth. It is tragic when any believer is martyred.

Triumph: John triumphed. What appeared to be losing, was winning. The moment his head was removed from His shoulders, he entered into paradise. “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” – Jim Elliot.

**Scene 2: Feeding the Multitudes**

Tragedy (used loosely): An incredibly large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus. Probably between 15,000 – 20,000 people were present when you include women and children. If you have ever traveled with children and they became hungry, you know that life becomes difficult if you can’t feed them. This entire crowd had underestimated their meal needs and had stayed longer than expected in order to continue hearing Jesus preach. Now they are hungry and far from any place that could support their needs.

Trial: What is the trial in this section? The disciples are told, “you give them something to eat.” How helpless would you feel in that moment. Why does Jesus command them to do this? In order to reveal just how week and limited they are apart from Him. He is once more revealing that they can do nothing but fail unless He supernaturally provides.

Triumph: Jesus miraculously and effortlessly overcomes the boundaries of natural science. He exponentially multiplies matter, providing more than enough food for everyone present. Once again, Jesus displays that He has power over matter.

**Scene 3: Walking on Water**

Trial: If you have ever been on choppy waters in a small boat, you know that feeling you get in your stomach when you look across the waves. You know that a single rogue wave will end your life. The disciples were afraid of the water. Then they saw Jesus walking on the water and became more fearful because they superstitiously believed it to be a ghost. But, when Jesus called out them to identify Himself, Peter still doubted. So, Jesus said “come.” To Peter’s credit, he took that step to hop out of the boat and onto the raging sea. By the power of Jesus, Peter was breaking the boundaries of scientific limitation by walking on the surface of the water.

Tragedy: What is the tragedy of this passage? Peter took his eyes off of Jesus. He stopped trusting in the power of the Savior when He was distracted by the wind and waves. It is tragic when any of us become distracted by the cares and trials of this world, and fail to set our attention on Christ. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2

Triumph: Peter’s faith failed, yet Jesus overcame his failings. If you make it to the finish line in your faith, it will be due to the fact that Jesus worked in your life to overcome your fear and faithlessness. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.”

For your reflection: Almost every night since Asaph was born, we have sung the same song to our kids: The Gospel Song. Here is a nice animation to accompany this simple reminder of the gospel that saved our souls.