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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



The Gospel *of* Matthew

PROCLAIMING THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

WILLIAM A. ANDERSON, DMIN, PHD



Liguori
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:
Harry Grile, CSsR, Provincial Denver
Province, The Redemptorists

Printed with Ecclesiastical Permission and Approved for Private or Instructional Use

Nihil Obstat: Rev. Msgr. Kevin Michael Quirk, JCD, JV
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur: + Michael J. Bransfield
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston
January 7, 2012

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Anderson, William Angor, 1937-

The Gospel of Matthew : a Scripture study and reflection / by William A. Anderson.

p. cm. — (The Bible study series)

ISBN 978-0-7648-2120-2

1. Bible. N.T. Matthew—Study and teaching. I. Title.

BS2576.A53 2012

226.20071—dc23

2012002262

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Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
18 17 16 15 14 / 6 5 4 3 2
First Edition



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bible studies and reflections such as those in this current text depend on the help of others who read the manuscript and make suggestions. I am especially indebted to Sister Anne Francis Bartus, CSJ, DMin, whose vast experience and knowledge were very helpful in bringing this series to its final form.

This series is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my parents, Kathleen and Angor Anderson, in gratitude for all they have shared with all who knew them, especially with me and my siblings.



Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible-study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our heads. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. In an address before the Pontifical Biblical Commission on April 12, 2013, Pope Francis stressed, "the Church's life and mission are founded on the word of God which is the soul of theology and at the same time inspires the whole of Christian life."

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on the Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 14 includes an Opening Prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section. This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our hearts and consciences to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)
2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.

3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' message. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of the Gospel of Matthew and realize how that gospel offers spiritual nourishment. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When each author wrote his gospel, he didn't simply link random stories about Jesus—he placed them in a context that often stressed a message. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

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Part 1—Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of the Gospel of Matthew, the book is divided into 10 lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 10 are divided into Part 1, group study; and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers passages from Matthew 3—5. The study group reads and discusses only Matthew 3—4 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on Matthew 5 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the first format on page 12. Otherwise the group meets for one hour using the second format on page 12, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2—Individual Study

The gospel passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into three to six shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio*

divina (see page 7) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study.

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study With *Lectio Divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud a second time, followed by quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ✠ Spend some time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read (10–20 minutes)
- ✠ Shared reflection (10–15 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 7.

2. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (40 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

Notes to the Leader

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Plan which sections will be covered each week of your Bible study.
- ✘ Read the material in advance of each session.
- ✘ Establish written ground rules. (Example: We won't keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating.)
- ✘ Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ✘ Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ✘ Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ✘ Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ✘ Use a clock or watch.
- ✘ Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ✘ Ask participants to read "Introduction: The Gospel of Matthew" (page 15) before the first session.
- ✘ Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ✘ If you opt to use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to Participants

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Read "Introduction: The Gospel of Matthew" (page 15) before the first class.
- ✘ Read the Scripture passages and commentary before each session.
- ✘ Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance,

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our minds and hearts as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for a word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain with us always.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew

AFTER JESUS' RESURRECTION and ascension, his followers, as dedicated Jews, believed the Jewish people would soon recognize that Jesus was truly the Messiah. Jesus' followers began a movement within Judaism known as "the Way," which referred to the new way of life with the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Within a short period of time, however, it became evident that the Jewish religious leaders were becoming agitated and even frightened by the rapid growth of this new movement. Other movements had erupted from time to time, claiming they had found the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, but these soon died out as their leaders died or were killed. The *Way*, however, seemed to be a different story. Those who professed to belong to this new *Way* proclaimed that Jesus, crucified by the Roman soldiers, had been raised from the dead.

Added to the mistrust of the religious leaders for these followers of Christ was the simmering confrontation between a zealous group within Judaism and the Roman rule. These Zealots used guerrilla warfare against the Romans, ambushing small groups of Roman soldiers and thus angering the Roman government. It was time for Rome to crush the Jewish nation, and the harsh Roman reaction began around the year 65. As the year 70 approached, it became clear that the Romans would soon invade the holy city of Jerusalem. Some Zealots, who believed God was on their side, assumed they could defend the sacred city against the Romans. Many Christians, however, as followers of Jesus' message of peace, recognized the futility of fighting the Romans and fled to areas in which Christianity was flourishing, establishing communities consisting mainly of Jewish converts to Jesus Christ.

Rome invaded Jerusalem, and a horrible slaughter took place. Roman soldiers destroyed the Temple, demolished homes and synagogues, and savagely killed a large number of the inhabitants. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, Jewish ruling structures changed. A group known as the Sadducees, whose ministry centered on the Temple, ceased to exist. A group within Judaism known as the Pharisees survived, since their ministry centered not only on the Temple but on the smaller meeting places for prayer, namely, the synagogues. The surviving Pharisees, however, believed God had punished the Jewish nation for ignoring the Mosaic Law. They launched a persecution against those whom they perceived as corrupting Judaism, most notably Christians, and drove many more Jewish Christians from Jerusalem into the surrounding regions, where they set up small communities.

At Antioch, northeast of Jerusalem, Christianity was growing rapidly in a mixed society of Jews and non-Jews. Jewish Christians joined together in small communities where they preserved many of the Jewish customs and prayers from the synagogues while at the same time professing faith in Christ. These Jewish Christians could not help but notice that most of the converts to faith in Jesus came from among the Gentiles (those who were not Jewish), and they questioned why the Israelites did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Christ). From their knowledge of the Scriptures, the Jewish followers of Christ expected all the people of Judea to recognize the Messiah when he arrived in the person of Jesus. Instead, they found themselves rejected by the Jewish leaders for their faith in Christ. They needed answers.

Who Was Matthew?

Within one of these Jewish Christian communities, an educated Christian Jew began to gather material for instructing his community about Jesus and his message. At the time of writing his message, this Christian Jew had a copy of the Gospel of Mark, written somewhere between 65 and 70, and a later manuscript containing many of the “sayings” of Jesus, usually referred to as the Q source. With these two manuscripts in front of him and with the knowledge he gained by listening to the community to which the author of Matthew belonged, he compiled his gospel.

The problem with identifying the author of this gospel is that he did not identify himself. A later writer named Papias identified Matthew as the one who compiled the events and messages of Jesus' life. The problem with Papias's evidence is that he states the gospel was written in Hebrew, while it was actually written in Greek. It is very difficult to translate Greek into Hebrew, which indicates that the original probably was not written in Hebrew. Because one of the sources used by the author of the Gospel of Matthew comes from an undiscovered source (designated as the M source), Papias could be referring to this earlier source, which would be an oral rather than a written source. The gospel was written somewhere around the year 85, and Matthew the Apostle most likely had died many years earlier.

In the gospel attributed to Matthew, the author names Matthew as a tax collector, while Mark (2:13–17) names him as Levi. Because a tax collector named Levi in the other synoptic gospels is named Matthew in this gospel, some commentators believe that Matthew was actually the tax collector. The problem with this argument lies in the fact that Matthew used the Gospel of Mark as a source for the story, changing only the name of the tax collector. If Matthew was actually the tax collector, why did he use Mark as a source for the story? He surely would have presented other details not found in the Gospel of Mark.

Matthew writes as a Jewish Christian. The Gospel of Matthew betrays the Jewish bias of the author, who holds Jewish laws and traditions close to his heart. For Matthew, Jesus does not come to do away with the Law, but to fulfill and correctly interpret it. Matthew quotes often from the Old Testament, showing that Jesus does indeed fulfill what has been foretold, that Jesus is the one promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is presented as a rabbi who enters rabbinical debates with his adversaries. As a true Christian scribe, Matthew omits the names of the scribes when Jesus comes into conflict with the leaders of the people. One of the questions Matthew must answer is a concern not only of his readers but of the author himself: "Why did the Jewish nation, the Chosen People, not recognize the Messiah?"

Although we must concede that we do not know the name of the author of this gospel, we will continue to refer to him as Matthew throughout this text.

Why Did the Jewish Nation Not Recognize the Messiah?

The author of the Gospel of Matthew was aware of the questions being asked by the people in his Jewish community. What caused so many Jewish people to miss Jesus' message and fail to recognize Jesus as the Christ? Matthew often quotes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah. He shows that Jesus preached mainly within Judaism, making the Jewish people the center of his ministry. Matthew concludes that the people followed the leadership of their religious authorities and rejected Jesus because their leaders rejected him.

Structure of the Gospel

A close study of the Gospel of Matthew shows that it consists of a prologue (the infancy narrative), followed by five narratives with a major discourse after each, followed by an epilogue (the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus). Throughout this book, we shall follow the structure used by Matthew.

What Are Some Characteristics of Matthew's Gospel?

Jesus as the Son of David

Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of David. He wishes to show that Jesus is truly the expected Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament. The title *Son of David* is considered a messianic title, but Matthew does not allow this title to portray Jesus as a kingly type. For Matthew, Jesus is the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man who will bring about salvation through his passion, death, and resurrection.

Jesus as the Son of God

Matthew also presents Jesus as the Son of God, as one who is equal to the Creator. Throughout the Old Testament, the title *Son of God* is used for saintly individuals who follow God's will in their lives. The title is also used as a reference to the nation of Israel, the Chosen People of God. When Matthew uses this term for Jesus, he is speaking of Jesus as one with God.

Because Matthew has such a high regard for Jesus both as Messiah and as Son of God, he presents Jesus in a more divine light than Mark does.

Matthew downplays the signs of weakness in Jesus and shows him to be the wise and powerful Son of God.

The Church as the New Israel

The Gospel of Matthew is also deeply concerned about the Church. Because the people of Israel rejected the call to lead all people to God, the new Israel—the Church—must perform this function. The reign of God is identified with the Church in the gospel, but it is not a total identification. The reign of God will continue throughout eternity, whereas “the Church” refers to the disciples in union with Jesus on Earth. Not all those who become members of the Church will remain faithful, but for those who do, the promise of eternal life in the reign of God stands out. Wherever Christians gather, there is the Church. A significant aspect of Matthew’s message is not only that the Church is the new Israel, but that the Church is the only *true* Israel. The Church is called to live a higher level of righteousness than were the people of Israel in Old Testament times. The members of the Church are called to the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor.

A Favorable View of Jesus’ Disciples

Matthew presents the disciples in a more favorable light than Mark does. Matthew has a high respect for the companions of Jesus, and he presents them as understanding the message of Jesus, although they must struggle with it at times. Mark’s presentation of Jesus’ disciples shows them completely lacking in understanding, and when they eventually do understand, they still do not fully grasp what Jesus is teaching. The disciples’ weaknesses are softened in Matthew’s presentation.

The End of the World

Matthew also does not see the end of the world fast approaching. The theme of the Gospel of Matthew is one of waiting patiently for the day of Final Judgment and being prepared for that day. At the end of the gospel, Matthew has Jesus commission the disciples to spread his message throughout the world. This hardly implies an immediate expectation of the end.



LESSON 2

Proclamation of the Reign of Heaven

MATTHEW 3—5

From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17).

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 14)

Context

Part 1: Matthew 3—4 This section begins with the preaching of John the Baptist. This is followed by the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ life, Jesus’ temptation in the desert, and the call of his first disciples. The central message of the passage is the pronouncement by Jesus that the “kingdom of heaven” has arrived.

Part 2: Matthew 5 The author presents one of the finest-known discourses in the New Testament, namely, the Sermon on the Mount (5—7). Using the Q source, Matthew skillfully structures his gospel with the precision of a Christian scribe intent on developing a message about the demands of living in the kingdom of heaven.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (3—4)

Read aloud Matthew 3—4

3:1–12 *John the Baptist*

When Matthew writes about John the Baptist, he uses Mark and Q as his sources. Those familiar with Mark's Gospel will find many similarities in Matthew's narrative. John the Baptist preaches in the desert, challenging his hearers to reform their lives because the "kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew, as a true Christian scribe and convert from Judaism, avoids using God's name wherever possible and speaks of the *kingdom of heaven* rather than the *kingdom of God*. When John the Baptist speaks of the kingdom of heaven, he is not speaking of eternal life, but of the presence of the kingdom here on Earth, which will reach its fulfillment in eternity.

Some commentators prefer to speak of the *reign* of heaven rather than the *kingdom* of heaven, since *kingdom* implies boundaries, whereas God's reign has no limits. Since the reign of heaven is near, John, like Jesus, calls his listeners to a radical change of life. In the person of Jesus, the reign of heaven breaks upon the world in a special and magnificent manner.

John is the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord as foretold by Isaiah. Matthew chooses a quotation from Isaiah (40:3) when he refers to John the Baptist as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. John's clothing recalls that of Elijah, an Old Testament prophet with whom John is identified, and the food is typically that of a desert sojourner. Matthew, more familiar than Mark with the geography of Judea, correctly positions the preaching of John in the desert and the baptizing at the Jordan. Mark (1:2–5) seems to have John preaching and baptizing at the same place, as though the Jordan and the desert were in the same immediate area.

When John sees Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for baptism, he challenges them harshly, calling them a "brood of vipers." The Israelites often referred to the pagan Gentiles with the lowly and insulting name of some animal or viper. John is telling the leaders of the people they are no better than the pagan Gentiles. He challenges the religious leaders to show that they are truly repentant by their good actions. His challenge shows that not all who came to be baptized came with a sincere desire to

repent. Apparently, he knew that some Pharisees and Sadducees would come for the sake of looking repentant in the eyes of others. Recognizing that some of the religious leaders believed they were chosen because they belonged to the line of Abraham, John warns that the claim to ancestry with Abraham gives them no special rights if they do not live the spirit of Abraham, adding that God could raise up descendants of Abraham from the abundance of stones found in the desert.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew uses various images for Judgment Day. In this episode, John the Baptist uses the image of an ax being laid to a root, implying that the Day of Judgment has arrived with Jesus' coming. He will bring Good News to those who accept his message and condemnation to those who reject it. Just as claiming to be descendants of Abraham is not enough, claiming to be a follower of Christ without living Christ's message is not enough. John warns his listeners that the time of separating the good (wheat) from the bad (chaff) has come. Wood and chaff were used as fuel for heat during the time of Jesus. John sees them as igniting a fire that will never end, an image of eternal condemnation.

John proclaims that his baptism is inferior to that of the One who is to come after him. Although John is referring to Jesus, he does not mention him by name. John baptizes with water, while the One who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Matthew is alluding to the sacramental baptism brought to the world by Jesus. Because John recognizes the greatness of the One who is to come, he declares he is not worthy to carry his sandals.

3:13–17 The baptism of Jesus

Although Matthew spoke only of the people of Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan coming to John, he now adds that Jesus came from as far away as Galilee to be baptized by John. After the resurrection of Jesus, some followers of John during the period of the early Church believed that because he baptized Jesus, John was the greater of the two. Matthew strives to correct this misunderstanding. When John and Jesus meet, both recognize the superior position of Jesus as John declares that Jesus should baptize him. Jesus, however, responds that John should allow his baptism to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus comes to baptism, not

as a sinner himself, but as one bearing the sins of all creation. He is about to begin his ministry on behalf of salvation for all people.

When Jesus comes out of the water after his baptism, he witnesses the coming of the Spirit of God in the form of a dove. The coming of the Spirit upon Jesus stands as a type of anointing. Jesus is now anointed for his ministry with the Spirit and will be guided by the Spirit throughout the rest of his life. The opening of the sky recalls an Old Testament reference from the prophet Ezekiel, who opens his book of prophecy by declaring that “the heavens opened, and I saw divine visions” (1:1). The voice from heaven recalls words from other parts of the Old Testament. (See Psalm 2:7.) In the Gospel of Mark (1:9–11), the voice from heaven addresses only Jesus, whereas the voice in the Gospel of Matthew proclaims to those around Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The term *beloved Son* may be understood to mean only Son. God’s being pleased with Jesus refers to his openness to the will of God. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased. Upon him I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1).

4:1–11 The temptation of Jesus

The influence of the Spirit in the life of Jesus is immediate, as the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert. The forty days and forty nights in the desert recall the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert during the Exodus. Where the Israelites failed, Jesus will succeed. At the baptism of Jesus, the reader learns that Jesus is the Son of God. The devil uses this identity to challenge Jesus in the first two temptations, in which the devil begins with the words, “If you are the Son of God....” The temptations become an image of the challenges Jesus will encounter during his ministry.

After forty days of fasting, the devil, recognizing that Jesus is hungry, tempts him with food. “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” This temptation recalls the journey of the Israelites in the desert and the gift of manna that they received from God. During his ministry, Jesus will take a few loaves and some fish to provide food for several thousand people, but here he rejects Satan’s request by responding to the temptation with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy (8:3), stating that it is not physical food alone that gives nourishment, but the

Word of God. Jesus will also later state in his Sermon on the Mount that life is more than eating or drinking. The reader learns that, as important as food is, we should trust God and not make food more important in our lives than living according to God's Word.

In the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the highest point in the Temple and, quoting from Psalm 91 that describes divine care for God's chosen one, he challenges Jesus to show his trust in God by throwing himself off the peak of the Temple. After all, if he is the Son of God, then God will care for him. It is significant that Satan chooses the Temple for this temptation, since it is the house of God and certainly the place where God would protect those who trust in God. Jesus, however, recognizes that God is the one in control of our lives and that we cannot make God act on our behalf whenever we want or for show alone. Jesus responds with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:16), which states that one must not put God to the test. This second encounter follows the typical form of a debate between learned rabbis. The first person would quote a Scripture text, and the other would counter it with a text that contradicts it.

Throughout his ministry, people will challenge Jesus to prove through his miracles that he is the Son of God. They will ask for a sign. Even when Jesus is on the cross, the people mock him, saying that if he is God's Son, then have God take him down from the cross. Jesus will be brought down from the cross in the glory of his resurrection, but not in the manner sought by those who view the world only in a materialistic manner.

In the final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. He promises that Jesus will have all these if he falls down and worships him. The Israelites worshiped a false image of God during their sojourn in the desert, but Jesus does not fall victim to this temptation. Where the Israelites in the desert failed, Jesus, the new Israel, succeeds in remaining faithful to the one true God. The mountain from which Jesus views the whole world is a symbolic mountain that does not really exist.

Jesus addresses the devil as Satan and harshly dismisses him with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy (10:20), which states that God alone is worthy of all homage. Jesus' refusal to worship the power and wealth of this world over God's reign teaches the reader that true power

and wealth rest in worshipping God and not in material goods. Jesus will speak more about seeking a true eternal treasure later in Matthew's Gospel.

The power of Jesus over the devil is immediately evident as the desert of desolation becomes a plain of God's presence where angels come to minister to Jesus.

4:12–25 Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee

When Jesus hears of the arrest of John the Baptist, he moves from Nazareth to Capernaum, which will serve as the base of his ministry. Matthew informs us that this move was not done simply on the whim of Jesus. It fulfilled God's plan. Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah (8:21—9:1), who proclaimed that a great light would come upon the land of Zebulun and Naphtali on the road by the sea. Jesus is seen by Matthew as the great light foretold in the prophecy. The land of Capernaum is situated in the ancient area of Naphtali, but not in Zebulun. The sea originally referred to by Isaiah was the Mediterranean Sea, but Matthew changes the reference to the Sea of Galilee. The land lies in the midst of Gentile territory, but the mission of Jesus continues to be directed to the Jews. The theme of Jesus' preaching is the same as that of the Baptist in the desert. Jesus calls the people to a radical change of life because the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

It was here in Galilee that Jesus called his first disciples. The call found in the Gospel of Matthew closely follows the same episode found in the Gospel of Mark (1:16–20). Jesus calls Peter and his brother Andrew to share in his ministry of bringing the message of the kingdom to all people. Like Jesus, they will be fishers of people instead of fish. They leave their trade to follow Jesus. James and John leave their work and their family to follow Jesus. Matthew, like Mark, shows that discipleship consists of immediate and complete surrender to Jesus.

Although Jesus has settled in Capernaum, he travels throughout Galilee, where he preaches, teaches, and heals. This transition passage follows many passages found in the Gospel of Mark. Matthew alone mentions that the fame of Jesus spreads as far as Syria, the place where many believe the Gospel of Matthew was written. Great crowds from a number of areas now follow Jesus.

Review Questions

1. What message does John the Baptist preach?
2. Why does Matthew prefer the title “kingdom of heaven” to the “kingdom of God”?
3. How and why does Matthew show that Jesus is greater than John the Baptist?
4. What happens when Jesus comes out of the water after his baptism?
5. How does Jesus respond to each of the devil’s three temptations in the desert?
6. What is the message behind Jesus’ call of his first disciples?

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 14)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 7)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. (See page 7 for further instruction.)

John the Baptist (3:1–12)

In the gospels, John’s ministry is to prepare the way of the Lord by calling people to repentance, a change of life that will enable them to recognize the presence of Jesus in the world. When Jesus arrives and commits himself to his mission, John’s main mission ends. He points to Jesus, and then slips into the background. In everything we do, we are called to point to Christ. God has given us gifts, but these gifts should not lead to boasting, but to a sincere gesture of thanking God for sharing them with us. Instead of boasting about our accomplishments, we should take an attitude that says, “Through the grace of Jesus, I can do well what I do.”

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

The baptism of Jesus (3:13–17)

At our baptism, the struggle in our lives between the human and divine begins. In a story in the Book of Genesis, Jacob wrestles with an angel all night long and by morning begins to prevail over the angel. The angel blesses Jacob, saying, “You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed” (32:29). This is what happens in our life. With the help of the Spirit who comes to us in a special way at our baptism, we wrestle with the human and divine throughout our lives, and we can prevail.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

The temptation of Jesus (4:1–11)

Jesus endured temptations in the desert that summarized many of the temptations he would face during his ministry. Jesus was able to overcome his temptations because he never took his eye off his love of God and his mission. In the same way, we can overcome the powerful temptations in our lives if we keep our focus on Christ and the vocation God has given to us.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee (4:12–25)

Jesus comes as a light in the darkness, which means that he comes with a hope for salvation in a world filled with sin. As the light of the world, he wants that light to be kept burning brightly, so he chooses disciples. Today, as Christians, we are the light in the darkness. Christians are meant to be positive people, knowing that no matter how dark the world may look with all its sinfulness, the light of Christ is strongly present in the life of every baptized person. Jesus will later warn us in Matthew’s Gospel not to hide that light, but to let it be seen by all.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (MATTHEW 5)

Day 1: The Beatitudes (5:1–12)

Matthew links together many of the sayings of Jesus and has Jesus deliver them on an unnamed mountain. Just as God gave the commandments to Moses on a mountain, so Jesus now gives the new Law to the people on a mountain. In Luke's Gospel (6:20–26), Jesus preaches the beatitudes on a plain rather than on a mountain. Luke does not have the same purpose in presenting Jesus' beatitudes. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks not only to his disciples, but to the crowd. He sits, taking the position of authority used by the great rabbis of his day. Jesus begins each of the beatitudes with the word *blessed*, which expresses a position of spiritual joy and peace for the person who practices it. The second part of the beatitude speaks of some gift in which those who practice the beatitude are already sharing.

In the first beatitude, Jesus addresses those who are poor in spirit. These are the ones who put their trust in God instead of worldly goods. Those who reach this stage of trust are already sharing in the reign of heaven, even in this life. When Luke presents Jesus' beatitudes, he speaks of those who are poor rather than those who are "poor in spirit." Matthew is speaking about a spiritual attitude, a way of thinking that affects one's manner of acting, not a social or economic condition of life as found in Luke's Gospel. In Matthew's Gospel, the call to be poor in spirit applies to those who are financially poor or rich. The poor in spirit recognize that all they have comes from God.

In the second beatitude, Jesus speaks of those who mourn. These are the ones who weep over the power of evil in the world. They mourn, not just through their tears, but through their active concern for those who are suffering in any manner. Those who practice this beatitude can find comfort in their trust of God.

In the third beatitude, Jesus states that the meek are blessed. This is not a meekness that shows weakness, but one that leads to a deeper understanding and thoughtfulness. Jesus himself, through his life and message, gives us an example of this type of meekness. He even accepts death meekly, not seeking revenge, but forgiving those who crucify him.

The land that the meek possess is the promised land of God's reign. The land was very important to the Jewish people.

In the fourth beatitude, Jesus speaks of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are the ones who seek the fulfillment of God's will. They seek a world that reflects the holiness of God rather than one under the power of sin. These people have their fill in the banquet of God's love.

In the fifth beatitude, Jesus speaks about those who act with mercy. Mercy reflects the manner in which Jesus acts throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and it is not limited to those who treat us with mercy. Jesus shows mercy to all, even to those who put him to death. Those who act with mercy share in the mercy of God.

In the sixth beatitude, Jesus speaks of those who are clean of heart, which means they are of one heart with God. They live with integrity and keep their minds and hearts on the will of God. Because they are able to focus and center their lives on God, they share in the gift of truly seeing God in every aspect of life.

In the seventh beatitude, Jesus speaks of those who are peacemakers, those who bring the peace and harmony of God into the world. The original Hebrew word for peace (*shalom*) has a variety of meanings that cannot be translated into English with any single word. This peace includes warmth, welcome, comfort, love, and so on. Those who share this peace reflect Jesus so perfectly that they are truly sons and daughters of God.

In the eighth beatitude, Jesus addresses those who are persecuted because of their fidelity to God. Like those in the first beatitude who have abandoned all attachment to the world, those who accept persecution for God have abandoned worldly desires and share in the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus finishes the beatitudes, he speaks directly to his listeners with the words, "Blessed are you...." Although the sentence begins with the word *blessed*, many commentators do not view this as one of the beatitudes, but rather as an expansion of the eighth. It is not the persecution that is important, but the motive behind accepting the persecution. Those blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. Those who accept such persecution join the ranks of the prophets and share in the eternal reward of God's reign.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

When Matthew writes about the beatitudes of Jesus, he speaks about one's attitude, not one's social condition as found in the Gospel of Luke. He is actually saying the same as Paul does when he tells the Philippians to have the same attitude as found in Christ. According to the hymn found in Paul's letter, Jesus, who is God, humbled himself and took upon himself our weak, ignorant human nature. The attitude we should have is an attitude that is poor in spirit, merciful, clean of heart, peacemaking, and concern for others, all virtues we find in Christ. To practice one of the beatitudes well is to practice them all.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: Salt and Light (5:13–16)

Salt had two major uses in the time of Jesus. People used salt for seasoning and to preserve perishable food. The people of Palestine used salt from the Dead Sea, which easily lost its flavor over a period of time. Jesus tells his listeners that the disciple who has lost the true meaning of discipleship no longer has anything to offer and is as useless as salt that has lost its flavor.

Jesus addresses his listeners as the light of the world. The early Church often spoke of Jesus as the light of the world. Jesus views his audience as disciples who are called to reflect his presence on Earth. The disciples must allow their light to shine before the world, not for their own glory, but for the glory of God. The light of Christ is given to them so that others may see it.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

We do not have to be outstanding or powerful to be the salt of the Earth or the light of the world. However, we should be willing to live as an example of generosity and trust in God, whether we have little or much to share, whether we are active or homebound. It is not how much we share with others, but how well we share our time, talents, or treasures.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: The Old Law and the New (5:17–20)

Matthew, who has a great love for the Law, views it not only as a list of commands, but as a type of prophecy that endures because it comes from God. Like a true convert from Judaism, Matthew does not believe the old Law is ending but is, instead, reaching its fulfillment in Jesus, the perfect interpreter of the Law. Jesus teaches respect for the Law and informs his listeners that he has come to fulfill the Law, which will remain in effect until the end of the world. Those who break the Law and teach others to do so will be least in the kingdom of heaven, while those who live and teach the Law faithfully will be great in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells his listeners that their holiness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, whom he sees as false interpreters of the Law.

A controversy arose in the early Church concerning the traditions of the Jewish laws and whether the converts to Christ from among the Gentiles had to follow the Jewish traditions and laws. By saying that Jesus came to fulfill the Law, Matthew leaves open the door for a development that can actually appear to be a change in the Law. Matthew does not see change as a rejection of the old Law, but as a fulfillment. In the following passages, Matthew will highlight how Jesus fulfills some of the Law.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Laws are necessary for the good order of society, but some laws may have to be broken for the common good, or they may be part of an exception to a law. For instance, an ambulance with a dying patient may drive through a red traffic light to get to the hospital before the patient dies. The Jews had a great love and respect for their laws, but Jesus warns them not to follow the letter of a law alone, but to understand the attitude behind it. Jesus will later sum up the Law in his command to love God, neighbor, and self. Love is the guiding principle of all laws.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 4: “I Say to You...” (5:21–48)

Jesus proclaims a series of six sayings known as antitheses, which consist of statements that contrast with one another. We read the expressions, “You have heard...,” followed by, “I say to you....” The law is stated first, and then Jesus gives the deeper interpretation. In some cases, Jesus not only interprets the law, but even seems to change it.

The first antithesis recalls the Old Testament prohibition concerning murder. (See Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17.) Jesus tells his listeners that anger, abusive language, and contempt for another deserve as harsh a judgment as murder; they all come from the same evil root within one’s heart. The need to make amends with one’s brother or sister is so great that one should set aside his or her gift at the altar to seek reconciliation with that brother or sister. To offer a gift to God without seeking some form of reconciliation seems to be a contradiction, since love of God demands love of neighbor. A second reason for seeking reconciliation is that the judgment of the courts might go against a person who could have made amends while there was still time. We should make amends with our enemies while we still have time.

In the second antithesis, Jesus reminds his listeners of the law against adultery. (See Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18.) To look with lust on a woman means the sin has already been committed in one’s heart. Avoidance of this sin should be as radical as plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand. Matthew takes his text from Mark’s Gospel and implies that sins of the eye and hand are connected with sexual sins. Jesus is not calling for bodily mutilation, but for control over these gifts of sight and touch. The person with one eye or one hand can still commit sin.

The third antithesis recalls the Old Testament law concerning divorce. Jesus reminds his listeners that a decree of dismissal is allowed when a man divorces his wife. (See Deuteronomy 24:1.) Jesus recalls God’s plan for marriage in which the two become one (Genesis 2:24) and warns his listeners that a man who divorces his wife actually puts her in the situation of committing adultery. Matthew adds the words “unless the marriage is unlawful” but gives no reason for this addition. Commentators have struggled with this phrase, trying to understand its meaning. Some believe

it was a message to those who were converts from among the Gentiles. According to Jewish Law, a person could not marry within a certain degree of family relationship. The Gentiles did not follow this law, and as new converts, their marriage would not be considered valid if they married a relative. Not all commentators accept this interpretation.

In the fourth antithesis Jesus speaks of the prohibition against swearing falsely. (See Leviticus 19:12.) It seems Jesus is actually changing the prohibition from swearing falsely to no swearing at all. The disciples of Jesus should be so straightforward that a “yes” or “no” from them should be sufficient for a person to believe them. Because the Jews held God’s name in such high esteem, they would not swear by God’s name. Instead, they would call upon things touched by God, such as heaven, God’s footstool, earth, or Jerusalem. Jesus points out that they are playing games when calling upon these things, because they are actually calling upon God as a witness when they do so.

In the fifth antithesis, Jesus quotes the law of retaliation. Although the law, which was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, sounds harsh, it was meant to control one’s response. A person who had an eye plucked out or a tooth knocked out could only pluck out an eye or knock out a tooth in return; the punishment could not surpass the crime. (See Exodus 21:24.) Jesus goes much further than the law. He significantly states that when one strikes us on the right cheek, we should turn the other. Masters slapped their servants on the right cheek, since many were right-handed and slapped a slave on the right cheek with the back of the hand. Jesus is speaking of the worst kind of humiliating slap, and even here, the victim should follow the example of Jesus, who did not respond with revenge when the soldiers crucified him. Not only should we allow a person to take our coat, but we should offer our cloak as well. We should walk two miles with the one who forces us to walk one mile. We should not turn our back on the beggar. The attitude Jesus wishes to instill is an attitude of complete abandonment to another, that is, the attitude of giving to those in need. He is not proposing that we stand around and allow another person to hurt or abuse us.

In the sixth antithesis, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament concerning love of one’s neighbor. (See Leviticus 19:18.) Nowhere do we find a command

that a person should hate one's enemies, although Jewish practice at the time of Jesus was to hate those who would draw the community away from God. The Israelites looked with hatred upon the Gentiles, who threatened their national religion. Jesus urges his listeners to reject a notion that allows them to love their brothers and sisters without allowing them to love their enemies. Even tax collectors and Gentiles, some of whom do not believe in the one true God, love those who love them. Jesus rightly points out that this is part of human nature, and it takes no special merit to return love to those who love us. God, however, sends rain and sunshine upon the good and the bad. The follower of Jesus is called to practice the perfect love of God, who loves all people, friend as well as enemy, and treats them all equally. For many, this is an extremely difficult command to follow.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Jesus sums up the six antitheses with his last statement, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Living as a Christian is not just a call to be holy, but to be holy and perfect as God is perfect. Jesus is fulfilling the law, which has always been directed toward love of neighbor. The call to be a disciple of Jesus is not simply a call to holiness, it is a challenge to be perfect as God is perfect, a challenge that can only be fulfilled with the help of the Holy Spirit. That help comes to us when we cultivate the habit of daily prayer.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. What is the significance of Jesus' preaching his sermon on a mountain?
2. What are the beatitudes found in the Gospel of Matthew, and what is the meaning of each one (the poor in spirit, the sorrowing, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who show mercy, the single-hearted, the peacemakers, and those who willingly suffer persecution for Jesus)?
3. What does Jesus say about anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and love of one's neighbor?