

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Lesson 2 – Study Questions

Matthew 3:1-17; 4:1-25

Review: *From your experience at the Cornerstone meeting last week, share something that helped build your faith.*

NOTE: With Chapter 3 we move to Christ's adult life and ministry. Our first encounter is with John the Baptist, who is preaching and baptizing in a desert area of Judea, east of Jerusalem. "Four centuries have passed since Palestine had sensed it had anything approaching a genuine prophet of the stature of Isaiah or Amos. Few contested that John the Baptist more than deserved the title of prophet of the Lord. Repentance is a central feature of the Baptist's program, along with the coming of the kingdom of heaven." *McBride, Alfred, The Kingdom and the Glory*

DAY ONE

Read Matthew 3:1-10

1. In verse 1 Matthew records John the Baptist saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The phrase "kingdom of heaven" is unique to this Gospel and is considered a key theme. Why do you think Matthew would use this phrase instead of "kingdom of God"? (see Commentary pages 21-22)

2. John the Baptist was preaching repentance from the people of his time. Repentance is "a conversion of heart away from sin and toward God" and is a central theme of the New Testament and a cornerstone of the Christian life. (*Catholic Bible Dictionary, edited by Scott Hahn*) How do you keep repentance in mind as you live your life in faith?

3. In verse 3 Matthew once again links the Old Testament to the New Testament by including a quote from the prophet Isaiah. In what way do you see John the Baptist as a fulfillment of this prophecy?

NOTE: Isaiah is not the only Old Testament prophet of God who describes one such as John the Baptist. For other verses that relate to John, see Malachi 3:1 and Malachi 4:5.

4. John was attracting large crowds coming from the whole region around the Jordan. Pharisees and Sadducees were among those who came to John to be baptized. John was harsh in his criticism of them. What did John call them and what was John seeing in them that others might not have seen?

NOTE: The Sadducees have a limited role in this Gospel, while the Pharisees were the instigators in the conspiracy to destroy Jesus.

5. CONNECTION: John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that the time for producing “good fruit” is now (a phrase we will see repeated throughout the gospel). Food, fruit, and good works would seem to be interchangeable throughout the New Testament. Consider the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23. Share an example of how you have shared a “good fruit” this week or how someone has shared one with you.

Later in Matthew we will read, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:20). With this thought in mind, begin your prayer time today discerning ways that you can continue to share the “fruits of the Spirit” with others.

DAY TWO

Read Matthew 3:11-17

NOTE: “After painting numerous parallels between John and Jesus, Matthew clearly distinguishes the two (vv.11-12). Jesus is more powerful than John; the baptizer is not even worthy to perform the task of a slave, to carry Jesus’ sandals (v.11). The reference to Jesus baptizing is best understood as a metaphor for his whole ministry of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Only the Fourth Gospel mentions Jesus baptizing (John 3:22; 4:1-2).” *Commentary*

6. In verse 11 John declares to the people that he is “baptizing you with water, for repentance...” Read Acts 19:4 and note how this extends the cleansing to an even greater commitment. What is that commitment?

7. Many of us do not remember our own baptism, but perhaps have been witnesses or godparents at the baptisms of family members or friends. What are some symbols or elements of Catholic baptisms which are meaningful to you and why?

8. In verses 14-15 there is a dialogue between John and Jesus, in which John recognizes Jesus as the greater person he has been preaching about and he tries to refuse to baptize Jesus.

Jesus insists that this is “a fulfillment of all righteousness,” confirming John’s prophetic words from verse 2 that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Since Jesus is sinless, and therefore not in need of a baptism of repentance, can you think of another reason why Jesus may have persisted in this situation?

9. From verses 16-17 what three important divine revelations happened at the moment of Jesus’ baptism?

THINK: In Jesus’ humble submission to John’s baptism, can you see a foreshadowing of the “baptism” of his bloody death upon the cross? The Fathers of the Church point out that the words which the Voice of the Heavenly Father speaks are similar to Psalm 2:7, revealing Jesus’ identity (“*This is My beloved Son*”) and to Isaiah 42:1 referring to the “suffering servant” (“*with whom I am well pleased*”), revealing Jesus’ mission of saving mankind by His suffering and death. *Vatican News*, “*Reflections on the Feast of the Baptism of Christ*”

10. CONNECTION: Pope Francis has stressed the importance of remembering our baptism saying, “Baptism is the Sacrament on which our faith is based...Together with the Eucharist and Confirmation it forms the so-called 'Christian initiation' which constitutes a single, great sacramental event that aligns us with the Lord and makes us into a living sign of His presence and His love.” Consider and share in what ways we can each be a living sign of Jesus’ presence and his love.

Today pray the following words of Saint Teresa of Avila, asking that you may have the courage to share your faith with others:

*“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”*

NOTE: All four gospels note that the start of Jesus’ public ministry takes place at the Jordan. The Jordan River, since biblical times, has been imbued with powerful symbolic meanings: it is a boundary and a crossing point, a metaphor for spiritual rebirth and salvation, and a source of holy water for Christians, Jews and Muslims. It is said to be the site of the crossing of the Israelites, as the last boundary before reaching the promised Land.

DAY THREE

Read Matthew 4:1-11

NOTE: Today's lesson begins with the familiar story of the Spirit leading Jesus into the desert (wilderness in some translations) to be tempted by the devil, an event mentioned by three of the gospel writers (all except John). You may wish to refer to the CCC 538-540 for a wonderful explanation from the Catechism regarding the Temptation of Christ and his adherence to his Father's plan.

11. As you read through the temptations offered by the devil to Jesus, consider the fact that these are temptations that Jesus likely faced throughout his life. Jesus' testing reminds us to examine our own reaction when we face challenges. Share a particular scripture verse or prayer that helps you stay centered on God in times of temptation.

12. The first temptation, offered by the devil after Jesus had fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, begins "If you are the Son of God..." and suggests that Jesus command stones to become bread. Record Deuteronomy 8:3 which gives background to Jesus' response.

13. Next the devil took Jesus to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the temple and challenged him "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..." Jesus responds with another verse from Deuteronomy that says we are not to test God. What does testing God mean to you?

NOTE: The devil used Psalms 91:11-12 to try to entice Jesus to test God: 'He will command his angels concerning you' and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.' (Psalms 91 is also often referred to as the "Psalm of Protection" or "The Soldier's Psalm" leading back to WWI.)

14. Finally, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship him, to which Jesus replies, "Get away, Satan!" and cites the command to worship God alone. When else, and to whom, did Jesus again say similarly, "Get behind me, Satan!"?

15. CONNECTION: We too face temptation and spiritual deserts. We may be tested by those who want us to be something we are not. We may turn to unhealthy actions or thoughts. We may find we are in a spiritual desert in a time of grief, disappointment, doubt or confusion. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI shared that the Saints are, "those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading, and assiduous meditation." How has The Cornerstone helped you to find consolation through the word of God?

Today, talk to God with a worshipful prayer of praise and adoration, perhaps beginning with the first words of the prayer of St. Anselm: “O Lord my God, teach my heart this day where and how to find you.”

DAY FOUR

Read Matthew 4:12-17

NOTE: In today’s lesson, The Gospel According to Matthew has Jesus moving from Nazareth to Capernaum (Matthew 4:13) and starting his ministry there. In all four gospels Jesus’ ministry occurs mainly in the Galilee region, particularly in the area at the top or north of Lake Galilee around Capernaum, believed to be the hometown of Simon Peter.

16. Refer to the map in the back of the Commentary and find Jerusalem, Capernaum, and Nazareth. Why might it be important to understand the geography of Galilee in the time of Jesus?

17. Matthew states that Jesus went to live in Capernaum in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 9:2 (verses 15-16). He will begin his mission in “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Refer to the Commentary, page 30, and note why this phrase is important.

NOTE: The tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali were the first regions to be carried into exile by the Assyrians. During Jesus’ day, there were some Jews (from Judah) living in Galilee, but the population was made up mostly of Gentiles and descendants of the Israelites (Northern tribes) who had returned from exile. *Cavins and Christmyer, Matthew, The King and His Kingdom*

18. Verse 16 is familiar to us from the Christmas liturgy. Share your thoughts on how Christ as the light in the darkness is meaningful to you.

19. After Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he withdrew to Capernaum by the sea, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy (Isaiah 9:1). According to verse 17, Jesus began to preach “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” the same message as that of John the Baptist. Why is this significant?

20. CONNECTION: To repent means to rearrange your entire way of thinking, feeling and being in order to forsake that which is wrong; to show remorse, but also to show transformation. Real repentance involves faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that he can forgive us and help us return to his path. In what way(s) can repentance bring you hope and joy?

Read and record Acts 3:19 and let these thoughts lead you into prayer.

DAY FIVE

Read Matthew 4:18-25

21. Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and saw Simon (Peter) and Andrew, and then James and John, calling all four to be his disciples. This may not be the first time he saw these men. Read and briefly summarize what may have been their first meeting in John 1:35-42.

NOTE: God's New Covenant grace builds upon, perfects, and elevates our human nature. The natural skills of these fishermen are thus raised to a new and spiritual level by grace, enabling them to gather souls for the kingdom as missionaries in the Church. *Ignatius Study Bible*

22. Our Commentary sheds further light on these disciples. Note a few surprising background details (page 30).

23. Becoming a disciple of Jesus would be a radical change for these first men who have been called. What do you think would have been the most difficult change for you had you been one of the four who were first called?

24. Jesus preached, taught and healed “around all of Galilee” in synagogues and elsewhere, attracting great crowds who followed him from “Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” These great crowds will become the audience for Jesus’ upcoming Sermon on the Mount. What do you think was the purpose of Jesus’ miraculous healings?

25. CONNECTION: As we learn more about the disciples whom Jesus’ called and who chose to follow him, we may become more aware of our own call. Discipleship is a word used to describe the faithful who are to be witnesses of Christ to the world in a variety of ways. Where might Jesus be calling you right now and how are you challenged by the call?

In John 15:8 Jesus says, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." Today write a discipleship prayer, asking our Lord to help you find ways to bring good works to others.

FINAL QUESTION for the WEEK

This second lesson on the Gospel of Matthew records several powerful events as Jesus begins his public ministry: the Proclamation of the Kingdom, the Baptism of Jesus, the Temptation of Jesus in the Desert, and the Beginning of his Galilean Ministry with the Call of the First Disciples. Choose one of these events to revisit and share how studying God's Word helps you to draw closer to Jesus.

Read pages 21-31 in the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* by Barbara E. Reid, O.P. The Cornerstone Catholic Scripture Study acknowledges that scripture quotations in this study are from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE) ©2010, 1991, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D.C. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

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