

fulfilled

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

d e v o t i o n a l s



UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Lent Breakthrough Prayer

Lord God, lift my gaze away from myself to see you
and to see the needs in the world around me.
Move me from apathy and stubbornness to obedience;
breakthrough any barriers so I can be wide open
to your possibilities for my life, our community,
and your world. Fill me with your Holy Spirit
so I act with courage and conviction
on your call in my life and for our church.
It is the powerful name of Jesus Christ
our Lord I pray, Amen.

Many thanks to our writers who made this devotional possible and to our proofreader, Breanna Brothers. Devotions are also available online at legacyumc.org/connect/devos. If you are interested in the team, please contact Amanda at Amanda@legacyumc.org.

Day 1 - Matthew 1

As I read the genealogy in Matthew 1, I find myself wondering what's up with the list of names? Are the numbers important? This list of names reminds me of the book of Numbers. Numbers contains long lists of families, responsibilities, and names. The list of ancestors is important because those who came before us are important. If not for them, there would be no us. I'm sure you've seen the commercials for websites like ancestors.com. People are interested in their family history. Our list of ancestors answers the puzzle of who we are. Getting to know where we come from, helps us to know the who, what, when, and whys of our life. This list of ancestors in Matthew 1 was foretold by prophets and kings. This list had to be, and had to be recorded, in order for the Messiah to be recognized as the Messiah.

I look at the list and see some interesting bits. Joseph is the one who came from the line of David, not Mary. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary are the only women named in 42 generations. It's also interesting that Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon although listed, is not named. These are women I want to know more about. Why were they chosen to be named? What amazing deeds have they done?

Something else that sticks out as I read this is the number 14. What is the significance of the generational numbers 14 - 14 - 14 in verse 17? Fourteen is divided by seven which is a number often used in the Bible. Seven is also the number of days it took to create the Earth, the number of years between festivals, and the number of times (70 times 7) we need to forgive.

This list of names and numbers might leave us with a lot of questions, but as we focus on our Savior this Lent, they are questions worth asking.

Diane Dyk

Day 2 - Matthew 2

There are many heroes in the story of the birth of Jesus. One group seen in Matthew 2 is the Wise Men, often called the Three Kings, or the Magi. In The Message, they are called a band of scholars. I really like the word “Magi,” but think it is out of style because it brings to mind magicians rather than scholars.

When I think of these scholars, I think of the long journey, the hardships they faced, and the checking and rechecking the Wise Men needed to do in order to take such a trip. It had to be uncomfortable, to say the least!

I wonder if they were believers in the one true God before they made the trip, or if they saw some signs and knew they needed to find a king to worship. I wonder what they thought they would find - they knew it was to be a newborn; did they know about the manger? We do know that they found the newborn baby Jesus and his family. They did worship him. Most important, they became heroes in this chapter by listening to God’s warning in their dreams and choosing not to report back to Herod. Instead, they went back to their own country! Personally, I want to know what happened after that. I have to think that their lives were changed forever. I have to believe that they never looked at the stars the same way again.

What message is God giving us in our dreams? Are we willing to pay attention and do what God is telling us to do?

Diane Dyk

Day 3 - Matthew 3

John the Baptist was referred to as the one Isaiah spoke of when he said, “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (vs. 3)

I sometimes feel like we live in a cultural wilderness that is barren without God’s Word. All around us lives are filled to the brim, bursting at the seams even, with social media, notifications, advertisements, TV shows, a drive to succeed in careers, good causes (but not God causes), recreational pursuits, and a host of other things. It is a wilderness of distraction. It is a wilderness without Living Water that quenches eternal thirst. People search to be filled, but don’t know how.

In today’s wilderness, there is still a voice calling out to us like John, telling us to prepare the way for the Lord. Jesus is the only source of deep satisfaction and lasting fulfillment. The way to him is the same as it was in the days of John —repent. This may seem silly to us at first. We may think to ourselves, “What do I have to repent of?” The Pharisees saw no need to repent, and Jesus called them a brood of vipers. He told them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (vs. 8). Repentance is still key to making a way for Jesus’s presence in our lives. This simple act of confessing our shortcomings to God makes all the difference. It is how we must be emptied so God can fill.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive me my shortcomings, failures, and sins. Fill me with your presence and reveal yourself to me. In this wilderness, let me hear your voice, and let my voice also be yours to call out to the lost.

Colette Leingang

Day 4 – Matthew 4

We all face temptation daily. Americans have to be one of the most marketed to societies on the planet. Advertising campaigns encourage us to indulge our deepest desires in order to be complete. 'Buy this car. Eat this food. Wear these clothes. Have these things and you'll be happy.' It's a lie that can leave us feeling empty, wanting more.

We can learn a lot from how Jesus fought temptation. Fasting for 40 days and nights may be excessive, but fasting, if even for one meal, is a conscious effort to practice self-control and to focus our minds and spirit on God. In fact, our Methodist founder, John Wesley, advocated fasting weekly on Wednesdays and Fridays as a regular spiritual discipline.

Reading God's word is another way to arm our spirits against temptation. As Jesus said, 'people do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' It may not be realistic in our weakest moments to read Scripture, but beginning each day in prayerful devotion to God's word may help prepare us for those times we are tempted.

Being conscious of the times we are feeling tempted and removing ourselves from situations that may tempt us give us power. Armed with the spiritual disciplines of fasting, prayer and Scripture we can overcome temptation and win the ongoing battle against sin.

Sean Thorenson

Day 5 - Matthew 5:1-20

My second job out of college was as a teacher for a growing photo preservation retailer. With the company's rapid growth, my role quickly changed to include class development as well as travel for new store set-up and opening. The expansion meant that neither my managers nor the company's HR team developed clear expectations or a job description for my position. Unfortunately, the happiness, challenge, and excitement of my new role were eventually replaced with confusion and frustration. Although many people work well without formal job descriptions, this outcome could have been very different with clear communication of expectations and a shared understanding of objectives.

Jesus's rapidly expanding ministry as described in the beginning of Matthew required just such communication. After Jesus endured 40 days of temptation by Satan in the desert and called his disciples, Chapter 5 details the first of many "staff meetings."

In this passage, Jesus takes the time to communicate the traits he was looking for in his followers. This list of expectations contradicted societal norms, but promised happiness and joy. His followers give when others take, love when others hate, and help when others abuse. Has knowing Christ changed your priorities and relationships? Are you more others-centric than you used to be? Do you find that your presence in a difficult situation brings peace? If your life is starting to look more and more like this list, then Jesus says you are in the right place.

- 1) Which of the character traits listed in Chapter 5 come easily for you?
- 2) Which do you struggle with the most?
- 3) Pray and ask God what you can do to live generously and graciously toward others this week.

Amanda Rue

Day 6 - Matthew 5:21-48

At first glance, Jesus's words in this passage seem contradictory. Matthew 5:17 makes clear that Jesus did not oppose God's law or the writings of the prophets. The statements in verses 21-48 make it seem as if he is saying, "Moses said one thing, but I am saying another." However, upon further examination, we find that Jesus is not opposing the law, but rather further interpreting it. He does not believe it is enough.

It is not enough, for example, to refrain from murder (vs. 21), if in anger, I carelessly insult or curse another person. Jesus makes this command complete by reminding his disciples that words have the power for life or death (Proverbs 18:21).

Although I may never commit the physical act of adultery (vs. 27), Jesus offers a fuller interpretation of this command by reminding listeners that "your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body (vs. 28 MSG)."

Anyone can love their neighbor and hate their enemy (vs. 43), but Jesus has a higher mark for his followers. When we are mistreated, hurt, taken advantage of, or treated unfairly, we are called to respond in love and prayer and to let those situations bring out our best, not our worst (vs. 44 MSG).

If there is any contradiction to be found in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, it is in Jesus's counter-cultural ideas. We cannot claim to follow God and live any way we please. Christ followers who encounter God's Word are never the same again. Jesus cares about what we do and who we are.

Amanda Rue

Day 7 - Matthew 6:1-15

I'm no good at praying. Most of the time I pray for the most selfish things such as finding enough change in the couch to feed my sudden craving for coffee ice cream, take away my unrelenting cold, or that my next day at work won't stress me out.

But the big prayers, the intercessory prayers, the prayers for others' healing -- the ones that bring about real results -- those are few and far between. Embarrassingly so.

I also admit to a bit of jealousy when I hear the eloquent prayers in church or other gatherings. I see other people add their heartfelt prayers on social media for others in need, and I wonder why I can't do the same.

While I care that my prayers seem lackluster by my own standards, Jesus doesn't. In Matthew 6:5-12 he told us what not to do such as praying where everyone can see, and babbling on and on. He also showed us what we should do. Verse eight is particularly heartening: "Don't be like them, for your father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!"

The structure and length of our prayers matter less (if at all) than when we pray with our heart first and foremost. Even the selfish ones, because we can't hide anything from God anyway. Our words don't need to sing in other people's ears -- or even our own -- because our heart will always sing more beautifully to God's ears.

Andra Marquardt

Day 8 – Matthew 6:16-34

I like to say that if there's nothing to worry about, something's wrong. To worry seems to be part of the fabric of my being. I can't escape it. My worries vary from the mundane such as if I forgot to turn off the coffee machine before I left work, to the more serious such as whether or not my family can afford health insurance next year.

I don't think it is insignificant that Jesus is talking about money in Matthew 6:19-24 prior to talking about worry in verses 25-34. Most of our worries focus on money, because without money, we can't do anything else, including eat.

Jesus asks in verse 30: "Why do you have so little faith?"

Why indeed. Jesus is pointing out that worry is the opposite of faith, and a consequence of our lack of faith is worry. To worry is believing that God cares more about the birds and the wildflowers than he does about us. How many of us, after all, worry about birds in the winter, or the wildflowers during a hot, dry summer? We don't, because we know God gave them the means to survive and thrive.

With faith comes trust that God will provide. That's not to say life doesn't throw us a punch in the gut, or make us face sometimes deadly hardships. God, however, will always give us the wisdom and strength to endure when needed — as long as we believe he will.

"So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today." ~ Matthew 6:34

Andra Marquardt

Day 9 – Matthew 7:1-12

Jesus finishes this group of verses with this, in verse 12: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law of the Prophets.”

Jesus’s positive statement of the Golden Rule has us doing helpful, kind, loving and thoughtful things, because we would like others to treat us that way. As a teacher and parent, I know that a positive approach to rules is a more successful when working with kids than the negative. When we put our energy into living by the positive rule, it makes our lives more pleasant, as well as showing the love of Christ in our hearts. We will forgive as we wish to be forgiven, help as we wish to be helped, praise as we wish to be praised, and understand as we wish to be understood. To live the “Jesus Rule,” we must do good to people in advance of their doing good to us, and trust that our reward will come later. We need to use prayer to neutralize a critical and unloving spirit, pray for wisdom, and pray to be open to the way our Father wants us to live.

Pray: Father, help me to redirect my destructive thoughts and energy to productive prayer. Help me to be more forgiving and understanding. Help me to do good in advance and trust that my reward will come later.

Lori Campbell

Day 10 - Matthew 7:13-29

It's been a number of years since Dan Brown wrote the Da Vinci Code. The book was a fictional mystery thriller novel that included and distorted core aspects of Christianity. I started reading the book after a conversation with a family member. This family member was questioning his understanding of Jesus after reading this book, so I had to figure out what Dan Brown wrote. I have to admit that I really enjoyed the book and the following books in the series. Unlike my relative, the book never swayed my understanding of who Jesus is or changed my beliefs, but I could definitely see how people could be swayed.

Jesus told the disciples to "Watch out for false prophets" (Matthew 7:15). Jesus is saying that there will be times that it may be hard to differentiate between these false prophets and the Truth. He directs us to look at the fruit that is produced. When I did research on Dan Brown and his books, it became evident that he was not looking to spread the Truth. Mr. Brown fabricates history, which is what many fictional authors do. The difference between other authors and Mr. Brown is that Mr. Brown did several interviews stating that all or 99% of the historical background in his book was true. His website at the time even had a page with all the facts proving that the background information was true. One of the problems, however, was that the book states that Gnosticism was suppressed by the Roman Emperor because it portrayed Jesus as purely human. The Roman Emperor wanted to promote Christianity by showing Jesus as a demigod. The problem with this supposed historical background is that all Gnostic writings depict Jesus as purely divine, so why would the Roman Emperor suppress Gnosticism? This, in addition to several other distortions in the book, caused me to conclude that Mr. Brown was saying what would sell more of his books.

The fruit coming from his tree was about what would benefit him and not spread the Truth. There will be many false prophets throughout our lives. Let us pray that we are able to follow Jesus' advice and focus on the type of fruit that is produced.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 11 – Matthew 8:1-17

The Roman Centurion exhibited more faith, according to Jesus, than God's chosen people. This gentile soldier was a man of power, but at the same time revealed his humility while acknowledging Christ's omnipotence. Because the Centurion believed, his servant was healed, even at a distance. What a remarkable testimony to the power of great faith.

Imagine the Roman soldier's return home to find his young servant fully healed. Do you think he would keep this miracle a secret? It's likely that his faith increased even more, making it impossible for him to not share the good news with others. Think of the empowering influence of a strong faith. Sharing such experiences could help plant the seeds of faith in non-believers. It could reaffirm and bolster the faith of current believers. Faith is a conduit of God's good grace. When we have faith in God, we find that all things are possible.

Sean Thorenson

Day 12 - Matthew 8:18-34

I like my life. I have a wonderful husband and son, a great job, and I want for nothing. Or should I say, I need for nothing. I want for many things, but a lot of those things I don't need. As I look around my cluttered home, I can afford to get rid of a lot of those one-time wants.

Another of his disciples said,
"Lord, first let me return home and bury my father."
But Jesus told him, "Follow me now.
Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead."

~ Matthew 8:21-22

When I look at those passages, I am conflicted — and convicted. Admittedly, I often hope Jesus doesn't ask me to sacrifice my husband, son, home, job, and every worldly good I've accumulated to follow him — even though he sacrificed everything for me.

This is where faith comes into play. Sure, Jesus may ask us to give up everything we've built and care for, but he'll never leave us with nothing and nowhere to go. If anything, his blessings increase, though they may appear in ways we never imagined. The disciples who dropped everything to follow him without a single "but" ended up literally walking with God. If we long for that same intimacy, we should eliminate "but" from our vocabulary as well.

In the end, what's more important? The treasures we gain here, and can't take with us, or the riches built in Heaven because we willingly gave up everything to follow Jesus?

Andra Marquardt

Day 13 - Matthew 9

We all know that God's timing usually doesn't line up with our own timing. We would like God to answer our prayers quickly. Prayers for healing, prayers to relieve financial stress, prayers to understand what our purpose in life is. Why doesn't God answer those prayers now? It can be hard for us who don't physically hear God's voice every time we pray. When I read about the leader who asks Jesus to bring his daughter back to life, I wonder if he felt the same as we do right away or if it was worse for him. His daughter just died and he must have been at his wits end. What is he going to do? He knows Jesus is nearby, so he goes and asks that he bring her back to life. Unlike us, he gets an immediate answer as Jesus and his disciples get up and go with him. We aren't told that Jesus said that he would bring her back to life, so the leader is probably feeling like we would. Will this really work? Is He going to answer my request?

Along the way home is where I think this leader must have started getting frustrated. Jesus is making his way through the crowds when he stops to locate a woman who touched him. Can you image what the leader is thinking? We're seriously stopping to talk to one of these people that touched you? Can we hurry along? This is my daughter's life! Maybe the leader was more patient than I would be and he wasn't thinking any of that. The leader really doesn't have to wait that long. Jesus does arrive at his home and he does bring his daughter back to life. Maybe Jesus was testing him to see if he truly believed that his daughter could be raised. Or maybe we should remember that Jesus was truly there to save all people. Jesus knew exactly what that woman needed at that exact time. She wanted to be healed. Jesus wanted her to know how important her faith was.

We may get frustrated that our prayers seem to be answered slowly when they are answered. Just remember that Jesus knows exactly what we need and when we need it.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 14 - Matthew 10

Have you ever found yourself feeling that you have nothing left to give?
Not one more minute, not one more bit of advice, not one more dime, not
one more meeting, not one more _____?

In the midst of exhaustion from day to day life, it's hard to remember the promise that God has given us the ability to generously give and he will sustain us and take care of our needs. We need to trust that God will fill us with unlimited resources for love, patience, wisdom, and service to others.

Pray: Father, help me begin and end each day filled with the promise that you sustain me every day with the unlimited resources I need and the knowledge that I can give freely without fear of running out. Help me to draw from your strength and not my own.

Lori Campbell

Day 15 - Matthew 11

I tend to have many questions for God throughout my day. Questions about life, about raising daughters, about being a husband, about being a friend, about purpose, about why bad things happen and about why good things happen. I sometimes wonder if I'll ever get to the point where He has given me all these answers and I don't have to ask so many questions any longer. Then I read about John the Baptist and realize I have a long way to go.

In Matthew 11, we see that even the greatest of humans had questions. Jesus says of John the Baptist, "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater" (Matthew 11:11). John, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and knew that the Son of Man was coming, had a question and possibly some doubts. In Matthew 11:3, we read that John sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" This was John who had spent his life preparing the way for Jesus. He knew what the prophets before him said about Jesus. He had even baptized Jesus. Shouldn't he have known that Jesus was the Messiah?

I would like to think that if I was able to be there when Jesus was baptized I would have known and believed that Jesus was the Messiah. In reality, like John, I can be given all the evidence in the world that Jesus is my Savior, but when hard times come I also will question Jesus. Are you really there Lord? Are you really going to do what you say? If the greatest of all humans can question who Jesus is, all of us that are far from the greatest can't be expected to go through life without doubts. Today's reading gives me solace to know that it is okay to question God.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 16 - Matthew 12

Jesus found ways to teach very simple concepts in very complicated ways. Take Matthew 12:9-12 for example. Wouldn't it have been easier to say that you should always do good to anyone you meet?

He is trying to show us that all people are important in the eyes of God, and there is NEVER a bad time to do something kind for someone. What the priests are asking him to decide is whether it is better to observe God's law or do good for someone in need. His answer is very clear. Do good! Do good for everyone you meet! Do good for everyone you can, whenever you can, in every way you can. This is the plan that God has laid out for us, and the challenge he has laid before us.

Be it on a Sunday or a Tuesday, daytime or nighttime, during the Christmas season, the Easter season, or during our everyday lives, there are always moments where we can choose to either continue on our way, or stop to make a difference for someone.

I often think more about the "big things" that I do, or do not do, when I am considering the difference that I have made in the world. For you, that might mean giving to charity, doing service projects, contributing the Legacy Onward project, or any number of other things. These, though, are the things that I tend to remember during only certain times of the year like Christmas, Easter, etc.

I challenge you to think about the things that you do in your everyday life that make a difference for someone else. How many times have you smiled at someone walking down the street, held open a door for the person walking in behind you, or helped a neighbor by watching their kid for a while? How much impact, when you add it up, have the little things you have done in your life had on those around you?

Do your best to follow in the path of Jesus. Do good for all the people you can, whenever you can!

Aaron Van Ningen

Day 17 – Matthew 13

I've never had much of a 'green thumb'. In fact, most summers getting my lawn to look healthy and green requires far more work than I feel it's worth. With some serious effort I can produce an impressive stand of green grass, but I still have some stubborn patches where nothing seems to grow at all. I concentrate my full attention on those barren, desolate areas, working the soil, raking in fertilizer, sprinkling seed, mulching and watering faithfully for weeks in hopes of seeing signs of life sprouting forth. It's work.

My spiritual life requires work, too. Much like growing grass, a strong and healthy relationship with Christ requires discipline and daily devotion. Finding that time in my day for distraction-free study helps me maintain focus. Engaging in small group discussions keep my heart and mind cultivated with the spirit. I'm not immune to dry spells. Sin can harden my heart at times and it isn't long before a lack of discipline causes some of that new growth to wither.

Certainly, maintaining a green lawn is a selfish and somewhat vain pursuit, so I'm not as devastated when I see the brown patches forming, but my receptiveness to God's word and the condition of my heart to grow in the spirit is and should be a far greater priority.

Sean Thorenson

Day 18 - Matthew 14

Chapter 14 highlights two of Jesus's best-known miracles. The first is the feeding of the 5000. I love that Jesus leads his disciples and followers toward the great gift of hospitality. Every household cook knows the discomfort of having a couple of unexpected guests when the planned meal is pork chops. I can't imagine 5000 hungry people, and I love that there were 12 baskets of leftovers! I know many of us have prayed over our sometimes meager offerings and hoped for a feast. It gives me hope that our God loves us and is able to do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

The other well-loved miracle in this chapter is Jesus walking on water. He had dismissed the well-fed crowd and gone to the mountains to pray. Take a minute to think about that. Jesus feeds a multitude of people, then goes to recharge. What a good example! Instead of rushing around, he prays. Only then does Jesus walk on the water to go to his disciples on the boat. He goes to offer comfort, and impulsive Peter rushes out to him. Jesus saves Peter and brings him back to the boat. There was no more rest for Jesus. After he arrived on land, he healed many people and continued his healing ministry. May your faith be encouraged today knowing that truly we follow the Son of God!

Diane Dyk

Day 19 - Matthew 15

God's Word is living and breathing, growing and changing as a living organism does. Though the Word outgrows human tradition, it remains truth from the same unchanging God. Sometimes we need to break cultural or societal norms and traditions to reach out with God's truth and love. It may be necessary to plant God's Word in our hearts.

Jesus taught that what is on the inside, the heart, and what springs forth from it, is what matters. Traditions which hold meaning are beautiful, but we must be careful as human traditions can lead people astray and alienate those who seek a relationship with Christ. The highest command is love.

God showed us that broken bread shared is multiplied many times over. He took seven loafs, gave thanks, and broke them to feed four thousand people he felt compassion for (vs. 32-38). Faith and compassion are God's will; and in this will, God's provision is found.

Have faith and compassion. We as a society are distracted, pulled in a million different directions, and seemingly engrossed in a digital world. Some may say snap out of it. Maybe God is calling us to snap into it. Jesus healed on the Sabbath (breaking with tradition) because that is what love called for. What does love call us to do today?

Dare: Find a Bible verse this week that speaks to your heart and share it. If you are on social media, your challenge is to snap, post, or tweet this verse. You never know, it could be someone's daily bread.

Colette Leingang

Day 20 - Matthew 16:1-12

One of my favorite sayings comes from author Andy Andrews, although I think others have said similar things. Andy says, "Don't believe everything you think." What Andy means is that not everything you think is going to be the truth. As I grew up, my thoughts and beliefs were guided by those around me and the things I read. Not everyone I was around had the same thoughts and beliefs as each other, so the chances were pretty good that some of what I grew to believe was not true. For example, how many of us believe that we only use 10% of our brain? I think I was told that in school. The truth is, the parts of our brains that are active at any one time is dependent on what activity we are doing, but ultimately, every part of our brain is used almost every day. When I read that in an article, I was amazed that I spent all these years believing something that's not true, but I was willing to change my thinking for this one truth that really doesn't affect me.

The biggest challenge for each of us is when someone challenges those beliefs of ours that we regard as core beliefs. This is what happened with the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had grown to believe that they fully understood the Scriptures and that all the rules they had put in place were for the good of all of God's people. When Jesus came and challenged their thinking, offering miraculous signs, they were unable to change their thinking. In today's reading, they ask Jesus to give them a sign from Heaven. Jesus had been giving them many signs. He knew that one more was not going to change their minds and hearts. Let's not be like the Pharisees or Sadducees. We each have our own thoughts and beliefs. I don't want you to automatically change your beliefs, but if we can all be open to the idea that everything we think is not the truth, we will be open to others' thoughts. In the end, this idea could strengthen our relationships and help us all get to the Truth.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 21 - Matthew 16:13-28

“But Peter . . . began to reprimand him . . . ‘Heaven forbid, Lord,’ he said. ‘This will never happen you you!’ Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s” ~ Matthew 16:22-23

My son used to beg me to not go to work. He couldn’t understand why I had to leave, or the potential consequences if I stayed (such as losing my job). He only cared that I was leaving. I don’t know who hurt more when I left -- him or me.

Jesus’ response to Peter always intrigued me. It seemed excessive to call Peter “Satan” over his understandable desire to keep Jesus with him. After all, no one wants to see those we love die.

Jesus understood this, too, I think. A part of him wanted to stay, and not give himself over to torture and death. But he also knew God’s view -- the long and eternal view -- and the consequences should he give in to the temptation to stay.

I, too, often see from a single -- and selfish -- point of view. Like my son, I live in the moment, and as such ignore the potential long-term consequences. How, then, do we see through God’s eyes?

Jesus tells us in verses 24-26: “. . . If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?”

Andra Marquardt

Day 22 - Matthew 17

I cannot begin to imagine what Peter, James and John were feeling when they witnessed the Transfiguration of Christ. This was the most brilliant vision of Jesus they had ever seen. He was still recognizable, as were Moses and Elijah, but simply more perfect.

If you've ever witnessed the seemingly sudden transformation of someone who has lost a lot of weight because you don't see them every day, it is quite a shock. They still look familiar but are a much healthier version of their previous self. Experiencing this may inspire us to adopt the healthy habits that led to the hard-won physical transformation of that individual.

Similarly, witnessing the beauty of Christ's eternal being while on the mountaintop had to have a profound effect on the enduring faith of Peter, James and John. Seeing the brilliance of God in Christ's countenance first hand must have been quite the spiritual transformation for these disciples. This powerful experience had to help them understand Heavenly salvation and that Jesus would, indeed, conquer death.

Sean Thorenson

Day 23 - Matthew 18

I love that Jesus, when asked who ranks highest in the kingdom of heaven, calls a child over and says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." In The Message it says, "Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom." It gives me hope that though I am not at all theological and can't quote a lot of Scriptures or laws, the fact that I relate better to children and like to be around them (hopefully helping and teaching them) will allow me to also receive Jesus. Giving real help to children, and the childlike, brings us closer to God.

My friend from Thailand, Somsong, once told me that one of the things that sets Christianity apart from other religions is the belief that everyone is a beloved child of God. Everyone is worth saving. Everyone belongs. Become simple and elemental like a child and choose to belong.

Diane Dyk

Day 24 - Matthew 19

Jesus addresses divorce, childlike faith, and wealth in Chapter 19. Let's talk about wealth:

“Jesus told him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’” Matthew 19:21 (NLT)

If Jesus was still walking this Earth and said this, how would you react? These words would cause very serious soul searching. This is God talking. Our first thoughts would be, wait a minute! How would I live, pay my bills, eat, etc. Our concerns would go on and on. Maybe Jesus's words were meant to challenge us. Do we worship money and possessions more than we worship God? His invitation is “come, follow me.” These words remind us to serve Him instead of ourselves. Are we willing to do this? Or, will our reaction be similar to verse 22 which says, “But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

We all struggle and have concerns with money. Many marriage arguments center around money. Just when we think we finally got a handle on our finances, some major money need (car repairs, appliances, etc.) comes along and the concerns start all over again.

We need to remember everything belongs to God. He wants us to be good stewards of what He has given us. Our attitude towards money and how we manage it is the foundation that sets the stage for every other aspect of our spiritual lives.

Begin by tithing. Start by giving 1% or 2% of your income and try to increase this percentage each year. You will be amazed how God will bless you to make this possible. Trust in Him!

Bruce Walth

Day 25 - Matthew 20

Among the familiar lessons in this chapter of Matthew's gospel is the parable of the Vineyard Workers. In today's economic times, it is difficult to read this story without naturally applying that familiar filter of financial justice where more hours yield a bigger paycheck. Almost too naturally, we have difficulty with those individuals in the story who worked only an hour to receive the same full day's wage as those that toiled longer.

The inequity is certainly relatable, and it may very well be the reason why Jesus chose it as a powerful allegory for the grace and salvation extended to all who enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is yet another reminder that Heaven will be nothing like this world. There will be no seniority system, where a better life in Heaven can be 'earned' by those who have been saved longer.

Like all those who worked the master's vineyards in the parable, eternal life is the reward for all that come to Christ, whether it happens in middle school or middle-age. We should rejoice in the just grace of our Heavenly Father.

Sean Thorenson

Day 26 - Matthew 21

When is it too late to follow God's word? In Matthew 21:28-31, Jesus shows us clearly that this answer is "never." He explains to the chief priests and elders of the temple that those who hear God's word and repent even after a lifetime of sinning, hold a higher place than those who have heard the word of God from a young age, but do not follow it.

This may cause you to reflect in many different ways. If you are someone just starting to understand the goodness of God's grace and his forgiveness of sins, this knowledge is the key to your life. By simply believing and following the teachings of Jesus from this point forth, ALL your sins are now forgiven, and you will go to God's kingdom after your life on Earth.

I see this passage from the opposite perspective, however. I have known God's love, kindness, and forgiveness from an early age. But when I think back over my life, I wonder how God sees my actions. At times I heard his requests and obeyed, but I know that I also ignored them.

Regardless of who we may resemble in this story, the beauty of this message is that the point at which we surrender does not matter. We can start anew today! I am allowed to let yesterday go, and to move forward with the knowledge that God is guiding me in a better way. Through the forgiveness brought by Jesus's death, I am assured a place in Heaven. Not because of anything I have done to earn this, but to the contrary, in spite of it.

Though I know that at times, I have not listened to God's request to go work in his vineyard, I hear that call today. It is time to tend the vines! It is time to let others know that God loves them too, so that his message can continue to spread throughout the Earth.

Aaron Van Ningen

Day 27 - Matthew 22

When Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem, He told a story about a wedding banquet. A king was throwing a wedding party for his son, and he sent his servants to gather the invited guests. But the guests refused the king's invitation and literally killed the messengers! The servants were only trying to bring people to the king's table so they could enjoy all he had to offer them, but the servants were killed for it!

How many times have we “killed” the messenger? We receive wise and godly counsel that we're not willing to accept on subjects where we know we're wrong, but certainly won't admit it. Even when the truth is spoken in love, we shut that messenger down simply because it's not what we want to hear. Shedding light on those areas would most likely make us uncomfortable, it might even hurt a bit, and it would definitely involve admitting we're wrong.

If we're honest with ourselves, we would probably find that sometimes that messenger is the Holy Spirit. A still, small voice inside corrects us and gives us gentle guidance that's difficult to take. It's easier to ignore or shut out the messengers than to truly assess ourselves and consider their advice. And eventually, ignoring them ends up hurting us more than listening ever would have.

Jesus ended His story by saying, “Many get invited; only a few make it.” When we get invited to deal with our issues, right our wrongs, or even just sit at the King's table, I pray that we spare the messenger, leave our pride at the door, and accept the invitation. Be open to everything the King has to offer this Lenten season.

Bethany Whitworth

Day 28 - Matthew 23

In reading chapter 23 of Matthew, I wondered how it applied to me. I'm no teacher of the law, or religion. I've never attended a legalistic church, so the idea of following the law and the law alone seems rather foreign to me.

Ah, but legalism is a subtle trap. Sometimes we don't realize just how much energy we spend on trying to follow the law until we stop, and think about it.

Three particular verses showed me that I, too, am not immune from placing the law above my faith.

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law — justice, mercy and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.”

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy — full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.”

~ Matthew 23:23, 25-26

The second part of verse 26 is key. Do I do good to attempt to clean the filth in my heart, or because my heart is clean? This is a tough but necessary question we must ask ourselves. Following the law and the law alone is a lot easier than taking an honest look at our heart. Jesus wants our faith to determine our good works instead of depending on our good works to determine our faith. The heart can't be cleaned any other way.

Andra Marquardt

Day 29 - Matthew 24

When will Jesus come again? Jesus tells us, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." In Matthew 24, Jesus tells about his second coming. Although he doesn't give exact date and time, he provides enough information for us to recognize signs of his coming.

- Birth pangs: false Christs, wars, famine, earthquakes.
- Believers persecuted and hated by all nations; many falling away from faith.
- False prophets and wickedness abound; love grows cold.
- Gospel preached throughout the entire world.
- World suffers distress and tribulation previously unequaled.
- Sun and moon are darkened; stars fall from the sky; heavens shake.

Then, Jesus returns to gather the chosen. One could argue many of these signs have already taken place. The problem is we don't know. The end could be near.

What must we do to be ready? Verse 13 says, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved." Keep the faith and demonstrate it to the end, no matter what. Verses 42 & 44 say, "Keep watch, for you know not what day your Lord will come. You also must be ready, the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." Live life as Jesus taught us. The saying, "Do what's right, even when no one is watching" applies, for Jesus is watching and will choose when he comes.

If Jesus came today, would he choose you? Have you professed your faith? Are you living as directed? Don't wait until tomorrow to demonstrate your faith and live a Christian life. Do it now, for when Jesus comes, you'll not want to be left behind. Are you ready? My friend, it is not too late. Anyone who believes and confesses will be saved. Live life as though Jesus is coming today.

Jeff Schneider

Day 30 - Matthew 25

In the Parable of Talents, God calls for faithfulness in the use of our talents. It's a parable of warning and promise. Have you ever found yourself saying the words, "I can't do that, it's not one of my gifts or I'm not talented enough to do that?" I wonder how many of us bury our talents because of fear of failure or unwillingness to try something new. When we carry these beliefs about ourselves, we limit God and restrict our potential for service. God calls us for a life of service to him and others. Sometimes that might involve taking a risk, making a change, or stepping out of our little boxes to discover something new about ourselves. This parable contains a warning that God will hold us accountable for the use of our talents.

Pray: Thank you Father for the many special talents I have been given: both those I use and those I have yet to discover. Help me to use those talents in service of you and of others so that one day I will hear you say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21)

Lori Campbell

Day 31 – Matthew 26

A number of years ago, our laptop started to have problems. It was getting slow. The monitor didn't work sometimes. It was about four years old, which, unfortunately, is about the lifespan of a laptop. I talked to my wife about buying a new one before the old one completely dies. That conversation, which probably didn't last very long, gave me what I thought was the go ahead to purchase a new laptop. When the new laptop showed up, I found out that my wife had initially agreed to talk about getting a new laptop. She was not agreeing to actually getting one. She couldn't believe I'd go and spend that kind of money without talking to her. I'm hopeful that I'm not the only husband that occasionally misunderstands his wife.

In today's verses, we find Jesus and his disciples in Gethsemane. The large crowd comes with Judas to arrest Jesus and Peter believes this is the time that they have been waiting for. This is when Jesus will reveal his power and they will take over. Peter wants to be part of this. He pulls his sword and gets the action started. After Peter cuts off the servant's ear, Jesus rebukes him and basically tells him to stand down. I think I know how Peter felt at that time.

What do you mean you didn't want me to buy a laptop? I thought we agreed on this. Prior to this time at Gethsemane, Jesus had told the disciples that "those who don't own a sword must sell their clothes and buy one...what's written about me is nearing completion (Luke 22:36-37)." Peter thought he was just doing what Jesus had wanted. Luckily for Peter and for us, Jesus was willing to forgive him and guide him on the path to building His church. Luckily for me, my wife also forgave me. We now have a very good understanding of when purchases can be made over a certain dollar amount.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 32 - Matthew 27

Matthew 27 vividly portrays the story of Jesus's betrayal, trial, and ultimate sacrifice. As we continue to look for opportunities for self-reflection and respond to his sacrifice during Lent, let's consider the responses of two of Jesus's disciples.

In Chapter 26, Jesus predicts both the denial (vs. 34) and betrayal (vs. 21) of who we now know was Peter and Judas respectively. Although both stories include similarities, their responses and outcomes are very different. At Jesus's words, Peter vehemently denies the accusation while Judas feigns innocence and has plans to betray Jesus. Two men whom Jesus poured his heart and life into, both made terrible mistakes and sinned. Both Peter and Judas experience great sorrow over their sin. Peter's sorrow leads to repentance and a changed life, and Judas's leads only to regret and hopelessness.

1) Imperfect lives do not exclude us from the hope of the cross-knowing Jesus. Do you identify with Peter and Judas? Why or why not?

2) Is there sin in your life keeping you from experiencing all that God has for you? This Lent, receive the life God intended for you through the cross! Respond and receive real and eternal life, more and better life than you could have ever dreamed of (John 10:10 MSG).

Amanda Rue

Day 33 - Matthew 28

Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as He said would happen." Matthew 28:5-6 (NLT)

Have you ever given serious thought to the resurrection of Jesus? How could a dead corpse of three days all of a sudden have blood running through its veins, a heart beating again, holes in its hands, feet and side no longer bleeding, and a brain totally functioning? Doctors would tell you it is physically not possible. "But with God everything is possible." Matthew 19:26.

Wasn't Jesus's death enough? He already died for our sins. Our sins went to the cross with Him. So our sins are forgiven. Couldn't Jesus have just remained in the tomb and we could remember Him and pay our respects to Him there? The answer is a resounding NO! for these reasons:

1. Jesus rose from the dead as He promised.
2. The living Christ is ruler of God's eternal Kingdom.
3. Because of His resurrection, we can be certain of our resurrection.
4. His resurrection is the basis for the church's witness to the world. He is the Son of God.

The resurrection is necessary. We are crucified with Christ, meaning our self-centered lives died when Jesus died. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, we can have a new life where we can worship and serve a risen Savior.

Jesus's final words to His disciples (and to us) are found in verse 19, "Go and make disciples of all the nations." Then in verse 20, Jesus gives us words of reassurance saying, "And be sure of this: I am with you always."

Bruce Walth