

## Study Guide for the Gospel of Matthew

### *Approaching the Gospel of Matthew: Initial Reflections*

**Assigned Reading:** Gospel of Matthew, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter 6.

After you have listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in the Gospel of Matthew.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of the Gospel of Matthew in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about the Gospels in general and the Gospel of Matthew in particular.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

In interpreting the Gospel of Matthew or any of the Gospels, one important goal is to get a sense of the narrative as a whole. Read through the Gospel of Matthew again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words what you think Matthew's story of Jesus is about.
- Make a list of important themes and some of the ways your own understanding of Matthew is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

### *Deeper Engagement with the Gospel of Matthew*

In both the world behind the Gospel of Matthew and the world of Matthew's story there is an on-going tension between external polemics and internal reassurances. As noted in the lecture and your textbook, Matthew is seeking to fortify his minority Christian community by delegitimizing the leadership of mainstream synagogue communities. Within the story, religious leaders of various types almost always wrongly interpret who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. If they are not clueless in a given situation, they are actively opposing him (e.g., 9:1-13, 32-34; 12:1-8, 22-33). On a regular basis, they engage him in theological showdowns, conspire against him, seek to do him in, and finally concoct a false story about his resurrection (e.g., 12:9-14, 38-45; 15:1-9; 16:1-12; 20:18-19; 21:33-46; 26:3-5, 14-16; 27:1-2, 20, 41-43, 62-66; 28:11-15). They are blind guides who will lead people away from God. Through such negative characterizations of the religious authorities, Matthew is seeking to move his audience in the world behind the text away from the influence of such leadership within the mainstream synagogue communities of his day.

The flipside of Matthew's polemic against outside religious authorities involves the reassurances he seeks to offer to his minority religious community which lives at the margins of both

mainstream Jewish synagogue communities and Greco-Roman society. Through his story, Matthew is reassuring his audience that God's true presence dwells in the midst of their community because Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God with us (1:21-23; 18:18-20; 28:20). This community gathered by and around Jesus is the true heir of Israel because God's promises and plans to Israel find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus (1:1-17; 2:4-6, 14-15, 22-23; 4:12-16; 12:15-21).

Ultimately in Matthew, the tensions within the text between polemics against the religious authorities of his day and the reassurance of Jesus' ongoing presence are also meant to lead to responsible, obedient discipleship. As noted in both the lecture and our textbook, the issue of active and obedient discipleship is not a matter of Jesus vs. the law. Rather the issue for Matthew involves understanding and doing the law as filtered through Jesus vs. understanding and doing the law not filtered through Jesus. Hence Matthew wants his audience to come to Jesus and learn from him what it means to do the exceeding righteousness which the religious leaders fail to accomplish.

### *An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation*

The following is an exercise for you to do on your own in which you will apply what you are learning about the Gospel of Matthew. Take notes for yourself so that you have content you can refer to in the discussion with other class participants. These notes may also be useful to you in your final paper.

- Read Matthew 23:13-15, 27-36; 27:62-66; 28:11-15. Briefly describe the details of the polemical attacks on the religious leaders presented in these passages. How are the religious leaders being characterized? How do they oppose Jesus? How does Matthew oppose them? If you were a member of Matthew's original audience in the world behind the text, what would passages such as these communicate to you? How might some Christians have misused these texts (as well as Matthew 27:24-26) throughout the history of the church to justify anti-Jewish attitudes and actions? How do these texts in Matthew's gospel stand in potential contrast with other texts from Matthew such as 5:43-48; 18:21-35; 22:34-40?
- Read Matthew 1:18-25; 3:13-17; 6:25-34; 9:9-13, 35-38; 11:25-30; 28:16-20. Briefly describe how Matthew is offering reassurance to his readers through who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. If you were a member of Matthew's original audience who lived a marginal existence how might these passages offer reassurance and comfort to you?
- Read Matthew 5:43-48; 7:24-27; 9:9-13; 18:21-35; 22:34-40. Briefly describe what the exceeding righteousness entails for Matthew. In your context in the world in front of the text, what would be some specific examples of Christians hearing and doing this exceeding righteousness as presented in Matthew's stories about Jesus?

## Discussion Questions

- How do you experience the presence of Jesus as Emmanuel (God with us) in your daily life? In your participation within the Christian community?
- How do you and your Christian community take Jesus to others? How do you hear and do Jesus' words on a daily basis? How do you encounter Jesus in the midst of those who are hurting, suffering, and in need?
- When have you or your church communities experienced Jesus taking your inadequate resources and turning them into abundant resources?
- How do we sometimes restrict the geographical and theological spaces of heavens' reign or the church?