

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW
AN OLD PLAN TO SHAPE NEW LIVES
(3) THE INFANCY OF A NEW LIFE

Matthew 11:2-13:53

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SCRIPTURE

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ . . . ¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matthew 11:7-10, 16-19 NRSV).

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV).

⁹He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. ¹¹He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” ¹³Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him (Matthew 12:9-14 (NRSV).

⁴⁶While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, “Look, your

mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”
⁴⁸But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50 (NRSV)).
¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!” ¹⁰Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ ¹⁴With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them’ (Matthew 13:1-15 NRSV).

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another

sixty, and in another thirty” (Matthew 13:18-23 (NRSV)).

⁵¹“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵²And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” ⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place (Matthew 13:51-53 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Matthew’s Gospel is known as the “Teaching Gospel.” It is organized in such a way as to make it quite suitable for use in teaching. It was the most widely used book in the early Church and many consider it to be the greatest book ever written.

In keeping with his Jewish perspective, his Gospel seems to be modeled after the Hexateuch, that is, the first six books of the Bible. Each of the six sections in Matthew includes material on the person of Jesus. Each section has a collection of Jesus’ teachings. Each section ends with the phrase, “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things” or the equivalent.

The first section includes the family lineage, birth, baptism and testing of Jesus as well as the launch of his ministry. Through these Matthew wants to show us that Jesus is the “Son of David” – the prophesied Messiah.

The second section contains stories that depict the power and authority of Jesus.

The third section has some material about Jesus but it also tells us quite a bit about the responses to Jesus. Some, like those who were healed, seemed to have a positive view of Jesus. Some opposed him, including many of the religious leaders. Some were confused or had doubts like John the Baptist.

Why would John have doubts? He was the forerunner of the Messiah in fulfillment of the prophecies of Malachi. He even baptized Jesus. Why would he have doubts?

Anyone can have doubts. John was in prison. He was soon to die. In his melancholy and despair he began to wonder if he had been wrong about Jesus. There had been many false prophets in Israel. What made him so sure that he wasn’t one of them? What if he had led thousands astray? Could imprisonment be God’s judgment?

He sent two of his friends to make inquiries. They asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (11:3). Jesus’s response was notable for its lack of

anger and especially its lack of condemnation. Jon Bloom puts it this way:

The affection that radiated from Jesus was palpable. Jesus was familiar with John's sorrows and grief and the satanic storms that break on the saints when they are weak and alone. He loved John. So he invited John's faithful friends to sit near him as he healed many and delivered many from demonic prisons. Then he turned to them with kind tears glistening in his eyes and said, "Tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them." John would recognize Isaiah's prophecy in those words. This promise would bring the peace John needed to sustain him for the few difficult days he had remaining. Out of love for his friend, Jesus didn't include Isaiah's phrase "proclaim liberty to the captives." John would understand.

None of us are spared sorrow or spiritual oppression. Most of us will experience some sort of agonizing affliction in our lives. There will be moments when we feel as if we have been abandoned.

But "the Savior does not break the bruised reed." He is patient with our doubts and fears. He does not condemn us. In John's darkness and pain Jesus sent a promise to sustain John's faith. He will do the same for you and me.

John and Jesus had very different styles. John was ascetic. Jesus gregarious. But there is no pleasing some people. Jesus comments:

¹⁶"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn' (Matthew 11:16-17 NRSV).

Or as it is sung in "I Danced in the Morning:"

I danced for the scribe and the pharisee,
but they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me.
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John -
they came with me and the dance went on.

The collection of teachings in the first section can be found in chapters five, six, and seven. It is called the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is about

discipleship. It helps us to conceive in our minds what a disciple is. It answers the question, “What does it mean to enter into a new kind of relationship with God?”

The second section of Matthew has a collection of Jesus teachings found mostly in chapter ten (9:35-11:1). This section is about mission. If the first section conceives the idea of a disciple the second section gives birth to it. The first section gives us the mission of Jesus. In the second section the mission of Jesus is extended to his followers. A disciple is born for the mission of Jesus.

As I said earlier, the six sections of Matthew can be compared to the first six books of the Bible. The first six books of the Bible can, in turn, be compared to life stages. The third book, Leviticus, represents the infancy or childhood of the new nation of God’s people. It has lots of rules. Just as young children need rules for their safety, welfare, and for preserving their identity, so too the young nation needed rules for their safety, welfare, and for preserving their identity.

The objective of rules is to develop the ability to say “No” to that which is unhealthy or bad. Don’t touch the stove, it’s hot. Don’t cross the street without an adult. Don’t play with matches. Don’t chew your shoes, and so on and so forth.

What complicates this is that children learn to say “No” for other reasons. Saying “No” is what differentiates them from others. It helps form their unique identity. Consequently they start saying “No” to things we do not want them to say “No” to. Wash your hands. No. Eat your vegetables. No. Kiss Aunt Bessie goodnight. No. The balancing act we call parenting involves letting our children form their own unique identities, on the one hand, and encouraging them to choose what is healthy and good, on the other.

The third section of Matthew contains stories of people behaving like little children. Jesus even refers to them as children. Many of them are saying “No” to Jesus without really thinking about what that means. Some can’t decide. Others start one way and go another. This sets the stage for the third collection of Jesus’ teachings and it is found in chapter thirteen (13:1-53). It is about parables.

A parable is a brief story you can picture in your mind. It almost always has only one salient point. The word comes from a Greek term meaning “throw things together.” Things are thrown together to see how they are similar or different or maybe just for the fun of it. Over time, the word parable came to mean a comparison of two subjects for the purpose of teaching. Some scholars refer to parables as everyday stories with spiritual significance. The Hebrew equivalent is *mashal* (MEHshahl) and it means “riddle.” Many parables are riddles but some are more advanced comparisons such as Jesus’ parable of the

sower.

The parable of the sower is used to explain the differing responses to Jesus. Jesus tells the parable of the sower (3-9). This is followed by an interlude focusing on the purpose of parables (10-17). Then Jesus gives an explanation of the parable of the sower (18-23).

The disciples had enthusiastically responded to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. But it bothered them that not everyone welcomed it in the same way they had. The parable of the sower with its four different scenarios indicates that the response depends not only on the message, represented by the seed, but also on the readiness of those who receive the message, represented by four different kinds of ground: the path, rocky places, thorn infested areas, and good soil. The path represents people who will not listen. The rocky places represent those whose response is superficial. The thorn infested ground represents people who are preoccupied or distracted with other concerns. These differing responses are all too familiar to any preacher of the Gospel both then and now. The point of the parable is that we should not be surprised at the divided response to Jesus's teaching.

The problem lies with the hearers and not with the message. When seed falls on good soil it is productive. This was Jesus' way of assuring us that though we may face indifference or even hostility, there will still be a harvest. We must not give up on telling people the good news of the Kingdom of God.

The disciples asked, "Why do you speak . . . in parables? (13:10). The response of Jesus indicates at least three reasons. First of all, it allowed him to continue his ministry in the face of growing hostility from the leaders of establishment religion. The move from inside a building to the seashore was significant. As Jesus became less and less welcome in the synagogue he began to teach more and more in the open air. Ancient rabbis frequently used parables to illustrate their points but usually only with the literary elite. Agrarian peasants were largely ignored. So when Jesus used parables during his open air ministry in the country, the common people heard him gladly. It meant that in contrast to their leaders, Jesus thought these people mattered.

Secondly, parables have a tendency to reveal who has a hunger for truth. It also reveals those who were too lazy to look for truth, or too blinded by hatred and prejudice to discern it. The meaning of a parable is seldom obvious. You must inquire further. But if you are not interested then the parable is wasted on you. There is a law of atrophy at work here. Jesus says:

For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance;

but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away”
(13:12).

It may seem unfair, but that is life. If you do not use your muscles you eventually lose the use of them. If you do use them, they increase in size and strength. It is the same at the spiritual level. The parables bring light for those who look for it, and for those who do not the darkness intensifies.

Thirdly, parables are intended to elicit a decision. Jesus quotes, with heavy irony, the condemnation Isaiah had issued to the people of his day. A parable was meant to challenge people to think again. It was meant to be a mirror in which they could see what they really looked like. The parable does two things. It draws people to a decision about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Then it gives them room to make that decision.

Modern Christianity seems to have trouble with this. Some churches neglect to encourage people to make a decision about Jesus. Perhaps they are afraid someone might get offended. Some churches fail to give them room to make that decision. They use “hard sell” tactics and manipulation to force a result. Neither approach is healthy. What is needed is to graciously encourage people to make a decision and then give them the space to make it.

There is an old saying: “Congregations preach the longest sermons.” There is a great lesson here. In terms of actual time a preacher may go ten, twenty or even thirty minutes. But the longer sermon belongs to the congregation. For you see, the congregation brings the atmosphere. The congregation brings the expectation. The atmosphere is either a barrier through which the Word cannot penetrate no matter how eloquently delivered or else it is such an expectancy that even a mediocre message filled with starts, stops, and stammers, becomes a living flame. It’s up to you. What kind of sermon do you want to preach?