

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

Matthew 13:54-19:2

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SCRIPTURE

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. ²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:13-33 NRSV).

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matthew 16:13-23 NRSV).

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Matthew 18:1-5 NRSV).

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down

and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35 NRSV).

¹When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan (Matthew 19:1 NRSV).

INSPIRATIONAL QUOTE

A drop of praise is an unsuitable acknowledgment for an ocean of mercy.—William Secker

MESSAGE

The Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah, can be said to represent the teenage years of the new community of faith God created when he freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And what are the characteristics of the teenage years? It is a time of questioning, and rebellion. Adolescents are unsure of their beliefs and often parrot the convictions of others. They struggle in relationships, treating each other with alternating doses of sympathy and cruelty. Numbers is filled with such experiences.

The fourth section of the Gospel of Matthew seems to correspond to the Book of Numbers just as the three previous sections corresponded to Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, respectively. There is definitely a feeling of adolescent spirituality in this section. By the way, adolescent spirituality is not necessarily based on chronological age. I have known teenagers who have been rather mature in their faith. And I have known many adults who were quite adolescent in theirs.

Take Peter, for example. Having already witnessed the public miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, he then catches sight of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee during an early morning storm. Like an impulsive kid he shouts out, "Hey let me try that." So Jesus tells him to step out. To the astonishment of the disciples Peter does exactly that. He walks on water, just like Jesus. But then he wonders what he is doing. He takes his eyes off Jesus. He looks at the wind and the waves. And he begins to get sink. Michael Green comments:

[This was an important story for] the Christian community for which Matthew wrote. It was a pattern both of unbelief and of faith. They were called to go to Jesus, to direct their lives to the walk of faith. But storms often beset them, and fear chilled them. In his power they could for a while do what would otherwise have been impossible—until they considered what they were doing and reflected on the size of the waves. Then, of course, they would begin to sink—until they cried out to the Son of God for his powerful hand to catch them and hold them up. That is what the story would have been used for, and still is.¹

By the end of the story Peter becomes an example of both little faith and of doubt. He is an object-lesson for disciples who are tempted to take their eyes off Jesus and to take more notice of the threatening circumstances around them.

But what I think really shows the adolescence of Peter is the incident referred to as the Great Confession. It is found in chapter sixteen of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus and the disciples had come to a place called Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks his disciples what other people say of him. Some, like Herod, thought he was John the Baptizer come back to life. Others thought he was the prophet Elijah, considered to be one of the greatest prophets of Israel who would appear again one day to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal 4:5). Still others were not willing to say which prophet he was, only that he was someone who had a message from God.

Then Jesus asks his disciples, "And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?" Perhaps a brief silence followed while thoughts came into their heads which they were almost afraid to say aloud. Then Peter makes his great discovery and confession, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Jesus congratulates him and one can almost imagine the peanut gallery shouting, "Great! Fantastic! Wonderful! Hallelujah! Peter hit the nail on the head!"

All is fine until Jesus explains what this means:

“. . .That he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (16:21).

How does Peter respond? Open rebellion. In spite of what he had just said about Jesus,

¹Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (p. 168). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

and in spite of the fact that he had seen Jesus teach with authority, heal the sick, cast out evil spirits, feed thousands of people with five loaves and two fish, and even walk on water, he suddenly acts like Jesus is the biggest idiot on the planet. “No, no. Ain’t going to happen. Forget about that, Jack!”

Those of you who have ever had a teenager know exactly what I’m talking about. As soon as they turn thirteen they start acting like you are the dumbest thing to ever walk this planet. So you look at them and say, “Do you think I’m stupid?” Sooner or later as a parent, you will hear yourself say this. You can’t help it. The question just falls out of your mouth. It’s a mindless rhetorical remark picked up from your parents or grandparents. It is a piece of indignant punctuation you use when your child has just told you, for instance, with a straight face, that they “don’t know” where their phone is.

But of course it’s not rhetorical for your children and their answer is yes, they think you are stupid. Very stupid. You have reached the point in your parenting life when your status has shifted from hero to tedious fool. Congratulations!

This has happened to me twice. But the good news is that it does not last. Eventually there will come a time when they think maybe you do know a thing or two, usually right around the time they ask you nicely to co-sign a loan.

How does Jesus respond to Peter’s rebellion? His words to Peter are not only severe, they are deliberately spoken in the presence of the other disciples. They probably shared Peter’s views and needed the rebuke, too. The severity of the rebuke arises from Jesus’ recognition in Peter’s attempt to dissuade him from going to the Cross the same temptation he had experienced at the outset of his ministry. In the temptation story we read that Satan offered Jesus the option of using the world’s means for accomplishing his mission (Matt 4:8-10). On that occasion Jesus flatly rejected such an option. “Beat it, Satan!” [he said. Then h]e backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

Apparently, Jesus recognizes the same devious misdirection in Peter and to Peter’s chagrin says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (16:23). This may well have been a double shock for Peter - the shock that Jesus would speak so harshly to him and the shock of discovering that he was acting in opposition to the divine will. Peter had in mind a popular messiahship with human goals and means. God had in mind a significant and lasting change that only our Creator could bring about.

We seem to be a lot like Simon Peter in this story. We let our ideas and expectations get in

the way of what God is doing.

The collection of teachings here in section four is found in chapter eighteen and is themed under the category of relationships, or, how to get along with others. Teenagers struggle in this area but so do adults. Jesus asserts a vital attitude that disciples need to adopt: humility.

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Matthew 18:1-5 NRSV).

Any human society is concerned to establish a proper “pecking order,” and the gospels record several disputes among the disciples on this subject. Over against all conventional ideas of status and importance Jesus offers the model of the little child. Children, it must be noted, were of little account in antiquity.

I have heard many a well-meaning sermon on this passage telling me that to be like a child means to adopt the child-like qualities of innocence or unselfishness. Now I love children. Children are a gift from God. But anyone who thinks children are innocent and unselfish never had any. The real lesson here has to do with the status of children at the bottom of the pecking order. To accept this lowest rank (humble one’s self) is to be great, and to treat the least prominent as the most important is to welcome Jesus himself.

I can imagine the disciples trying to talk to Jesus about this. “Are you crazy? If people did that then the whole world would be turned upside down.” And Jesus replies, “Now you’re catching on.” (cf. Acts 17:6)

Perhaps the thing that most affects relationships is when we hurt each other. No wonder then that most of the chapter is on mercy and forgiveness reaching a climax with the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Ancient rabbis taught that you should forgive someone three times. If they messed up a fourth time they were out of luck. This was based on a misunderstanding of the Book of Amos. In the opening chapters there is a series of condemnations of various nations with the words “For three transgressions and for four.” The rabbis reasoned that if God was not going to forgive on the fourth trespass then why should they.

Peter sets the stage for the story when he asks Jesus, “How many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?” Peter has hung around with Jesus for awhile now so he thinks he has picked up a thing or two. He suggests an answer he believes to be off the charts in terms of its generosity: “As many as seven times?” That would be more than twice what the ancient rabbis said. But Jesus is not impressed. He replies, “No. Seventy times seven” – an expression meaning “no limit.”

Jesus then tells the story of the servant forgiven a great debt who went out and dealt mercilessly with a fellow servant who owed him a debt that was a tiny fraction of what he himself had owed; and who for his mercilessness was utterly condemned.

This parable underscores a recurring theme in the New Testament. There is a relationship between offering mercy and receiving mercy. Jesus says:

“Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy” (Matt 5:7).

Paul writes:

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col 3:13 NRSV).

But forgiveness is hard, especially if it involves people close to us. There is an old ditty that says:

To dwell above
with saints we love,
Oh, that will be glory.
But to dwell below
with saints we know,
Well, that's another story.

We need to forgive as we have been forgiven. We need to show mercy as we have been shown mercy. We need to love as we have been loved. Ray Stedman observes:

Can we not forgive twenty dollars' worth of injury, when we have been forgiven ten million, ourselves? That is always our situation. Therefore, if there is a grudge, if we have been harboring resentment, if there is a feeling of antipathy, if we do not want to speak to someone else, if we feel cut off from another, two things have happened: We have reacted as an ungrateful

wretch to the grace that has been extended to us, just as this unforgiving [servant] did. Second, we have consigned ourselves to bitterness of heart, to the eating of the acid of resentment to our own hurt. This is why nothing will ever take place toward the healing of the world until there is the healing of the church, the healing of the heart, and the healing of hurts, one with another, by the grace God has shown to us.