

Doing the Will of God: Studies in Matthew

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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About Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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A *Doing the Will of God* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

About the Sequence of These Lessons

While this curriculum unit is undated, it was originally released in the months preceding and leading up to Advent and Christmas. Many Sunday school classes planned to use the curriculum during the months of October, November and December. For that reason, the lessons related to the birth narrative were placed at the end of the unit, instead of the beginning.

If you plan to use this curriculum at a time which does not coincide with Advent and Christmas, you may wish to use the lessons in this order:

Tracing Our Roots, Matthew 1:1-17

Committed to Justice, Matthew 1:18-25

Signs for All to See, Matthew 2:1-12

Free to Choose, Matthew 2:13-23

Doing the Will of God, Matthew 3:1-12

Surrender Surprise, Matthew 3:13-17

The Temptation Trap, Matthew 4:1-11

The Forgiveness Factor, Matthew 9:1-8

There Goes the Neighborhood!, Matthew 9:9-13

Radical Relationships, Matthew 10:5-15

Hard-Wired Faith, Matthew 11:25-30

Above the Law, Matthew 12:1-14

Defining Family, Matthew 12:46-50

Preface

“It was God’s will,” a church member says to grieving parents whose child was stillborn.

A bigamist tells a 14-year-old girl that she must marry him. “If you do not submit to God’s will, you will lose your salvation,” he tells her.

“This is God’s will,” a delegate to a religious denomination’s convention says of her views prior to a critical vote that threatened to cause a schism. A man holding an opposing opinion also claimed that God’s will was on his side.

A pornography publisher and gubernatorial candidate asks people to pray, by name, for the death of a certain television commentator who had been critical of pornography. A spokesperson later says the call to prayer was a “spoof,” but also states that if the commentator dies, “it must be God’s will.”

A suicide bomber boards a bus and detonates the explosives, killing several schoolchildren and himself and wounding dozens of others. “God wills that we do this,” the terrorist group behind the attack later says.

A 14-year-old from Singapore who befriended conjoined Iranian twins in her country for surgery says, following their death, “I thought that after all the pain they had gone through they would survive but it’s God’s will.”

“I’m just trying to find God’s will for my life,” a college student says, after changing majors for the fourth time.

“We’re flying through some dark clouds. With God’s will, the sun will rise and shine again,” says a professional basketball player accused of sexual assault, giving a clenched-fist salute and flashing a peace sign to fans and supporters.

From a woman whose son was brutally murdered: “I’m leaving it up to God. With God’s will, everybody will be revealed who’s involved in my son’s death.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” a disillusioned woman says in reference to her paralyzed and ineffective marriage. “It must be God’s will.”

Without a doubt, people are both comforted and confounded by the idea of “God’s will.” Some toss around the term cavalierly in an attempt to justify their actions. Others use the phrase in an effort to explain tragedy and other misfortunes they do not understand. Still others speak of it as though it were a one-time acquisition, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow or a chest of buried treasure.

Skepticism and unbelief, in addition to the influence of many worldviews and religions, add to the confusion Christians feel when trying to understand and commit to God’s will.

Also contributing to the misunderstanding is this: People believe that God’s will is individual and personal. It is. But it is also corporate and inclusive. That’s a part of the equation many fail to consider.

People often speak of “searching” for and “finding” God’s will as if it were a lost or hidden object. God does not hide the divine plan from us. God’s will is not veiled in mystery or characterized by confusion. God wants us to know the divine plan. So what’s the problem?

Many have failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah because they were looking for someone other than the one God sent. Similarly, we often fail to recognize God’s plan because we expect it to be something different than it actually is. We often want things so badly we interpret those desires to be God’s will when they are not. Our vision is quite narrow and short-sighted; our goals are self-serving. The divine plan is not. Further, our unwillingness to repent and forgive others can block our ability to understand and participate in the divine plan.

In spite of our incomplete understanding and often selfish motives, God continues to work through ordinary people like us to fulfill divine purposes, as in centuries past. Realization of the divine plan does not depend upon our participation, however. God invites us to be a part of the divine plan, but it will go forward in spite of our lack of interest or commitment or our outright disobedience.

Much of what happens in the world is clearly not God’s ultimate will. Still, God works in and through all people and circumstances to accomplish the divine plan.

Connecting the activities of God throughout history to the activity of God in the world today and in their personal lives is difficult for many people. People and events in the Bible that reveal God and the divine

plan can seem dry and lifeless, little more than a recitation of history. Yet it is through these accounts that we discover that God has always had a plan and works to fulfill it.

We can know and live God's will individually and corporately by consciously choosing to do those things we understand God expects of us. While we may not understand everything God expects all at once, we can understand enough to make choices and decisions that please God. In the process of our obedience, God confirms our choices, reveals more of the divine plan and often surprises us with serendipitous blessings.

Obedience to what we understand of God's will results in further understanding of the divine plan. And that makes for an exciting and rarely predictable life.

Living God's will is counter-cultural. We may face misunderstanding, opposition, ridicule or indifference.

Commitment to the divine plan results in ongoing contact with the people of the world, their needs and concerns. It may place us at risk or in an unpopular minority. It will also push us to question commonly held beliefs, policies, practices and prejudices and work for reform when necessary.

Even when it appears that the divine plan has been thwarted or that evil has prevailed, God continues to act and work. God is at work even in places that appear hostile to the message of Christ.

No one lived God's plan more fully than Jesus. By understanding the way he followed the divine plan, we can better follow it ourselves.

Allow the accounts of Matthew's gospel to frame the way you understand and live God's will.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Doing the Will of God

Matthew 3:1-12

Theme: God's will necessitates repentance.

Introduction

America got what it deserved, said a Baptist preacher a few days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

"What we saw on Tuesday ... could be minuscule if, in fact, God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve," he said, implying that the terrorist attacks were God's will.

After blaming certain Americans and civil liberty organizations for the attacks, he told the Christian TV audience, "I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

His remarks sparked a visceral outcry within a bruised, albeit united nation. The White House quickly distanced itself from his remarks. One of the accused groups refused to dignify the preacher's statements with a comment. Christian leaders offered some of the sharpest rebuttals.

When the well-known TV preacher finally issued a defensive, qualified apology, he said, "We have expelled God from the public square and the public schools. We have normalized an immoral lifestyle God has condemned. American families are falling apart. Because of our national moral and spiritual decline during the past 35 years, I expressed my personal belief that we have displeased the Lord and incurred his displeasure."

He then repeatedly asked the nation to repent. Sadly, his own shaded statement was more political retraction than moral repentance.

Retraction and repentance are often confused.

Retraction is the recognition of bad judgment and the move to correct a mistake for public relations purposes. It happens after someone realizes that earlier comments were inappropriate and that more politically correct or socially polite words of restatement are necessary.

When ministers offer retractions, they sometimes say that the media took their comments out of context. When politicians issue retractions, they often do so through press secretaries who say their bosses “misspoke.” When celebrities deliver retractions, they speak through publicists who say their clients are deeply sorry and ask for privacy.

Repentance is far different from retraction.

Repentance is recognition of wrongdoing and the confession of sin. But it is more than sorrowful admission of missing the mark or making hurtful statements. It is commitment to changing directions, turning from the wrong path and going down the right path in pursuit of God’s will.

The Biblical Witness

Repentance is a profoundly biblical concept. In biblical Hebrew, two verbs represent repentance. *Shub* means to return and *niham* means to feel sorrow, according to Jewishencyclopedia.com. In the Gospels, repentance is a central theme in Jesus’ preaching. Early in his ministry, Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4:17).

Repentance at its core is about turning in faithfulness to do the will of God.

Matthew 3:1-3 Repentance

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 1:57-66). Elizabeth was an older relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:39). Consequently, John and Jesus were kin.

While the biblical witness tells little about Jesus’ childhood and early adulthood, it tells us even less about John. After his birth, we read that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (Lk 1:80). On that day, he preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 3:2).

The Greek word for repent (*metanoiein*) means more than a cerebral change of one’s mind or worldview. It also means to turn or convert. The Good News Bible translates the word repent as “turn away from your sins.”

The motivating factor for repentance was the emergence of the “kingdom of heaven,” a phrase used some 100 times in Matthew and indistinguishable from the phrase “kingdom of God.”

“Kingdom of heaven” concerns the rule or reign of a king. It is far more than the eternal resting place which occupies the imagination of many Christians.

Numerous texts tell us to whom the kingdom belongs: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3); “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10); and “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3).

The idea of kingdom was rooted in the Hebrew prophets. When Isaiah spoke of the coming kingdom, he referred to a kingdom of justice and righteousness, peace, joy and healing (Isa 9:1-11). The kingdom was coming as a tangible reality. Citing the prophet Isaiah (40:3), John the Baptist advised to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Matthew 3:4-6 Confession and Baptism

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region

along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John's wardrobe and diet associated him with the poor. Rather than the fine linen of the wealthy or the priestly class, John wore camel hair. He ate locust, which were ritually clean (Lev 11:22-23) and a food of necessity to this day among the poor. Perhaps his leather belt tied him symbolically to Elijah (2 Kings 1:8).

Despite his ascetic lifestyle and barren setting, urbanites (the people of Jerusalem) and others came to hear him preach. His preaching compelled the confession of sin, which was followed by baptism in the Jordan River.

The idea of "confessing their sins" was rooted in Hebrew tradition. Israelites knew that when they touched an unclean carcass or uttered a "rash oath," they were to confess their sin (Lev 5:5). If an Israelite wronged another person, he or she was to confess that sin and make restitution (Num 5:7). The people even had a ceremony of confessing their sins, placing those confessions on the head of a goat and driving the goat from the camp, from which comes the idea of scapegoat (Lev 16:20-23).

Matthew 3:7-10 **Fruit Worthy of Repentance**

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Joining "the people" were Pharisees and Sadducees. They, too, wished to be baptized, although the text does not say that they came to confess their sins.

John referred to them as a "brood of vipers," giving us the image of deadly snakes which were slithering from a brush fire.

John warned them against the false hope that their relationship to father Abraham could replace repentance and good works. Ethnicity or nationality offered no escape. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (v 8), he said, forewarning them that non-fruit bearing trees would be cut down and burned (v 10).

Jesus, too, repeated the fruit-bearing and judgment themes in the Sermon on the Mount. Speaking about false prophets, Jesus said, "Every good tree bears good fruit ... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 7:17a, 18-19).

In terms of what repentance and fruit-bearing meant concretely, John the Baptist gave examples, according to Luke's parallel account. In that text (Lk 3:1-18), "the crowds" asked, "What then shall we do?" John replied that they should share their clothing and food with the needy (v 11). When the baptized "tax collectors" asked the same question, John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you" (v 13). And finally, when "soldiers" asked what they should do, John said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (v 14).

Matthew 3:11-12 **One More Powerful**

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John contrasted his acts of baptism in the Jordan with that of Jesus, telling the people that Jesus' baptism was more powerful than his.

Jesus would baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (v 11). Another word for "Holy Spirit" is wind. In fact, God's spirit is often associated with wind. Perhaps the core idea here is that God's wind and fire would separate the wheat, the useful, from the chaff, the unusable.

God's Will Today

From the earliest pages of the biblical witness, we find accounts of human beings seeking to discern and to do God's will. We also read

about those who knew God's will and sought to evade it. We sometimes see biblical figures who showed a compelling faithfulness and then a troubling unfaithfulness. We often find biblical characters who turn from the sin, confess wrong doing and seek God's will.

While repentance and righteousness are bundled together in God's will, human beings tend toward selectively applying the biblical witness. For example, we make radical conversion the prototype of real faith. Or we apply faith with a rugged individualism.

Radical Conversion. The Christian tradition of revivalism defines repentance as conversion from horrific sin. After all, the biblical witness tells us of John the Baptist's fiery preaching about vipers, wrath, ax on tree roots, burning trees and unquenchable fire, creating a frightening image. The Bible recounts how "the people" repented and were baptized.

Picking up on John's account and other texts, revival preachers thunder about personal evils. Drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, compulsive gambling, destructive pornography and profanity are at the top of the list from which people need to repent. Conversion means turning from these sins and surrendering to Christ.

Not surprisingly, this tradition profiles the radical conversion of alcoholics, drug users, pimps and prostitutes. Chuck Colson represents an example of radical convert. He turned from being a dishonest political operative to being a prison minister. Michael Franzese is another example. Upon his conversion, he left a high position in the Colombo crime family to lead a Christian ministry.

Radical conversion is an authentic part of both the biblical story and contemporary life.

Sometimes, however, Christian faith has so emphasized radical conversion stories that those without records of prison, promiscuity and pornography feel that their faith commitment is inferior. Raised in loving Christian families and nurturing churches, many Christians question their conversions because they did not make 180 degree turns. Yet their faith is every bit as valid.

So, what is repentance and righteousness?

Individualism. Another tendency within Christianity is to define repentance in personal and private terms. Consequently, we focus on an individualistic righteousness. We teach that real Christians have a list of don'ts—don't drink, don't cuss, don't gamble, don't watch R-rated movies, don't gossip. We have a list of dos—go to church, tithe, read your Bible.

Personal piety and self-discipline are valuable virtues, which we should not deemphasize. They are not the only areas where "bearing fruit worthy of repentance" applies, however.

What is missing in much of Christianity is a strong commitment to social justice—affordable housing, accessible health care, human rights, racial equality, prison reform, fair taxation and equal justice under the law.

When John the Baptist replied to those who came for baptism, he gave them practical examples which had a social application: share coats and food; collect taxes fairly; and no military extortion. All his examples had a social dimension to them.

So, what is repentance and righteousness?

In a thumbnail, we turn from conformity to the world and follow Jesus' way in the world.

And guided by the word, led by the Spirit and encouraged by fellow believers, we discern God's will and work out the road map.

Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

Surrender Surprise

Matthew 3:13-17

Theme: God's will calls for obedience.

Introduction

Anne and Carl Braden are legends in the civil rights community of Louisville, KY. In the 1950s, they were arrested and tried for sedition. Their crime? They bought a house in an all-white neighborhood in southwest Jefferson County and then sold it to an African-American family. But that was neither the beginning nor the end of the story.

For years, Carl and Anne Braden had petitioned for the rights of workers, African-Americans and others who were being left out of and behind in America. Buying and selling the house, in addition to offending segregationist sentiment, gave those who were unsettled by their calls for justice a way to silence them.

During most of the decade of the '50s, the Bradens were hounded by family, friends and foes. Anne's family did not understand her commitment to racial equality. Relations were strained to the breaking point. They were investigated by the Department of Justice, the CIA, the FBI and others. Carl went to jail, leaving Anne to raise her children alone.

Despite all attempts to silence them, Anne and Carl continued to speak for those who had no voice, as well to organize those folks and train them in how to speak for themselves.

Now well into her 70s, Anne is still a voice for justice in Louisville. She chronicled hers and Carl's story in a book entitled *A Wall Between*. Recently the book was revised and re-released. At a book-signing and discussion at a local bookstore, one person asked her, "How do you do it? How do you continue the fight for justice and equality without giving into despair?"

I will never forget her reply: "Every morning, when I get up and read the paper, I know whose side I am on."

I left the bookstore that night asking myself, "Do I know whose side I am on? To what have I surrendered my life?"

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 3:13 One of Us

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

The passage begins in a deceptively simple manner: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan..." And yet, these words carry the full weight of Jesus' mission. To get to John, Jesus literally had to come down from the northern hill country of Galilee to the plain of Jericho on the banks of the Jordan River, passing through Samaria.

Many Biblical commentators see Jesus' presenting himself for baptism by John as a tangible expression of the Incarnation, through which Jesus identified himself with humanity. He became one of us so that he might break the bonds of sin and death and bring us into God's kingdom (see Heb 2:17). Frederick Dale Bruner called Jesus' baptism his "at-one-ment with humanity."¹

For some time, John had been preaching a message of repentance in preparation for the coming kingdom of God. Baptism was the sign of a person's confession of sin. Note that John's baptism did not offer the candidate the assurance of forgiveness of sin. It was an act of awareness. If repentance is rightly defined as turning to walk in a new direction, a change of heart and mind, then the confession of sin rightly precedes the act of repentance. Thus, John saw his baptism as an act of preparation. The one who would follow him would baptize with the Spirit, which would empower a person to live in a new relationship with God in a world transformed by God's kingdom.

With that in mind, it is easy to see how Bruner would observe that we should be surprised that Jesus sought John's baptism. But, as we will see, Jesus saw this act of identification with sinful humanity to be crucial to his role in God's ultimate act of salvation.

John Broadus pointed out that baptism was the proper ritual for all Jews who welcomed the coming kingdom of God that John proclaimed. In addition to identifying with sinful humanity, in seeking John's baptism, Jesus demonstrated that John's prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God would be continued, indeed fulfilled in him

Matthew 3:14 **A Superior Mission**

John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

John, recognizing the superiority of the mission of Jesus and his own sinfulness, tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized.

Matthew 3:15 **Fulfilling All Righteousness**

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Gottlob Schrenk writes: "A man is righteous when he meets certain claims which another has on him in virtue of relationship. Even the righteousness of God is primarily His covenantal rule in fellowship with His people."

This observation helps us understand Jesus' response to John's hesitancy. In Jesus' reply, we can see God's fourfold claim: God's claim on the mission and person of John to prepare the people of Israel for the coming kingdom; God's claim on Jesus' mission and person to save the world from the guilt and effects of sin; God's love-claim on the world in general; and God's covenant-claim on all who respond specifically to that call.

In preparation for the coming Messiah, John had been commissioned by God to remind Israel of God's covenantal claim on them. He stood in a long line of prophets, many of whom were related to priestly families.

The prophet's role in the life the people of God was to remind the people of God's faithfulness; point to the ways the people were violating their promise to be faithful adherents to the Covenant (see

Josh 24); warn the people of God's coming judgment; and proclaim the coming way of salvation. Jesus reminded John that his mission was not fulfilled unless an unbroken link was established between the prophet and the Messiah. Submitting to John's baptism was a clear ratification of the whole of John's message.

The work of Jesus to redeem sinful humanity from the guilt and effects of sin hinged not only on Jesus being Immanuel—God with us—but also on his being fully and completely identified with the human condition. Neither time nor space allows a complete exploration of this theme, but the New Testament and early church both witness to the mystery of Jesus being fully God and fully human as necessary to the fulfillment of God's redemptive work (see Heb 1-10, Phil 2:4-11, Jn 1, The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed). Jesus affirmed his willingness to submit to his Father's will in this matter.

The Apostle Paul recognized that from the beginning of time, God has had a plan to "gather all things in [Christ], things in heaven and on earth" (see Eph 1:10). This plan was to be revealed in the "fullness of time." Jesus proclaimed through his baptism that the time has come. God is redeeming his claim on all humanity (see 2 Cor 5:18-19). Those who respond to the gracious invitation will be brought into a new covenant. As members of this new covenant, we are to pick up the mission of Israel to bless all peoples of the earth through God's name. We best do this by being "imitators of God" (see Eph 5:1ff).

In calling on John and perhaps the disciples and others standing nearby to join in fulfilling all righteousness, Jesus invited us into this new covenant of grace and obedience.

Matthew 3:16-17 **The Presence of God**

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Frederick Bruner pointed out that the image of "...the Spirit of God descending like a dove..." is a great reversal of the normal spiritual direction. He understood this as another example of God's movement toward us. But he also saw the downward movement of the Spirit as a

paradigm of our call to move downward toward servanthood in the midst of a lost and broken world. Just as the Spirit confirms that Jesus is the servant son of God who fulfills the Old Testament expectations, so the followers of Jesus are to adopt this life of suffering servanthood.

Bruner also argued that the image of the Spirit as dove communicates something important about the power and ways of God. The dove represents peace and gentleness. Therefore, though God's power is able to accomplish whatever God desires, it is always exercised with gentleness. Peace is more than just the end we seek; it is to be the means by which we live in the world.

Though not widely used in the Old Testament, the dove is a symbol of God's empowering presence in the New Testament. When combined with the voice of God—a voice that creates the entire universe—the dove is a reminder that Jesus' ministry is empowered by the presence of God.

God's Will Today

Bruner made the case that in the interplay between Jesus being baptized by John, the descending of the Spirit and the voice from heaven, Jesus transformed John's baptism. Going beyond the confession of sin, baptism is the sign of a right relationship with God.

Jesus' baptism teaches us what happens in ours. We are reminded that like the Son of Man, we are here to serve, not to be served. We are called to live a life that fulfills the righteousness of God, i.e. a life of covenant loyalty that is willing to join Jesus in humble identification with sinners.

For 150 years East Baptist Church ministered in downtown Louisville. In the mid 1950s, many of the members wanted the church to move out of the inner city to find a more promising life in the suburbs. The church went through a time of study and discernment and decided to stay and minister to the changing urban core. They bought a couple of shotgun houses beside the church and converted the original sanctuary into a gym. Many members left.

In the early 1960s, urban renewal threatened to condemn the church's property if improvements were not made, improvements the congregation could not afford. Through another process of discernment and

study, the church decided to give up some of its property and partner with Long Run Baptist Association to build a ministry center and offices for the association. Upon completion of the Baptist Center, the church razed the historic building and moved into the center. While this allowed the church to continue to provide ministry to the widely diverse population that lived and worked in the neighborhood, it cost the church visibility and identity. Other members left to find more traditional churches and church programs. Those who stayed continued to support ministry to children, youth, senior adults, prisoners, students, those with chemical dependencies, young single mothers and more.

In the 1990s, the association decided to move its offices to another part of town and sell the downtown property. The congregation faced another decision. Should they try to buy more property in order to have place to worship? Or should they take their part of the sale and invest the money in continued ministry to the inner city? As hard as it was, the church decided to end its 150 year life in order to continue ministry to its neighborhood.

East Baptist Church died as it lived, with a joyful, humble commitment to bringing the love of Christ to disenfranchised people in a devalued part of our city. The payoff for "fulfilling all righteousness" was not large buildings and prosperity, but hundreds of changed lives.

They always knew whose side they were on.

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Lyndon, Ky.

The Temptation Trap

Matthew 4:1-11

Theme: God's will strengthens us in the face of temptation.

Introduction

Resisting temptation is ever harder in an American culture that glamorizes it. A FOX television series, "Temptation Island," places unmarried couples together with eligible singles in an exotic location specifically to tempt them and test their level of commitment.

Like with so many of the so-called "reality" TV shows, our heads tell us that at least it is silly to waste our time watching; at most it is not being good stewards of God's gift of time. The irony is that we are tempted beyond the ability to resist wanting to see how other people handle temptation. Of course the sponsors of shows like "Temptation Island" are betting that we cannot resist temptation because that is what will bring the greatest viewing audience.

Temptation. Of all the theological words we could use, temptation is the one that probably needs the least amount of definition for us. People both inside and outside the church can relate to the reality of temptation equally well. We experience temptation in varying degrees and with different outcomes.

Sometimes the temptation is as mild as to tell a little white lie to save embarrassment. At other times, the temptation is as great as to violate one's marriage vows. Most of the time, we are successful in turning away from temptation. Sometimes, however, temptation grabs us and our lives are changed forever, from that moment on.

Temptation is one of life's realities. In recent years, the American public has witnessed events in the lives of celebrities who could not resist temptation. Their stories were then blasted to the world through media interviews and books.

As I write this, NBA superstar Kobe Bryant has been charged with sexual assault. At his press conference, he summed up his actions as simply being a momentary mistake. The justification was that nothing was planned, his sexual encounter was not a long-term relationship and, besides, the woman consented. In other words, he could not resist the temptation of the moment and neither could she. Almost always, after people give into temptation, they follow with excuses and hollow justifications.

Temptation is also tricky business. It does not always come upon us from the direction we might expect. Sometimes the temptation is obvious but it is often disguised as something noble and good. The rationale is that while the immediate action may be a little (or a lot) questionable, the long-term outcome is worth it.

God does not lead us into temptation. But God does provide us with a way out. When we look at the temptations of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, we see not only his experience but also our own.

The Biblical Witness

Immediately before the account of the Temptation of Jesus, Matthew records his baptism. Understanding the importance of his baptism is critical to understanding the meaning of his temptation. In his baptism, Jesus received his identity. As the dove descended, God declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17).

Jesus' baptism was neither for remission of sins nor to show a change in his heart. Rather, the baptism conferred an identity on Jesus, that of the Son of God. God's indication that the Son was doing what pleased God indicates that Jesus had an accurate understanding of God's will for him and was acting accordingly. By following this revelation about Jesus, the individual temptations become not isolated temptations to sin, but attacks upon the identity of Jesus and his fulfilling God's will.

Matthew 4:1-2 Testing with a Purpose

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew wrote that Jesus was “led up by the Spirit” to be tempted (v 1), indicating that he was cooperating with the will of God. The Greek word translated in most English versions as “tempted” also has the meaning of being “tested.” The word in Greek carries the meaning of purpose in the confrontation, not just chance occurrence.

Even more significant is the fact that in the midst of the series of temptations, God, not Satan, was in control. Jesus was there to be tempted because God allowed it. This does not mean that God caused the temptation. But it does mean that all that occurs in the life of a believer occurs with significant consequences for one’s identity as a child of God.

Notice also that Jesus’ temptation happened in the wilderness. The combination of testing and wilderness recalled Israel’s experience with God. Israel was tested in the wilderness and was found unfaithful. Will this Son of God be found faithful?

Therefore, we should see Jesus’ temptation as part of his obedience to God. The public ministry of Jesus was about to begin in Matthew and the question Matthew raised was: Will Jesus be able to fulfill God’s will? His refusal to give into temptation would be further evidence of his obedience to his identity as the Son of God.

Significant to understanding the temptations is the fact that Jesus received his identity from God. Also noteworthy is the timing of these temptations in Jesus’ life. These tests of his will came after perhaps the highest moment in his life, his baptism. It is perhaps at such exalted moments that people are most apt to stumble at the point of temptation. Over-confidence and pride of accomplishment are enemies of staying true to one’s identity.

Jesus’ 40-day fast (v 2) must have had a profound effect on him physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Note the connection between Jesus’ 40 days and 40 nights and those of Moses (Ex 34:28; Deut 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) and Israel’s forty years in the wilderness (Num 14:33 f; Deut 8:2). Jesus’ experience in the wilderness was similar to Israel’s experience in coming out of Egypt. The difference is that Jesus was tested in the wilderness but remained obedient to God. Israel’s faith wavered in the wilderness and was restored only when God gave them manna. Jesus was hungry but remained faithful and obedient without a miracle.

The purpose of the temptations was to destroy Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. Before we focus on the individual temptations, we must understand that these temptations are more significant than a simple urge to misbehave.

Thomas Long says, “The devil is not tempting Jesus to misbehave. He is not tempting Jesus to steal a wallet, or sneak a peek at a Playboy centerfold, or cheat on his taxes, or pick a fight with his neighbor. It’s deeper than that. The devil is tempting Jesus to ignore his baptism, to deny who he is, to forget that he is the child of his Father in heaven.”

Even so, the symbolism of the different temptations points out the areas in which we need to especially be careful at being tempted to give up our identity as children of God.

Matthew 4:3-5 A Physical Test

The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

The temptation of bread (vv 3-5) was a temptation to allow material and economic matters to control the direction of Jesus’ life. For us, the temptation is to take matters into our own hands and not wait upon the provision of God.

Israel’s experience in the wilderness of being afflicted with hunger and then being provided manna from God paralleled this experience of Jesus. Deuteronomy 8:3 explained this lesson in this way: “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna . . . in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy in order to show that he was obedient to God and aware of his utter dependence upon God to supply his needs. Since the Spirit led him into the wilderness, he determined not to chart his own direction but instead to wait for God to provide.

Matthew 4:6-7 **A Spiritual Test**

Saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The temptation at the temple was a temptation to test God and his faithfulness to fulfill the promises that God had made. Exodus 17:1-7 points to a similar testing of God by Israel as the people questioned whether God was even in their midst. They were hoping to make God prove to them that God was going to fulfill covenant obligations. The temptation for Jesus was to test God to see if having chosen Jesus and having set him out on his task, God would be there for Jesus in the future.

This was a spiritual test to see if God is truly faithful. Jesus' response indicated that it is not the place of humanity to test God. Part of doing God's will involves accepting that God will be faithful to the promises that God makes to us.

Matthew 4:8-10 **God's Messiah**

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The temptation at the high mountain was a temptation to idolatry: placing another god before God. Often this temptation is interpreted to be a temptation to political power. Jesus did not understand it that way, as evidenced by his response to Satan, ". . . for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (v 10).

There is, however, a touch of the political in the temptation. Matthew's readers would have been well aware of the requirement of those vanquished by Rome to abandon their own religion and adopt Rome's religion in order to participate fully in the political system. The greater issue, however, is the substitution of one god for another. The test for

Jesus was whether he would stay true to and be the kind of Messiah that God ordained. Such a Messiah does not decide his own direction but follows the lead of God. Such a Messiah does not make his own plays for power but rather serves the God who has called him.

To be true to his identity as God's son, Jesus could not set up a separate kingdom of his own and pursue his own plans. We are to worship and serve only God.

Matthew 4:11 **Faithful and True**

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The devil left Jesus, but the devil's defeat was not complete by Jesus' passing of the temptations. The appearance of the angels who ministered to him showed God's continued endorsement of the decisions Jesus made. Through God's ministering angels, God proved faithful to his promise. Jesus chose in the temptations to remain true to his identity.

God's Will Today

Jesus met each of the temptations he faced with a clear sense of who he was and whose he was. His example of quoting scripture to the devil is often championed as a primary way to resist temptation. Some would tell us simply to recite memory verses when we are tempted. But for Jesus, quoting scripture was more than simply memory work. When Jesus quoted scripture, he affirmed the character of God who stood behind the scripture. He also indicated that God's acceptance of him and his understanding of God's will were so much part of his identity that he could do nothing other than remain true to his identity as God's Son.

Temptation comes at different levels and in a variety of forms. While it can be quite personal, it can also be corporate. Churches and institutions are subject to temptation just as individuals are. Churches and institutions that bear the name Christian must do just as much work to know their identity as individuals.

When I was a child, a famous TV preacher led his church into all kinds of business ventures in order to bring more income to the

church. The church owned restaurants, dry cleaners, even a recreational island. All of the income was claimed as tax exempt because it was for the church. The IRS did not agree. They also discovered that the preacher's and the church's funds were too close to the same. The preacher had definitely lost his identity in Christ but the church was led that way, too.

People, churches and other institutions are generally weakest to temptation when they feel the strongest and most self-confident. A clear understanding of our identity in Christ will lead us to understand that we are not the one in charge, we are not the one who has the power and we are not the one who controls the future.

Temptation is often tied to human desires. The way that the devil sought to tempt Jesus was to have him deny his identity by claiming something for himself that belongs only to God.

If we will truly seek to understand God's will for us and then remain faithful to that identity, temptation will not get the upper hand in our lives.

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.

The Forgiveness Factor

Matthew 9:1-8

Theme: God's will redefines religious expectations.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom warns us never to show weakness. Because our culture enthusiastically embraces winners, anyone who displays even a hint of powerlessness is looked upon with some suspicion. Listen to the tune our culture sings:

Sports fans cheer wildly when their favorite team pummels the competition, but wonder anxiously when the final score is uncomfortably close. Investors respond gleefully when a corporation shows a series of financial gains, yet back away quickly at the first sign of distress. Voters flock to the polls to cast their ballots for politicians who "hold the party line," while shying away from those who practice the art of compromise.

In a day when supposedly "only the strong survive," where does the notion of forgiveness fit?

The first place where we would expect to find forgiveness alive and well is the church. Most people understand that pardon was Jesus' business. They are aware that Jesus welcomed the worst and the weak of his day, and that he taught his disciples to show the same compassion.

Still, someone who is struggling with guilt and shame rarely considers the church as a place where real help exists.

Author Philip Yancey points out this assumption in a story he tells of a Chicago prostitute a friend of his once encountered while ministering in a downtown shelter.

Sick, homeless and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter, the woman had sunk to a life she had never considered simply so she could survive. When his friend tried to encourage her by asking if she had ever thought about going to a church for help, a look of pure shock crossed her face.

“Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”

Clearly, the church wrestles as much with how we are to relate to the outcasts and powerless of our day as other institutions do. But much more is at stake for the church. Our purpose is to show Christ’s presence in an unforgiving world. Consequently, any reluctance to forgive prevents us from realizing the possibilities that following Jesus offers.

Nowhere is this truth more apparent than in the story of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic. The story teaches us that while forgiveness is never easy, it is the best way to help others see the greatness of a God who is constantly redefining our religious expectations.

The Biblical Witness

What separates this healing event from other such events recorded in Matthew’s gospel is the theme of forgiveness. Forgiveness of sin governs the incident and ultimately overshadows the fact of the paralytic’s healing. Matthew’s intention is to demonstrate the authority of Jesus as God’s Messiah through an act that simultaneously awes the crowd and quiets Jesus’ critics.

Matthew 9:1 Back at Home

And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town.

The encounter took place in “his own town,” which is Capernaum, a town on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had returned to Capernaum from a trip to the country of the Gadarenes (8:28), on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus healed a demoniac. There, the people were frightened by Jesus and begged him to leave.

Will the situation be any different in Capernaum among those who know Jesus well?

Unfortunately not. Jesus’ actions then and now prove uncomfortable for all who have life as they want it, be they stranger or neighbor.

Matthew 9:2 True Healing

And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”

But some people don’t have life as they want it. Their only hope is God. Such was the case with the paralyzed man whom Jesus saw being carried by others, a not so subtle illustration of what the church is to do for those who cannot carry themselves.

When Jesus saw “their faith,” he made an audacious and seemingly out of place comment, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus’ statement was bold and daring in the sense that religious expectations in his day were that forgiveness was exclusively the domain of God. At the same time, Jesus’ statement appeared inappropriate in that what the man clearly needed most was healing, not forgiveness.

Had the paralytic done something to bring about his crippling condition? Certainly in the ancient world, there was the belief that a connection somehow existed between sin and sickness. Even in our day we are well aware of how bad choices too often create disastrous consequences.

But something else appears to have been Jesus’ intent. While most people might think that nothing could be worse than to go through life physically paralyzed, Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness suggests that the real challenge of our everyday existence is the bondage of sin. In fact, the purpose of Jesus’ ministry was to deal with precisely this bondage. What began with his birth (1:21) culminated at the cross (26:28). Thus at any point sin is defeated, true healing takes place. Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness intended to awaken not only the paralytic and those who were carrying him to this truth, but also the onlookers who were paying close attention to Jesus’ actions.

Matthew 9:3 **In the Place of God**

Then some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.”

Among the onlookers were the scribes, who had responsibility for maintaining the integrity of religious expectations in Jesus’ day. Jesus’ words troubled them because he claimed to do something only God can do. Whereas Hebrew Scripture makes allowances for forgiving those who commit wrongs against us (Esau and Jacob, Gen 33:4-11; Joseph and his brothers, Gen 45:5-15; David and Saul, 1 Sam 24:10-12), nowhere does it offer an authority to extend “blanket” forgiveness. That authority belongs solely to God! Hence, the scribes responded to Jesus’ pronouncement with one of their own: “This man is blaspheming.”

The scribes defined “blasphemy” as engaging in actions that “revile the very name of God.” Because all sin is ultimately against God, to offer such open-ended pardon is to assume the place of God, which is exactly what the scribes viewed Jesus as doing. They made the connection between Jesus’ words to the paralytic and his understanding of himself. He stood in the place of God, inviting others to stand with him in realizing the fullness of God’s purpose! While the scribes might have acknowledged that Jesus’ intentions were compassionate, they were fully in agreement that his words were an insult to God (Num 15:30).

Matthew 9:4-8 **Authority to Forgive**

But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

Jesus perceived their expectations and called them “evil,” because of the way they stood in opposition to the will of God and the emergence of his kingdom (6:9-15). They thought Jesus to be not only a blasphemer but also a fraud, so Jesus challenged their expectations

and acted to redefine them. Since they believed that God alone can do acts of healing, if Jesus could heal the man, then the scribes must acknowledge that Jesus acted with the authority of God.

“Which is easier,” Jesus asked them, “to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’” (v 5). On the surface it seems like an easy question. Anyone could claim to forgive sins, but how can such a claim be verified? On the other hand, a healing is obvious to all. One moment a man is on a mat. The next moment he is on his feet. How much clearer could someone’s authority from God be? If Jesus could lift the man to his feet, how could they argue that he had no authority to forgive sins?

Such was Jesus’ logic. His intent was to correct misunderstanding of his ministry by demonstrating the power he had received from God. “‘But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home” (v 6).

The healing is almost an aside. The focus of the story is on Jesus’ authority. The healing is simply a means to the end of the declaration of Jesus’ authority to forgive.

Authority is an important term in Matthew’s gospel. This story is not the first time Matthew appealed to it. The first occurrence is the response of the crowds to Jesus’ teaching during the Sermon on the Mount, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:29). Neither will it be the last; the gospel ends with the risen Jesus assuring his disciples that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18). Here, the emphasis is on demonstrating with deeds what Jesus expressed previously with words.

As God’s Messiah, Jesus worked to bring in the power of the kingdom that the prophets of old had predicted the “Son of Man” would establish (Dan 7:13-14; Isa 24:23; Jer 31:34). His power to heal plainly revealed his ability to deal with the root of all suffering, which is sin.

God’s Will Today

“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’”

In our day, the forgiveness factor is definitely most difficult. While we have made significant progress in treating various diseases, we have made comparatively little progress in forgiving one another.

Yet God's expectation is that we move in that direction. Matthew doesn't end his account of the paralytic's healing with the fact of his taking up his mat and going home. Matthew, rather, notes how the crowds were filled with awe, signifying their amazement at what Jesus had shown them about God and concludes with them glorifying God, "who had given such authority to human beings" (v 8).

God's expectation is not only that Jesus extend forgiveness. God's expectation is that we do the same! Forgiveness is the church's mission also!

What would it look like if the church claimed such authority from Jesus and became the first place hurting and powerless people looked to find forgiveness? Most of all it would mean that we would be more faithful in our efforts to know and do the will of God.

Someone has said, "Few burdens are heavy if everyone lifts." That proverb certainly holds true for churches who wish to join in Jesus' work of establishing God's reign over evil. One person alone cannot fully accomplish God's will, though one person can make a significant difference.

However, one person can most definitely paralyze a church by his or her unwillingness to forgive.

Jesus is definitely looking for our faith as together we seek to lift the world's burden of sin. As he has forgiven us, so we forgive others in order to move to the next work God has for us.

We are not stuck; we are not paralyzed. We are forgiven and authorized to show God's glory through our everyday dealings with others. Not only are they looking in our direction expecting to find such forgiveness, so is God.

"Take heart; your sins are forgiven." This is our story. This is the church's song.

Written by Doug Dortch, pastor, First Baptist Church, Tallahassee, Fla.

There Goes the Neighborhood!

Matthew 9:9-13

Theme: God's will redefines community.

Introduction

In a nostalgic trip back in time, thousands of tourists flock each year to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, home to both Old and New Order Amish communities.

Known for their plain dress and horse-drawn buggies, the Amish are master woodworkers and quilters. They make tasty jams, jellies and other food items, many of which are produced apart from modern conveniences. For generations, they have passed down their lifestyle and skills, changing little for several hundred years.

Old Order Amish are fascinating but private people who stress humility, separation from the world, family and community. They follow a strict interpretation of the Bible and a largely unwritten set of rules called the Ordnung. Men obey the laws of Hebrew Scripture regarding beards, and women wear head coverings—white if they are married, black if they are single.

Strict Old Order Amish do not have electricity, radios, televisions or telephones in their homes. They send their children to private, one-room schoolhouses where one teacher teaches all children through eighth grade. After that, the children work with their parents, the boys on the farm or in the family's business with their fathers, the girls in the home with their mothers.

While they are set apart from the world, they form small and closely knitted communities that support and care for their members. They do not collect Social Security benefits, unemployment insurance or welfare, instead maintaining mutual aid funds for members who need assistance with medical and dental bills and other emergencies.

Those within the Amish communities work together to enforce the Ordnung. Failure to follow it results in shunning, or “the ban.” The Amish practice of shunning is severe in some communities and includes avoiding a former member in every possible way. It was largely this issue, in fact, that resulted in the Amish breaking off from the Mennonites in the late 17th century.

When an Amish person is shunned, the rest of the community does not speak to, eat with or in any way associate with him or her. If that person fails to repent, the ban could last a lifetime, resulting in total exclusion from the community, including immediate family members. Old Order Amish believe this practice helps guard their culture.

The Amish sense of community and their practice of shunning offer an interesting and puzzling dichotomy, yet they are not really alone in it. While most Christian churches strive for a similar community environment, some succumb to elitism and exclusion, resulting in the marginalization of people both within and outside of the church, a kind of “shunning” all its own.

Community is essential. It addresses basic human needs for relationship and fellowship. God’s will redefines community for us and causes us to invite everyone to sit at our table. Jesus denounced exclusivity and taught that everyone can belong to the kingdom of God.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 9:9 A Most Unlikely Choice

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

Apart from this account and the parallel accounts in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27 of Jesus’ call to him, we know very little specific information about Matthew. After its mention in the list of disciples in Acts 1:13, Matthew’s name doesn’t appear again in the New Testament.

Matthew’s name is included in all of the lists of Jesus’ original 12 disciples (Matt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:15; Acts 1:13). The accounts of his call described here and in Mark and Luke are so similar that scholars have long assumed they refer to the same person. The first

Gospel’s account gives the man’s name as Matthew, while the Mark and Luke accounts refer to him as Levi. It is possible, though unlikely, that he had two Hebrew names. It is more likely that his name was Levi, and Jesus gave him the name Matthew or that his name was Matthew and he was from the tribe of Levi.

Matthew’s call took place in Capernaum, the center of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus encountered Matthew as he was “sitting at the tax booth,” his place of business. By this we know Matthew was a tax collector, and because of the time and location of his work, we know that he worked under Herod Antipas. Much of the rest of what we know about Matthew comes from common feelings the Jews had toward those who worked as tax collectors, or publicans. In other words, Matthew was guilty by association.

First-century tax collectors’ reputation for dishonesty was well-known and widely held, although the Gospels are silent about Matthew’s personal integrity. To be sure, tax collectors had numerous opportunities to make illegal profits, and many likely did. Their fellow Jews saw them as traitors because they collected taxes for the Roman government. Even though Matthew worked for someone who was also a Jew, he was still considered, along with the rest of the tax collectors, to be outside the Law and ceremonially/religiously unclean because he cooperated with the Romans. As such, he could not participate in any of Israel’s religious activities. Matthew, like all tax collectors, was excluded from the community.

Tax collectors were held in such disdain, in fact, that they were associated throughout the Gospels with other less-savory folk: Gentiles (Matt 18:17); harlots (Matt 21:31); thieves, rogues and adulterers (Lk 18:11). Interestingly, Jesus became known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt 11:18-19), including that well-known publican, Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). A tax collector was the hero in one of Jesus’ most powerful parables (Lk 18:9-14), and Jesus boldly stated that publicans would enter heaven ahead of Israel’s religious leaders (Matt 21:31).

Matthew’s response to Jesus’ call to follow seems immediate and abrupt as recorded here: “And he got up and followed him” (v 9b). But because Matthew worked in Capernaum, he likely had had more than one opportunity to see and hear Jesus. We do not know whether Matthew and Jesus had personal conversations prior to this encounter. We do know that when Jesus summoned Matthew, he was ready to follow him.

Matthew 9:10-11 **A Most Unusual Meal**

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

The scene that follows Matthew’s call was actually quite stunning: Jesus and his disciples, seated at a meal, joined by “many tax collectors and sinners” (v 10). The scriptures do not indicate at whose house this meal occurred. It could have been Matthew’s house, someone else’s house or even Jesus’ house.

The Pharisees who looked on were both curious and disgusted. By eating with tax collectors and sinners who were ceremonially unclean, Jesus and his disciples also became unclean, unacceptable for participation in Jewish life.

Keeping clean—separating socially and religiously—defined life for the Pharisees. They believed it was absolutely necessary to observe all of the ancient and historic rituals about cleanliness so that Israel would not offend God. To be unclean was to be contaminated and risk infecting the entire community.

The Pharisees were astonished that Jesus, a Jew, would do something so bold and blatant. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” they asked Jesus’ disciples (v 11).

First-century Jews took seriously the matter of those with whom they ate. Sharing a meal indicated acceptance and welcome. To be sure, anyone with whom the Pharisees shared a meal would first have to be declared clean and acceptable by them. Jesus, on the other hand, deliberately ate with those the Pharisees categorically rejected—those who did not live up to their standards. The very ones the Pharisees rejected, Jesus accepted.

Jesus’ choice of dining companions sent a strong message both to the Pharisees and to the larger community. Jesus likely was not rejecting Jewish law by doing what he did; instead, he was asserting his belief that proper motivation ought to determine outward behavior. And he was establishing a relationship between people and God based on God’s mercy, not individual works or efforts at righteousness.

Matthew 9:12-13 **Community Redefined**

But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Verses 9-13 follow a pattern similar to one found in verses 1-8: Jesus forgives/accepts; religious leaders object; Jesus makes a concluding pronouncement. These and other scenes in Matthew’s Gospel reinforce a recurring theme: God’s acceptance of sinners.

Jesus defended his choice as logical and right first by using an analogy of the physician who ministers to the sick (v 12). His point, of course, is this: a doctor does not wait until sick people are well before going to them. In the same way, Jesus did not wait for “bad” people to become “good” before ministering to them.

Then, he referenced scripture: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6) and challenged the Pharisees to go and learn for themselves what the scripture really means.

By eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus redefined community. He fulfilled the intention of Hosea 6:6 and reminded everyone that God prefers mercy over ritual sacrifice.

In one of many encounters that must surely have stunned the righteous and “clean” religious leaders, Jesus rejected as disciples those who believed they qualified because of their own initiative and deliberately and specifically called the rejected, the “unclean.” His inclusiveness contrasts sharply not only with the exclusiveness of the Pharisees but also, unfortunately, with the exclusiveness of some of his followers today.

God’s Will Today

Mary McAleese, the President of Ireland, was completely overwhelmed by her reaction to the birth of her first child, daughter Emma. After all, she was the older sister in a family of five boys and three other girls and had been surrounded by dozens of younger cousins growing up.

She admits to a “relatively underwhelmed” attitude toward babies in general.

When Emma was born, however, she writes that she was “totally smitten” and “loved her to bits.” Two years later she discovered that she was pregnant with twins. She was delighted but also disturbed, because she could not figure out how she could possibly divide the wonderful love she had for Emma with two more children.

The birth of the twins caused her to realize just how incomplete was her understanding of love. She discovered that she did not have to share the love she felt for Emma; that love was enhanced and even stronger because of the two new children.

“You cannot divide love,” McAleese writes in her book *Reconciled Being, Love in Chaos*. “Its nature is to multiply, to embrace openly and widely, to draw in, not to exclude, to make each feel part of the group, to make each feel completely at home, to reconcile. Exclusivity is not in the nature of God. He made each one of us, called us by our name, knew us before we were born, has the very hairs on each head counted. God has no favourites. Captor and captive are his cherished children. Calvary is his gift to all. The Resurrection is his promise. The Second Coming is his invitation. It is an invitation to experience his loving presence, to share it and to bring the world out of chaos into reconciliation with Him” (www.catholicireland.net/testimonies/mcaleese.shtml).

Exclude. It means to bar, ban, shun, keep out, ignore, omit, pass over. Regardless of what we call it, it’s not positive, and it can’t be a part of the Christian community, according to Jesus.

Consider its antonym: include. It means to contain, comprise, involve, have, hold, embrace, encompass, take in, embody, incorporate.

Now consider *community*: sharing, participation, collectivism, communion, cooperation, similarity, affinity, fellowship, rapport.

Exclusion. Inclusion. Community. Which two of these three words belong together?

When the church follows Jesus’ example, it models community and inclusiveness. You can’t have one without the other.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

There Goes the Neighborhood!

Radical Relationships

Matthew 10:5-15

Theme: God’s will redefines our presence in the world.

Introduction

Because their training and orientation had brought them to Raleigh for six weeks, our church agreed to provide lunch one day for a group of newly appointed missionaries of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Our Baptist roots caused most of us to be excited about serving a meal to “real, live missionaries.”

When the food was ready and those in orientation came to lunch, I must admit they looked like a pretty ordinary group. They were all attractive, bright and friendly. But, they were fairly typical young adults. They actually looked no different from the mid-twenties to early-thirties Sunday school community in our church.

After everyone was served, we joined our guests at the table. They patiently explained where they would be ministering. A couple from Texas with a young child was headed to North Africa to minister in a children’s home among the Berber people group. Another couple was on the way to Tokyo to do international student ministry. They would be the first to focus on ministry to internationals on a campus of more than 50,000 students. A young woman recently graduated from college was bound for Los Angeles to do inner city ministry.

Soon the meal ended. While the missionaries went to an exciting session on expense accounts and retirement plan options, we cleaned up the remains of lunch and headed for home. On the way, my friend JoAnn commented, “Those were extraordinary Christian young adults.”

Yes, they are extraordinary. But why? It is not their charisma. It is not simply that they are sincere and committed. I did not have time to see their ministry gifts displayed, but I doubt that they are more

noteworthy than the gifts of other Christians. I believe that what is authentically rare in these individuals is their vulnerability in serving God.

The more I thought of these new friends, the more I focused on their willingness to be vulnerable—to travel to an unfamiliar place, to minister to unknown people, to begin unproven works of mission.

Perhaps part of the admiration we feel for missionaries is rooted in our recognition that they are willing to be vulnerable in their service to God. While we prefer to do the things at church that we find comfortable and easy within the limits of our time and talents, the missionaries seem to stretch themselves admirably beyond their comfort zones.

Does God only call a select few to be vulnerable in their commitment to the kingdom, or does God call all who follow Jesus to risk being vulnerable in their discipleship?

The answer to that question is vital to all who want to experience the fullness of the Christian life.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 10 begins with Jesus summoning the twelve disciples to try their hand on a mission of great possibility: to cast out unclean spirits and “to cure every disease and every sickness” (Matt 10:1). Our text is the beginning portion of Jesus’ instruction to the twelve.

Matthew 10:5-6 The Lost Sheep

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

It seems strange to us for Jesus to say, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans” (v 5). We generally think of taking the gospel to everyone and ministering without distinction. The exclusive nature of this particular mission enterprise, however, does not negate the more universal appeal recorded by Matthew in what we know as the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19a).

The disheartening state of Jewish religion in the world of Jesus caused him to view many in Israel as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). The ministries of the Pharisees, scribes, synagogue rabbis, high priests and Sanhedrin often showed little concern for the hurts of the common people of Israel. While God cares for everyone, the Scriptures repeatedly affirm God’s primary concern with first meeting the needs of the neglected and forgotten “lost sheep” (v 6).

The appointed shepherds of Jewish faith had not gone out to seek the lost sheep of Israel. They had busied themselves with other pious tasks. Now the followers of Jesus were to begin their personal ministries in Jesus’ name. Their first destination: the lost sheep of Israel.

Matthew 10:7-8 God Is Near

As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

How we have grown to under-appreciate the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near”!

It is a marvelous thing to hear this news. The kingdom is now, not something we will experience only at the end of time. The kingdom is close, as near as our hands, not something as distant as heaven. Jesus brought the astounding news that God is present in our time and space. Here, the disciples were given permission and instruction to announce the same good news.

Not only were they to announce the very news Jesus had announced, but they were also to do the very same works of healing and ministry that Jesus had done in their midst. The disciples had already received so much from Jesus. Now, they were to freely give to others. Authentic ministry always follows this pattern: we receive grace, strength and other blessings from God. Out of what we freely receive we are able to bless the lives of others through ministry.

The idea of “freely you received, freely give” (v 8 NKJV) has another dimension. The Greek word used there is from the root which means *gift*. What God has done for us is a gift, freely given. As we in turn serve others, our service should be a gift. Ministry for profit is a concept foreign to the teaching of Jesus.

Matthew 10:9-10 **A Radical Faith**

Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

Here the text accentuates the demand that the disciples go out to serve in vulnerability. No money, no extra clothes, no helpful tools, not even sandals—what a risky mission trip this sounds like! While we often plan our mission ventures carefully, making sure that our budgets, accommodations and itineraries maximize our chances for success (or at least for having a great experience), Jesus insisted that the disciples have a radical faith that was expressed through their vulnerability.

Any support the disciples received would flow from the perception of others that their ministry deserved it. Many Christians find missionaries raising their own support too risky for our tastes. Yet here we find Jesus sending the disciples to the mission field without support on the premise that authentic ministry will lead someone to give them aid.

Matthew 10:11-15 **Vulnerable to Rejection**

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

These five verses are rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality so important to Palestinian culture. The disciples were not to bankroll their mission endeavor. They were to depend on the hospitality of “worthy” persons they encountered.

Who are these worthy persons? Frank Stagg wrote that they were “those open to the gospel.” Perhaps they were also persons known for their hospitality and generosity, persons with reputations for supporting benevolence, ministry and spiritual endeavor.

Like we speak of networking and partnering in missions, Jesus instructed the twelve to seek out those who would be their ministry partners, at least through their hospitality. To those ministry supporters the disciples were to extend blessing. If the blessing was returned, which would be required of a good host, the disciples were to extend their greetings of peace to the household and enjoy the gifts of hospitality extended by their gracious hosts.

The bonds between those on mission and those supporting their mission are strong, full of wonderful potential.

But, should hospitality be denied or withdrawn or if the words of the disciples went unheeded, Jesus instructed them to shake the dust off their feet. It was common for Jews to ceremoniously “shake the dust off their feet” when leaving Gentile soil. It seems Jesus asked these disciples to be vulnerable to rejection. In the face of their rejection they were to move on elsewhere where their ministry would be well received.

The disciples needed to expend no energy in argument or conflict with those who rejected their ministry and message. For those who opposed the gospel and its messengers, it would be worse than “for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah” (v 15), Jesus said. The evil of those cities was great, but they were judged when they were inhospitable to the messengers of the Lord in Genesis 19, and chastised in Ezekiel 16:49 because of inhospitality to the poor and needy in spite of their “abundant food and careless ease.”

God’s Will Today

The mission Jesus gave the disciples required that they have radical faith and be willing to risk extreme vulnerability. They were asked to do great tasks beyond their experience and perceived capability. They were asked to go without provision. They were asked to depend on hospitality of supportive partners. They were asked to go in spite of the likelihood of some rejection. But, they were authentic disciples. They said “yes.”

God does not ask only career missionaries to become vulnerable in service and mission. God asks this of every Christian. Many try to ignore the call to vulnerability. Others try to carry out the mission but with careful planning rather than radical faith.

When I was a child, my family attended a medium-sized congregation in an old neighborhood of Atlanta. My Sunday school class teacher was a man we called Mr. Lee who had a fairly severe speech impediment. He was quiet and shy, an introvert by nature, a design engineer by trade. Each Sunday he entered a room of about ten nine- and ten-year-old boys and often endured embarrassing moments of stammering as he tried to begin the lesson.

Eventually, each week Mr. Lee would overcome his initial nervousness, teach the Bible and talk about life wonderfully with us. He was loving and kind, and somehow he was one of the important voices who shared with me, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Somehow, it seemed that most of the boys in our church found their way down the aisle and into the baptistery during our years in Mr. Lee’s class. I was one of those boys.

I look back and am amazed that Mr. Lee—young, no children of his own, shy and often embarrassed by his stammering—said “yes” to God’s call to teach nine- and ten-year-old boys. His vulnerability was every bit as great as missionaries on their way to Africa, Canada or Los Angeles.

God wants each of us to do something, not because we have the gifts or abilities, but because God wants us to be vulnerable in our doing the work of the kingdom. We may not see how we will accomplish what God wants us to do; we may be well afraid of the criticism and opposition we may receive, but God still calls us. The true disciple finds the faith to say yes, more desirous of the blessing that comes from serving God than afraid of the vulnerability that following the Lord demands.

Written by Jack Glasgow, pastor, Zebulon Baptist Church, Zebulon, N.C.

Hard-Wired Faith

Matthew 11:25-30

Theme: God’s will redefines our understanding of God.

Introduction

Since God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the garden and established an ongoing relationship with them, people throughout history have had ideas about a power behind and beyond everything. The idea of God is universal and persists in all cultures, in all times.

Are we ‘hard-wired’ for relationship with God? The scientific community continues to explore that concept, looking in depth at the relationship between human biology and spiritual experiences (www.baptiststandard.com/2003/4_28/pages/hardwired.html).

The thought has fascinated scientists and philosophers throughout the centuries. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French scientist and religious philosopher, said, “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”

Created by God in God’s image, something within us wants to know and understand God. And God wants that too.

Marcus Borg, a professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University and internationally known as a “Jesus scholar” in both academic and religious circles, writes thoughtfully of his growing understanding of God: “In my religious journey, now over five decades long, I have learned that our concept of God matters. . . . It matters not because God wants us to get it right, as if what God most wants is ‘correct beliefs.’ Rather, it matters to us. . . . [O]ur concept of the sacred can make God seem real or unreal, present or absent, near or distant” (www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week421/perspectives.html).

Borg's belief in God as a child was effortless, stemming from what he learned at home and church. It didn't take faith to believe, he recalls, because children tend to believe without question whatever the significant authority figures in their lives tell them is true. In adolescence, however, his childhood beliefs crashed into the 'worldview of modernity.' His growing understanding of the enormous age and size of the universe caused him to believe God was increasingly farther away.

Borg, in fact, became a 'closet atheist' for a number of years, a sojourn that ended in his 30s after a series of spiritual experiences led him to understand God as "an experiential reality, not simply an idea to believe in.

"The change in my concept of God has changed my understanding of the religious life. God is real, right here, and can be known. The religious life is not about believing in a person-like being 'out there,' who may or may not exist, but about a relationship with the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Salvation is not primarily about going to be with God when we die, but about a transforming relationship with God here and now" (www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week421/perspectives.html).

Like Borg, we can know God because God desires this and makes it possible.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 11:25-26 Those Who Know God

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

Jesus' prayer of gratitude (vv 25-27) and his invitation to the crowds (vv 28-30) offer a positive and welcome contrast to verses 20-24. While saddened and troubled over the rejection of his message by some, Jesus refused to let his words of condemnation be the last.

"At that time" (v 25) indicates that these words of Jesus came immediately after he expressed disappointment and remorse over those who did not respond to his message and repent. The phrase

also connects his prayer to his teachings in the preceding verses. Although Jesus here is speaking to God, his audience also included "the crowds" (v 7).

Jesus expressed gratitude to God for those who had accepted his message and his mission and because God had "hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent" and "revealed them to infants" (v 25). While his reference to the "wise" and "intelligent" might specifically have meant the scribes who were self-confident and even prideful about what they knew, it also included anyone who relied on individual intelligence alone. "Infants" did not refer to the very young but instead to those who were humble and open to Jesus and his teachings.

Jesus in no way intended to glorify ignorance. In other places, Matthew's Gospel notes that wisdom and intelligence are positive attributes of the disciples (see 7:24-27; 13:51; 23:34; 25:13).

Although he was praying, Jesus continued to teach the crowds. Jesus' use of "Father" (v 26) surely taught them and reminds us that we can know God as Jesus knows God. We can encounter God in a relationship of trust and love, much as we would a parent. Coupled with "Lord of heaven and earth" (v 25), Jesus taught us to approach God reverently but also confidently, believing God is able to provide whatever we need and wants to give us what is good, as a loving and caring parent.

Jesus' prayer further reinforced what he had made clear throughout his ministry: those who have and display faith in Jesus do so because of God's gracious will. Those who recognize Jesus as the divine messenger display the faith God gives them, not personal intelligence or any special or superior status in the religious community.

Because of Jesus, we can know God in a relationship of trust and love, beyond and apart from an intellectual knowledge.

Matthew 11:27 Unique Relationship

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Verse 27 makes clear Jesus' identity and points to his unique relationship with God. Jesus alone possesses complete and true

knowledge and can give it to whomever he chooses. This is possible not because Jesus has somehow unraveled the mysteries of the divine; rather, it is possible because Jesus and God share an exclusive relationship like no other.

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father,” Jesus said (v 27). What God knows, Jesus knows. God’s plans are also the plans of Jesus. God commissioned Jesus alone to establish the new covenant between God and people; because of Jesus’ relationship with God, he has all power and authority to do so.

While Jesus’ assertion, “no one knows the Son except the Father,” (v 27) emphasized his unique relationship with God, it may also point to a lingering sense of loneliness Jesus felt. Even those closest to him frequently misunderstood him. God alone understood Jesus completely, and Jesus was grateful for that.

Further, “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (v 27). We do not “discover” God, nor do we “find” God’s will. God is revealed in Jesus. We can know God, and God’s will, because of our faith in Jesus.

Hebrew scripture reveals a personal God, one who takes the initiative in revealing himself to people. The New Testament preserves this idea and relates this God of the Hebrews uniquely to Jesus. Jesus is the supreme revelation of God.

Jesus made clear that we know God because of his relationship with God, and God desires this.

Matthew 11:28-30 **Come, Rest and Learn**

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

Verses 28-30 are among Matthew’s special gifts, words of Jesus not found in Luke’s Gospel. Familiar and pleasant to us, ministers for generations have used these words to comfort and console during times of deep grief, need and distress. But they represent so much more. Jesus issued this invitation as the way to an abundant life, not simply as a way out.

Continuing the idea of education and learning, Jesus again spoke to the uneducated and naïve and offered them a kind of lifelong learning that would help them overcome their fear, anxiety, uncertainty and meaninglessness and replace these with security, peace, well-being and contentment.

Immediately following his claim that people could know God because of him, Jesus invited people to “come” to him. Only Jesus could give the people what they could not earn or purchase for themselves, try as hard as they did to keep the letter of the law. Jesus’ invitation to “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (v 28) was probably specifically issued to those who struggled to keep the law according to the guidelines imposed by the Jewish religious leaders.

His invitation comes with a promise: “I will give you rest” (v 28). The rest Jesus offered was on several fronts. It was an alternative to the weariness they felt from the burden of religious obligation imposed by the scribes and Pharisees. It meant a clear conscience and peace of mind, a relief from the terror people felt because of sins they surely committed simply because they could not keep the minute details of the law. And it meant the certainty of forgiveness of sin and release from its power, the contentment associated with salvation.

Jesus promised rest, not an escape from the hurdles and conflicts that sometimes make life hard, but an assurance that in the midst of those things, and in spite of them, people can live completely and joyfully. The rest Jesus offered was the offer of salvation and eternal life, membership in the kingdom of God.

By accepting his invitation to “come,” people also accepted his “yoke” and the opportunity to “learn” (v 29). The yoke was a familiar term, one the rabbis used to refer to the Jewish law and school. Although they spoke of it positively and referred to it as a joy, they had made it a burden for the average person. It had, in fact, become a barrier between the people and God.

By contrast, Jesus described his yoke as “easy,” and the burden from carrying it as “light” (v 30). Jesus’ yoke had nothing in common with the yoke of the religious leaders. Instead of making people tired and weary, Jesus promised a yoke that was pleasant and resulted in refreshment. Jesus’ yoke is loving and beneficial to us, not designed to harm us.

While Jesus did promise freedom from the impossible demands of what had become a religion designed by humans, he did not promise a problem-free life of ease. Jesus' salvation is a gift, but it demands from us total obedience. "Learn" was an important aspect of following Christ in Matthew's Gospel, and the teacher makes all the difference. Because Jesus is meek and humble, going to his 'school' is a pleasant experience. Jesus is compassionate with those who are naïve, even ignorant. The meekness and humility he models are also qualities he desires that we learn. While these were not qualities the religious leaders admired, Jesus turned them into virtues.

Taking on Jesus' yoke and learning from him lead us to know God.

God's Will Today

Sandy Sasso, rabbi of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis, tells the story of a picture her then 6-year-old daughter drew at day camp. When she asked her daughter to tell her about the proper-looking elderly man in the picture, the little girl replied, "Well, Mom, the counselors asked me to draw a picture of God."

The little girl stopped suddenly, noticing her mother's startled expression, then continued: "Don't get excited. I know God is not an old man. When they asked me to draw God, I handed them a blank page, but they insisted that I had to draw *something*. This was all I could think of" (www.beliefnet.org/story/9/story_991.html).

Sasso writes that at first, she was thrilled because her daughter didn't think of God only as a male image and that she recognized God was beyond human perception. "I was ready to enroll her in seminary!" she says.

As she thought about it, however, Sasso realized that her daughter, like many children—and many adults—lacked "rich images . . . to fill her spiritual world."

She continues: "The rabbis taught that God is like a mirror and each person who looks into that mirror sees a different face. A generation newly freed from bondage called God 'Redeemer.' A people seeking guidance and protection called God 'Shepherd.' . . . Who we are and where we are in our cycle of life will determine what we see when we

look into God's mirror. Each face, each name, is a partial reflection of the One who includes us all."

To Sasso's analogies, we can add: A people seeking salvation call Jesus Savior.

No amount of human achievement in science, technology, medicine, education or any other field can allow us to know God. Jesus can. We grow in our understanding of both God and God's will as we participate in the divine plan.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Above the Law

Matthew 12:1-14

Theme: God's will redefines our practice of faith.

Introduction

In the rural South where I grew up, the rules for Sunday were quite rigid. But the rules varied from community to community, and from family to family. Some believed you could go to church, but not to the movie. Others could swim, but not go fishing. Some families believed it was okay to dine in a restaurant, but not to shop in a department store. Sabbath observance was all a matter of interpretation.

In one of his insightful editorials, Marv Knox wrote, "Of course, Sabbath-keeping provided all kinds of opportunities for inconsistency and holier-than-thouness. We could look down our noses at the neighbor who mowed his lawn on Sunday afternoon while we wore ourselves and our families out with church activities and needed to go to work or school on Monday to rest up" (see "24/7: One Hundred Sixty-eight Reasons to Rest With God," www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1704).

On the American scene, observance of the Sabbath was not just a matter of religious practice. Statutes called "blue laws" (because they were originally written on blue paper) were prevalent in the Deep South. These laws primarily sought to enforce Sabbath-keeping by prohibiting businesses other than restaurants and other "works of necessity" from opening on Sundays.

Oh, how times change! Blue laws have been repealed and many businesses open on Sunday. Sunday is a prominent day for fishing, swimming, boating, racing, golfing and school-related sports.

Those who embark on a faith journey in the postmodern world, a world perplexed by paradoxes and pluralism, may struggle to understand the difference between prohibitive and permissive Sabbath activities. Perhaps a careful consideration of these conflictual encounters

between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel will provide guidance on how believers can practice faith by interpreting all scriptural teachings in the light of the ministry of Jesus.

The Biblical Witness

The Conflict Continues Matthew 12:1-2

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath."

In first century Jewish life, the Sabbath was a day of rest. Strict prohibitions guarded the sacredness of the Sabbath activities. The regulations were so meticulous that the scribes identified 39 different classifications of labor that were forbidden on the Sabbath. Subsequently, Jewish scholars identified 1521 possible violations of these Sabbath regulations.

There was nothing criminal about Jesus and the disciples walking through the grainfield. In fact, Deuteronomic law permitted the disciples to "pluck heads of grain and eat" from the field of a stranger. But in order to eat the grain, the disciples had to "thresh the grain."

"Threshing" was a form of labor which customarily violated the Sabbath. Threshing to prepare harvested grain for the market would have certainly been considered a Sabbath violation. When the Pharisees accused Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath by threshing their handfuls of grain, the Pharisees were obviously attempting to entrap Jesus.

The Pharisees associated religious fidelity with strict adherence to the Torah. It must have seemed inconceivable to them that the God of Israel could be manifest through the actions of this wayfaring prophet from Nazareth. The writer of Matthew's Gospel seems to go to great extent to demonstrate the growing conflict and the escalating accusations between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Lord of the Sabbath Matthew 12:3-8

He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath."

Jesus responded to the Pharisees' accusation with an illustration from their own scriptures. He cited an incident from 2 Samuel when David and his entourage entered the temple and ate the consecrated bread, the bread of the presence. Jesus also reminded the Pharisees that temple priests had a long tradition of engaging in activities that were prohibited by the Sabbath code, and yet the priests were not considered "violators." These arguments were probably well known among the Pharisees because for years the rabbis had differed on how to interpret these exceptions to normal Sabbath-keeping.

As was his custom, Jesus seized the moment for a didactic purpose. He urged a new perspective on religious fidelity as he proclaimed, "something greater than the temple is here." Jesus seemed to be proposing that because of his coming, Sabbath was about to take on a new and deeper meaning.

Jesus also seemed to tactfully empathize with his accusers by acknowledging their difficulty in understanding the text, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," a prophetic text from Hosea 6:6. Jesus inferred that their own lack of mercy had caused them to condemn both him and his disciples, even though these disciples were innocent of an infraction.

The most emphatic moment in this conversation between Jesus and his accusers must have been when Jesus proposed that "the son of man is Lord of the sabbath." Jesus was indeed identifying and aligning himself with Yahweh, the God of Israel. To the Pharisees, this would have been the ultimate in Sabbath desecration and blasphemy. For Jesus, who was secure in his own identity, this was a simple declaration, that he, above all others, should know the importance, significance and ultimate purpose of the Sabbath.

The Deeds of the Sabbath Matthew 12:9-14

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a 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. He 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? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

What better deed to honor God on the Sabbath than to heal a man with a deformed hand. Jesus captured this moment as a living illustration. The Pharisees knew that the law permitted healing to save someone's life, but other administrations of healing were traditionally considered infractions of the Sabbath. Jesus contrasted this healing exercise with other activities that were permitted on the Sabbath. Sabbath law permitted the retrieval of a sheep from a pit and the removal of an ox from a ditch. Jesus argued that because a human is much more valuable than a sheep, the intent of the Sabbath should also permit the doing of good deeds on the Sabbath.

As the man stretched out his withered hand, it was restored to be as functional as the other hand. Rather than celebrating the healing, and rather than being persuaded by the theological argument of Jesus, Matthew portrays the Pharisees as intensifying the conspiracy. Now they are plotting, not just to discredit Jesus, but to destroy him.

Not So Fast Matthew 9:14-17

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

Resistance to these ways and teachings of Jesus did not come only from the Pharisees. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we find John's disciples questioning Jesus about fasting. Their claim is that John's disciples and the Pharisees fast regularly, but that Jesus' disciples do not fast at all. Jesus' response must have either alarmed them or jolted them into new understandings of faith and fasting. Jesus contended that just as wedding guests do not mourn while in the company of the bridegroom, neither should his disciples assume a disposition of fasting. But the days will come later when they will fast.

To illustrate the faith paradigm initiated by his ministry, Jesus appealed to two common practices. First, he asserted that no seamstress would sew unshrunk cloth on an old garment, else the patchwork will look worse than the original tear. Second, he described what happens if someone attempts to put new wine into old wine-skins: The skins cannot contain the new wine. New wine must be put into fresh skins.

Could Jesus possibly mean that there are some new perspectives about fasting and Sabbath-keeping, and about faith and fidelity that will accompany his ministry? Through the husking of the grain and the healing of the hand on the Sabbath, and through relaxing of the rigid understandings of fasting, Jesus seems to be introducing an era of faith that focuses on the spirit of the law and not the letter of the law.

God's Will Today

These episodes reveal that Jesus was indeed more concerned about relationships than rules. Jesus was indeed above the law, not in that he was exempt from the law, but in that he was the ultimate revelation of God's law and God's love. Therefore, Jesus did not come to eliminate the law, but to demonstrate that love is the dominating principle in interpreting and practicing the law.

Those who follow Jesus today will find general guidance from the law and commandments. Maturing disciples may best find God's will as they interpret all scripture in light of Christ. Because Jesus devoted his life to actions that were loving and merciful, Christians are at their best, not when attempting to enforce certain interpretations related to the law, but when demonstrating the love of Christ.

Written by Barry Howard, pastor, Brookwood Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.

Defining Family

Matthew 12:46-50

Theme: God's will redefines the nature of family.

Introduction

The three of us seated on the floor around a low table sharing a meal had little in common. One of my companions was a young man from Afghanistan, a member of the Hazara people group and a Muslim by heritage. In his youth, his father had sent him to Iran to be trained in the ways of terrorism. The other man was a native of India and had been reared in the Hindu tradition. I am a white Baptist from the southern United States.

The setting was Kashmir, that beautiful territory over which India and Pakistan have warred for decades. We met to discuss how my church might partner with the two men. An outsider listening to our conversation might have been surprised to learn their work involved introducing people to Christ and teaching new Christians the ways of Christ. Such talk was dangerous in Kashmir. Only a few days before, a Christian convert and his family had been cast out of their home by his father and family and threatened with harm by extremists.

I had expected to feel isolated and afraid. Instead, I felt as if I were with supportive family members. My new friend from Afghanistan had become a Christian while in Iran. Suffering imprisonment and torture, he had been fortunate to escape with his life. In the years since, he had developed a unique ministry to the Hazara people. My Indian friend had become a Christian as a young adult. For the past twenty years, he had led a coalition of various Christian groups in India in an effective program of evangelism and discipleship training.

We came from different nations, races and language groups. Who would have dreamed we might find one another, let alone bond with one another as a kind of family? We were united by our desire to do the will of God by following Jesus. In the context of this family relationship, we strengthened one another for the task before us.

Jesus redefined family to mean those who seek to know and do the will of God. In Kashmir, the power inherent in such a family became real to me.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 12:46-50 concludes a lengthy collection of stories found in Matthew 11 and 12. Each story depicts some kind of emerging opposition to the vision and ministry of Jesus.

Confused by the content and style of Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist questioned his messianic credentials. Some Pharisees were offended by Jesus' willingness to set aside traditional Sabbath restrictions on activity in order to feed or heal people. They demanded that he reveal his source of authority or validate his ministry via miraculous signs. Some went so far as to label Jesus a tool of Satan. In each case, Jesus dealt with the matter at hand and challenged his opponents to abandon their perspective and join him in doing God's will.

The climatic challenge came from Jesus' own family. Most commentators suggest his family opposed his ministry at this point in time. They came in search of him, most likely with the intent of persuading him to abandon his work and return home with them. Surprisingly, Jesus responded to his family in much the same manner as he had John the Baptist and the Pharisees.

Matthew 12:46-47 Altered Expectations

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

We know relatively little about the family of Jesus. While Mary and James occupy significant places in scripture and church tradition, his other siblings remain shadowy figures. Matthew 13:55 names his brothers as James, Joseph, Simon and Judas.

What were their expectations of Jesus? Almost certainly they expected him to play the traditional role of the eldest son. Jesus would have been expected to follow in his father's trade as a carpenter. Upon the death of his father, Jesus would have borne primary responsibility for his mother's welfare and leadership of the

family. To a lesser degree, his siblings would have hoped Jesus would marry, have children and so continue the family name.

In addition, Jesus' family no doubt expected him to fulfill the requirements of traditional piety. These included, but were not limited to, observance of the Sabbath laws, participation in the life of the synagogue and due respect for religious authorities such as the Pharisees. Not only in their view was such piety important for the sake of Jesus; faithful observance also helped solidify the family's place in society.

Jesus' family also bore responsibility toward him. Families were expected to provide the basic needs of each family member. They were to care for one another during times of illness and old age. We should not discount the elements of compassion and responsibility when we ask why Jesus' family sought him out.

In summary, Jesus' family expected him to act according to tradition in order to provide for the family's financial, religious and social needs. As a side note, his disciples probably shared their expectations. The disciples had not yet grasped that following Jesus entailed a radical reorientation of all commitments.

The public ministry of Jesus confounded his family's expectations. He left his home and profession, challenged pious traditions when they hindered ministry and appeared likely to be headed for a dangerous showdown with the authorities. Commentators have long surmised his family believed Jesus had taken leave of his senses. If this is the case, they came to where he was speaking in order to confront him and persuade him to retire from public ministry and return home. No doubt they hoped Jesus would be moved by the force of family ties and would agree to abide by their wishes.

When the family arrived on the scene, they found Jesus speaking to a crowd. Someone, perhaps a disciple, went to tell Jesus his family wished to speak with him. The custom of the day required Jesus to bring his work to an end and see to his family. No doubt, Mary and Jesus' brothers expected him to do so. Once again, Jesus did not do as was expected.

Matthew 12:48-50 **A New Family**

But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus seized the occasion as an opportunity to redefine the meaning of family. He insisted his true family members were not determined by biology but instead by a shared relationship with God. Dramatically, Jesus pointed to his disciples and proclaimed they were his genuine family because they sought to do the will of God. Three implications of Jesus' statement require attention.

First, note the element of action in his definition. Jesus did not say his spiritual family consisted of those who agreed to certain propositions or doctrines. He placed the focus on action, on doing the will of God. In the preceding stories found in Matthew 11 and 12, Jesus already had made it clear that doing the will of God meant following Jesus. He had also shown them examples of the kinds of ministry following him involved: freeing captives, bringing sight to the blind, helping the sick, feeding the hungry and the like. The family of Jesus consists of those who do such things.

Second, those who seek to do the will of God are kin not only to Jesus but to one another. Biology, nationality, race and sectarian agreement are eliminated as the criteria for family. Any man or woman who follows Jesus is part of the family. Such a concept was difficult to accept and put into practice. Jesus' birth family was confused and hurt by the statement. Later, the early church would repeatedly struggle to implement Jesus' vision of family as it sought to unify believers drawn from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Nonetheless, the vision remains: To be kin to Christ is to be driven to see and embrace our relationship with all other disciples.

Third, Jesus' vision of family effectively eliminates the concept of the solitary Christian. The idea has expressed itself in multiple ways throughout church history. In modern America, it most often takes the form of isolation from the church. Christians who buy into the concept believe they can best follow Christ on their own. They sometimes think that interaction with other Christians hinders one's walk with Christ.

Jesus' vision of his new family or church was quite different. He assumed that an individual Christian would be strengthened in the faith by interaction with the larger family of faith. He did not envision a life characterized by diminished relationships but instead a life in which the Christian becomes increasingly connected to the wider family of Christ's disciples.

God's Will Today

Perhaps we are tempted to say, "It's all well and good for Jesus to redefine family in this way, but will it work today?"

My experience in Kashmir suggests that Jesus' vision is capable of realization. In spite of our genuine differences, we found a sense of community. The two men remain part of my extended family of faith. We support each other in our efforts to do God's will.

Jesus' redefined family works in the United States as well. For example, Frank (not his real name) grew up in a home dominated by an abusive, alcoholic father. His mother claimed to be a Christian, but she avoided church gatherings and other Christians. Years later Frank said, "Early on, I decided to depend upon myself and that all that talk about religion or church was bunk."

As soon as possible, Frank enlisted in the armed services. He rose through the ranks, but his personal life spun out of control. He became an alcoholic. By the time he retired, his family had left him and he saw no hope of a better life.

When he began a post-military career, two Christians made an effort to become his friends. After considerable resistance, he allowed them into his life. They won his trust. The friends introduced Frank to a pastor who shared his kind of background. In time, Frank chose to follow Christ and enter the church.

Slowly, Frank expanded his range of friendships in the church. With their support, he brought his alcoholism under control and began to try and do God's will.

His career entailed a great deal of travel. Frank's church friends worried about him being alone for extended periods of time. They relaxed after hearing what he had to tell them following an extended business trip.

“It used to be that whenever I traveled, I felt very lonely,” he said. “I would do my job, then I would go back to the room and drink. Things are different now. Whether I’m in Singapore or Japan or Australia, I keep running into Christians. I’m never far away from someone in my new family, am I?”

Frank was right. God’s new family provides the support and guidance we need to seek and do God’s will.

Written by Michael A. Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

NOTE: The scriptures used in the remaining four lessons in this unit jump back to the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel. These lessons were placed in this order because the unit was originally released in early fall. Many Sunday school classes planned to use the following lessons during Advent. If your class uses the curriculum at a time which does not coincide with Advent and Christmas, you may prefer to use the following four lessons first.

Tracing Our Roots

Matthew 1:1-17

Theme: God's will works through human history.

Introduction

My wife, Kelly, loves to create scrapbooks. Ever since we were married, she has had the goal of piecing together the significant moments of our lives from college until now and displaying them appropriately on acid-free paper. Flipping through her scrapbooks is a bit like reading a selected history of my small family. We have the years prior to engagement, the wedding, the pre-child days and now the days with our son Parker. Each name mentioned has a story behind it, and each face reveals a memory that we share together.

The Bible is much like God's scrapbook of our ancient history as people of faith. The pages do not mention every person who has walked by faith with the Lord; but through the inspired writers, the pages contain the lives of some great and not so special characters. Much like scrapbooks which piece together the places and faces from long ago, the scriptures bring together small nuggets from their lives. The Bible is bound together around the common theme of the history of God's redemptive plan for the world.

The text for this lesson opens the New Testament account of the narrative of God's history. The book of Matthew begins with a genealogy designed to be read from the perspective of Matthew's church. They viewed a genealogy as a theological family tree, a group of people who played vital roles in the history of God's will as it weaves its way through time. They were not concerned if the writer mentioned every person who was connected to Jesus biologically or ethnically. Instead, they heard this group as a list of faith figures: those whom God used to engender faith in the work of Christ.

This lesson shows the kinds of characters God used leading up to the life of Jesus and how Jesus' own life prepared the way for the kind of work God is still accomplishing today.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 1:1-15

The Faith Family Album

Like many ancient novels, the Gospel of Matthew's genealogy contains a selective list of individuals who are tied historically to the central figure in the story. We can imagine that the names listed evoked all kinds of images and memories as a person read the Gospel to the early church to whom it was written. In an oral culture such as Matthew's, history was retold through the stories of previous generations. Most people did not research information from a library; rather, the history was passed down among family groups in a process of ancient storytelling. Those who heard the roll call of names in Matthew remembered important individuals who played roles in their stories.

Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy contains important characteristics that set it apart from other ancient genealogies. In the first place, Jesus' family tree is more than a list of those tied biologically or genetically to him. Matthew is more interested in the theological ties that connect them to the Savior of the world.

Secondly, the genealogy can be divided into two groups of fourteen generations and one group of thirteen names. The first two groups are those names from Abraham to David and from David to the Babylonian exile, respectively. The third group of names lists those from the exile to the coming of Christ. Presumably the reason that there are only thirteen generations in the third group is to gain the attention of the audience. By listing only thirteen names, the writer implies that a new generation is coming that will involve anyone from Jesus' time forward who desires to be a part of his family.

Thirdly, the text highlights mothers, brothers and sinners, three classes of people not normally mentioned in ancient genealogical data. They play important roles in the shape of the story.

Matthew mentions four very prominent women in these verses: Tamar (v 3), Rahab (v 5), Ruth (v 5), and "the wife of Uriah" (v 6). Each shares several characteristics. They were mothers who were more than likely Gentiles and whose marriages did not follow the conventional biblical pattern of family. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute so that she could be the mother of the children of Judah. Rahab did not disguise

herself as a prostitute; she was one. Ruth entered the city of Bethlehem as a widow and a Moabitess before marrying Boaz. Bathsheba's name is not even mentioned here, but most people in Matthew's day knew the reference to Uriah, just as believers do today. These four women function as key players in the theological heritage of Jesus despite their questionable circumstances.

Another group that plays a key role in the genealogy is the "brothers." In the first two groups of generations, the "brothers" of individuals are noted. Verse 2 references the brothers of Judah, the other 11 leaders of the tribes of Judah. Verse 11 mentions the brothers of Jechoniah (1 Chron 3:15).

Sinners also play key roles in this genealogy. One would expect prominent, upstanding figures to be featured in most ancient records. Instead some of the worst are mentioned. The four women are not the only ones who arise from questionable circumstances. Many of the men have a sordid past. For instance, Manasseh (v 10) was remembered by the biblical writers as one of the worst kings in all of Israel (2 Kings 21:1-18).

Matthew 1:16-17 Family Connections

And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

The list of names in Jesus' family tree reaches its climax in verses 16 and 17. The imagery of mothers, brothers and sinners lies behind these verses as well. Where a reader would expect to see "Jacob the father of Joseph" and no wife mentioned, instead the text indicates, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary," placing even greater emphasis on Jesus' mother.

Mary is not viewed as Joseph's wife; Joseph is seen as Mary's husband. Secondly, no brothers are mentioned in the third group (vv 12-16) of the genealogy, possibly because the followers of Jesus played such key roles as his new spiritual brothers and sisters. Thirdly, Jesus' coming into the world gives the sinners mentioned in the genealogy a chance to be connected to a new kind of family, which is fulfilled and completed in Christ.

Christ fulfills the expectations of the Israelite and Gentile families prior to his time. Whereas David had been promised a new family, one whose line would never end (2 Sam 7:12-16; 1 Chron 17:11-14), and Abraham was given the promise that his family would be like the sands of the seas and a blessing to all the nations (Gen 22:18), Jesus fulfills the expectations of the generations. He creates new family connections, born not exclusively through bloodlines but inclusively through the spirit. He reaches out to the scandalized (Manasseh), the tawdry (Tamar), the Gentile (Ruth), the frightened (Mary and Joseph). He uses ordinary and sometimes less than desirable people as the foundation on which he can build a new kind of family. A new generation of believers is born through the coming of the Messiah/Christ. When his history is recorded, people will know that God has been with them (v 23).

God's Will Today

"You cannot separate Christianity from history. If you ignore history, eventually history will reach up and bite you," Robert Sloan once stated in a sermon at Truett Seminary. The genealogy of Matthew reminds the believer that God's will still works in history, and we would do well to remember how that process works.

The family tree of Jesus reminds the reader of Matthew that the history cannot be measured in months or years but epochs. We do not count the days physically or biologically but spiritually. The old days have passed away; a new day has dawned (Matt 3:2); a new generation has risen through the work of Christ.

The genealogy changes the way individuals define what it means to be family today. Where some would say a true family consists of a husband, wife and 2.5 kids, Jesus' family changes biological family to faith family. The genealogy anticipates Jesus' coming encouragement and challenge to his disciples when he tells them later in the Gospel: "For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:50).

Hearing the roll call of Matthew is a reminder that God continues to use unlikely individuals to accomplish God's work. The pedigree of a follower of the Lord does not need to be people listed in a global hall of fame; sometimes they should be put into a hall of shame. God's work in history can be measured by the lives that have been transformed by the redemptive story of Jesus Christ.

The pattern of God's will working in the world calls for us to see people today with new eyes. Instead of seeing them for the apparent failures that they might have become, the Lord sees them as people who are waiting to be a part of the new faith family that God has designed for them. Their lifestyles might make them perfect candidates for a transforming work of the Lord and an addition to the family tree. Our success as believers might not be measured in how many years we can say we have served the Lord in our families but rather how many conversations we have had with those like Tamar and Manasseh whose lives need a changing touch from the Christ who has faith in them to change.

Ben and Susan were active young adults in a very small, rural church. After becoming parents to two biological children, they adopted an African-American boy and a Caucasian girl. Unfortunately, an individual in the church made a racial comment to the couple one Sunday morning, and they dropped out of church for a very long time.

A few years passed, and the fences were not going to be mended easily, until one day the church found an opportunity to seek forgiveness. Ben was having back surgery, and the church wanted to respond in love to the family to express their desire to work through their problems. The couple was not too eager to receive support, but they had not been attending church anywhere since they had dropped out. After months of work and prayer, both parties came together again. The church found forgiveness of themselves for their cruelty, and Ben and Susan chose to forgive as well. And God continues to use both in the kingdom.

The history of God's kingdom coming into the world is not measured in years but in epochs. It is the epoch of God's kingdom dawning, a new light shining, Jesus Christ coming to create a new faith family as Savior of the world.

God's will works through human history. In this new day, Jesus welcomes new faces into his album, those who are a part of his plan to save the world.

Written by Bill Shiell, senior pastor, Southland Baptist Church, San Angelo, Texas

Committed to Justice

Matthew 1:18-25

Theme: God's will redefines our practice of justice.

Introduction

Behind the wheel of his tractor-trailer rig, Billy Turnbow had been driving for 20 hours when he plowed into Lynda Taylor's car near a construction zone on I-65 around Prattville, Alabama. Her twin 3-year-old daughters in the car survived the crash, but Taylor, eight months pregnant, did not.

In a court of law Taylor's family had every right and reason to seek the maximum penalty when Turnbow pleaded guilty to manslaughter. But rather than urging a harsh sentence, they shocked their small community by asking the judge to be lenient on Turnbow, who has a wife and two young children.

"Lynda's children have lost their mother, and we couldn't find a constructive reason for the Turnbow children to lose their father," said Bryan Hancock, Taylor's brother. "Mr. Turnbow had no intention to harm them and we thank him for his apology."

Harold Hancock, Taylor's father and a staff member at First Baptist Church in Montgomery, responded, "We are a family whose faith is important to us. We have a deep, abiding faith in our Lord, our God, and our Christ. We had to forgive Mr. Turnbow, just as Christ has forgiven us."

We live in a litigious, suit-happy society. Many people who threaten "I'll see you in court!" follow through, expending thousands and sometimes millions of dollars to receive retribution and revenge. Often our court system is a legitimate avenue for pursuit of justice and redress of grievances. But as Christians there are times we are called to higher ethical ground, higher law—God's law of love. Love, not the

letter of the law, ultimately dictates our standards. Our civil courts may allow us to exact our pound of flesh, but that is not what God desires every time.

Matthew 1 records how Joseph redefined the practice of justice. Read the verses and between the verses to see a man devoted to God's law as well as God's heart. Joseph sensed God's Spirit move him in a direction that placed love above the law. He sought for Mary not what she deserved according to Jewish law, but what was best for her. His actions implore us to relax our tight fists of anger, hatred or vengeance and firmly grasp compassion, restoration and grace.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 1 opens with Jesus' family tree, his genealogy from Abraham through David and Joseph to Jesus. Be sure to read these first 17 verses as a backdrop for the study of Joseph. Note both the familiar names as well as the rather scandalous names recorded. Take comfort that Jesus' family background has some rouges like you and me in it, too!

Matthew 1:18 The Drama Unfolds

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus' genealogy, Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, a story mixed with as much drama, passion and twists as any soap opera. Mary was betrothed, engaged to Joseph. In Jewish law, strict rules applied to betrothal and marriage. A betrothal could be dissolved only by the man giving the woman a writ of divorce. And a betrothed virgin was considered a widow if her fiancé died. Marriage actually occurred when the groom took his bride home and consummated the marriage.

But Joseph discovered before marriage that Mary was pregnant and he knew he was not the father. According to Jewish law recorded in Deuteronomy 22:23-24, it was his religious obligation to annul the marriage contract because Mary was apparently guilty of fornication, a capital crime resulting in death by stoning. He could expose her publicly by taking her to court or he could divorce her privately in the

presence of two witnesses. But he had to divorce her in order to prove tangibly that he loved God more than Mary. He could not simply forgive her and go ahead and marry her.

Matthew 1:19-21 A Righteous Man

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word *dikaios* used to describe Joseph as a righteous man means "one whose thinking, feeling and acting is wholly conformed to the will of God." The word as used here may also include sympathy and kindness as well as religious scruple and obedience.

As a righteous man, Joseph opted to do justice tempered by mercy. He would divorce Mary quietly to avoid her public humiliation and death. In Greek his action, *apolo*, may be interpreted as "to acquit one accused of a crime and set him at liberty." He would follow the principle Matthew fondly states twice: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Matt 9:13; 12:7).

Joseph's plan was interrupted by the Lord's angel, who appeared to Joseph and addressed him as "son of David." This is a big clue that Joseph's role in Jesus' birth was connected to his Davidic descent and that the miraculous conception centered on Jesus' Messiahship. God's miracle includes incorporating the child into Joseph's family and having Joseph name the child Jesus. In those days it was common for women to name their babies, but by Joseph naming Mary's baby he acknowledged that, by God's will and action, the boy was genuinely—and legally—his son. Jesus was a descendant of David, a vital prophecy fulfillment (Isa 7:14).

Matthew 1:22-25 Compassion Meets Justice

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which

means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The name Jesus was quite common in the first century. Although the angel stated that Jesus' name indicates he will save his people from their sins, his rather ordinary name connects him with people rather than separates him from them. Joseph understood these definitions of Jesus' name to the depths of his soul, for how God led him to respond to Mary is how Jesus would respond to the world—redemptively and personally.

When Joseph awoke from his sleep, he immediately followed the directions the angel had given. In fact, he went a step further. He remained chaste with Mary until after Jesus was born.

Mary must have felt physically and emotionally weak with relief when she realized Joseph understood the situation and heeded God's call. Her love and admiration of Joseph must have multiplied many times. And her awe of God surely knew no measure.

Yet what about those who lived in the community with Joseph and Mary? How would they perceive Joseph's decision to follow the angel's directions? Perhaps some gossiped. Others would have been puzzled. Some might have accused Joseph of foolishly following his heart rather than his head. But still others likely understood Joseph, for dreams and visions held deep meaning and purpose among those who followed God. (In fact, God still works today through dreams and visions to bring others to Jesus, especially in countries like Morocco where dreams and visions are highly respected among the Muslim.)

Joseph, the often neglected character in the Christmas story, begins Christian scripture by modeling justice that respects both the law and Christ's command to love, even when it seemingly violates the law. Certainly Joseph fought an inner tug-of-war between his day's prevailing understanding of God's commands and the new thing God was about to do in Jesus. Perhaps at some level he even briefly questioned God for putting him in such an awkward situation. A flash of doubt may have raced through his mind and heart. How could God allow this when he had been faithful and righteous? Had he perceived God incorrectly all these years? Yet Joseph made a conscious decision to live not the letter of the law, but the heart of it.

Joseph learned the life-changing lesson that God inhabits love and compassion even when injustice seems to rule the day.

God's Will Today

From the life of Joseph we see love and compassion as the response to injustice and unfairness. But how do we translate that into our daily lives? And what if we perceive God as being the one who is unjust and unfair? What then?

In *Strength for the Journey*, Peter Gomes, minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University, offers powerful and practical guidelines for these questions. He relates the true story of Ernest Gordon, former dean of the chapel at Princeton for many years. Captured on the River Kwai during World War II, Gordon and his fellow British prisoners were initially quite religious. They read their Bibles fervently, prayed earnestly, sang hymns with courage and gave daily witness of their faith. At some human level they quietly hoped and expected God would reward them by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity. (Think Peter in Acts 12:6-18 and Paul and Silas in jail in Acts 16:16-34.) But God did not deliver.

Ultimately the situation wore the men down, making them both angry and disillusioned. Gordon and his friends stopped their outward display of faith and worship. Eventually, the men began to tend to the needs of their fellow captives. They cared for them, protected the weaker ones and in some cases died for one another. By surprise they sensed the power and spirit of God in their midst as they lived out compassion. They discovered that their faith was not only what they believed but what they did, especially when it seemed there was nothing they could do.

God's compassion expressed through them galvanized their inner strength, and their inner strength became the conduit of God's compassion. Gomes writes, "Could it be that amid the cries of vengeance and violence and warfare, the inner strength we so desperately seek is the strength that comes from hearing and heeding the cry of the other? . . . Could it be that compassion is superior to power? Can it be that amid the turmoil of that violent crowd on Good Friday, from his inner strength Jesus showed compassion? He forgave his enemies, he reunited his friends and he redeemed the criminal?"

Gomes challenges us to look not for what we can get (or think we should get) from others and even from God, but to look for what we have been given and for what we can give. We must consider the needs and hurts of another person and what is best for them, not only for ourselves. These thoughts may change our knee-jerk response to those who treat us unjustly.

In this light the words of Romans 8:38-39 ring true: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

No situation on earth, no matter how horrid, is beyond God’s love. And because Jesus lives within us, no situation on earth exists in which we cannot offer God’s loving response.

We may begin with injustice surrounding us, but, like Joseph, we must permit God to work within us and by God’s Spirit flesh out God’s compassion. Joseph learned this lesson right before he married. For the rest of us, may it take root in our seasons of life as well.

Written by Ginny Bridges Ireland, freelance writer, Clemmons, N.C.

Signs for All to See

Matthew 2:1-12

Theme: God’s will works even among those who are not part of the faith community.

Introduction

Fresh off a successful youth revival effort in Waco, Texas, a group of young men was asked to hold a similar meeting in Houston. During the sweltering summer heat of 1946, these youthful evangelists were faced with the struggle to publicize the event that was only weeks away. Houston was a large city and publicizing a city-wide youth revival a daunting task, even for a well organized effort with plenty of time.

The father of one of the young preachers approached a Houston business acquaintance and asked him if he would be willing to help this effort to preach the gospel in his city. Mr. Weingarten agreed, and considering the needs of the group donated the use of 14 billboards around the city to proclaim the revival effort.

The youth revival filled the First Baptist Church to overflowing with 3,500 in attendance for each of the evening worship services. Many factors contributed to the success. Certainly prayer, word of mouth and passion played their role. But the 14 billboards were a crucial God-send. Mr. Weingarten’s donation played a significant role in the hundreds of commitments that took place, from professions of faith to rededications and commitments to ministry.

Mr. Weingarten was Jewish.

A Christian revival succeeds because of the gift of a Jewish man. Certainly, those who participated in the services experienced the nearness and call of Jesus Christ in their lives. They experienced the revival as God’s will. The prayers of devout Christians were clearly at the heart of the effort. But what do we make of the indispensable gift of Mr. Weingarten? Was he also a participant in God’s will? Could

God use a Jewish man to further the gospel? Can people outside the Christian faith participate in God's will that all might find salvation?

The Biblical Witness

While Mr. Weingarten's gift of some signs furthered God's will, the scriptural account of the Magi shows how the understanding of a sign by those outside the community of faith led them to further God's will. These outsiders saw the star, while the insiders—those we might expect to be attuned to such things—both failed to see the sign on their own or to respond with faith when it was brought to their attention.

Matthew 2:1-2 Exceptional Vision

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Because Matthew's Gospel begins the story of Jesus with a lengthy genealogy, not until the first verse of chapter 2 do we find a specific time and place for Jesus' birth. Bethlehem means literally "house of bread," which from its name seems an appropriate birthplace for the one who will break and offer the bread of life. It was however, despite our romanticizing, a little backwater town. Everyone expected that God's will would be accomplished in Jerusalem, not in the province of Judea.

The time was that of Herod the Great. A Hellenizing Jew, he expanded the Jewish temple, but in a Greek style. Ruthlessly, he eliminated his rivals. He was exceptionally unpopular among the people who rightly believed he was more interested in pleasing the Romans than in advancing the Jewish faith.

Verse 1 also introduces the Magi, "wise men from the East." Tradition has numbered them at three, although the text does not specify a number. They also have been identified as kings, perhaps due to the opulence of their gifts. The Greek term *magoi* properly rendered is "wise men." But more precisely, the term (which is the root for the English word "magician") was often used for ancient astrologers.

God's will accomplished by the "Jeanne Dixons" of that day: a very strange picture indeed!

From the star, they were able to ascertain quite a bit. They correctly identified the star with the birth of the king of the Jews. But not only did these Magi who were outside the faith community correctly read the sign, they also responded to it. Their intention was to go and worship, "to pay him homage" (v 2).

Matthew 2:3-6 Temporary Blindness

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Hearing that there was a newborn king of the Jews, Herod had an understandably angry reaction and was "frightened" (v 3). Having already killed his brother-in-law, a wife and three sons over issues of palace intrigue and power, it is not surprising that all Jerusalem was troubled with their king when he feared for his throne.

Herod correctly identified who would have the additional information he needed for action. Turning to "all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (v 4), he asked where the Christ was to be born. Although these religious leaders, who should have been sensitive to such things, missed the star the Gentiles had seen, they were able to look within their own religious tradition to identify the place where the star was leading. Ultimately, it was a moment that condemned these religious leaders who already possessed the knowledge of God's intention, but failed to act on it.

Careful readers of the gospel will not be surprised that these same chief priests and scribes who were blind to the star would be deaf to Jesus himself. Possessing the scripture is not the same as practicing God's will. Their self-interested desire for preservation of privilege sought to silence the fulfilled revelation in the life of Christ. They consistently demonstrated that they were truly deaf and blind to God's work in the world.

The crucial moment of the passage occurs when Herod heard the report of the chief priests and scribes: “. . . for so it has been written by the prophet: . . . for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (vv 5b, 6b).

What would they do? They had been insensitive to God at work. Without these astrologers from the East, they would have continued unaware. But now Herod and the religious hierarchy know that this is God at work. What will this new awareness cause them to do?

Matthew 2:7-12 **Growing Awareness**

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The text does not record any response from the chief priests and scribes. It seems a reasonable assumption from this silence that they did nothing. With a sign in the sky and a prophet in print, they did not care enough (dare enough) to leave comfortable Jerusalem to see what God was doing.

Herod, however, was more than apathetic. He was downright hostile to the will of God. Claiming to be a child of Abraham, he took the scriptures and news of the star as an opportunity to try to overcome the will of God. But even Herod was so entrenched in Jerusalem that he chose not to join the wise men in their journey. He noted the time when their journey began and sent the astrologers to find the infant King in his stead. Once they found the child, he assured them, he would come and worship: “. . . and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage” (v 8).

It was all a ruse, of course. If God’s will was anything other than the continued rule of Herod, the king was committed to trying to circumvent it. It was the astrologers, the Gentiles, who having seen the sign and heard the word, responded by seeking. It was they alone who followed the star to the house where Jesus was. It was they alone, they who stood outside the community of faith, who worshiped. It was they alone who followed the will of God.

They once again showed an awareness of the divine will when they were sensitive to a dream which instructed them to return home a different way: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (v 12). Not only did they save their own skins by following the divine directive, they also short-circuited Herod’s effort to defeat God’s intent.

God’s Will Today

In the days of slavery in the South, many Southern churches preached from the pulpit that slavery was God’s will. The disappointing truth is that the move to free the slaves was more a societal than a religious movement.

Today of course, we recognize the evil of slavery. Churches proclaim that it is profoundly not God’s will that people be forced into slavery. God at work in society overcame the church that was more interested in maintaining the status quo than modeling God’s will for humanity.

What does it mean for those of us inside the church that God’s will can be accomplished outside the faith community?

We need to be ready to see God at work—even outside the church. Herod, the chief priests and scribes were so absorbed in what God had done in the past, they were unable to see what God was doing in the present. Christians must always be looking for signs of God’s present activity. Sometimes we become so hidebound in the maintenance of tradition that we deny or fail to observe God at work in the world around us. Too often, we encounter those from outside our religious tradition with Christian arrogance rather than openness to the possibility that they may have God-given insight to point us on our journey.

Where is God working outside the Christian community today and how can we embrace that as a way to further God’s purposes for the world?

The will of God will be accomplished even without us. God's will was for Jesus to be worshiped. Ultimately the Jewish leaders at the time of his birth chose ignoring and plotting over God's will. God used the Gentile astrologers to overcome the obduracy of the king and priests to accomplish God's will. We should be thankful that the furthering of the divine purpose is not dependent on our own faltering, and too often, selfish efforts.

In what ways have we consciously or unconsciously attempted to hinder God's designs in order to protect our personal peace and security?

God is at work in our broken world. Evil and sin are certainly present in the world around us. But the story of the wise men reminds us that God's good is bigger than our sinfulness. Although it may appear at times that God's will is being thwarted, the big picture is that God can use even our sinfulness in ways that are redemptive.

In what ways can we join God's work in the midst of helpless or evil situations?

As Christians, we need to constantly evaluate our lives and our society to find God's presence. We must be careful not to parochially delegate God to work only within the church.

We need to look for the star and embrace those who have seen it, Christian or not, for they have insights that can set us in the right direction.

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Free to Choose

Matthew 2:13-23

Theme: God's will gives us the freedom to choose.

Introduction

"The will of God" is a loaded concept. We bring to it the accumulation of life's baggage and a ton of preconceptions.

If, indeed, God has a plan for each of us, then what kind of God is he? Is God vindictive, punitive? Does God genuinely love those he has created? Does God love people enough to set us free to make our own choices? Or is a person trapped by a cosmic plan from which there can be no deviation?

Some feel that life is governed by a cruel fate and an inflexible predetermination. Humorously, Martin E. Marty quotes Emo Philips: "I'm not a fatalist. And even if I were, what could I do about it?"

Because of the divine act of creation, each person has been made a free moral agent. That is to say, God has endowed each of us with the capacity for choice. To say that we have no choice in our destiny or in the effectiveness of our lives is to strip ourselves of freedom and to render ourselves without responsibility.

It is certainly true that we are influenced by circumstance, culture and genetics. We all have our ancestors to thank or blame for the kind of world left to us. However, it is powerfully truer that a person's destiny is determined more by choices than chances. To have no choice in any situation is to be robbed of freedom. Freedom, choice and responsibility form a triad describing the very nature of people as God endowed us.

The very idea that all of life's outcomes have been pre-planned is quite disturbing and flies in the face of scriptural revelation and common sense. Think about it. If a person is not free to choose, then such a

person should never have regrets. The incentive to be productive is absent. Our actions and attitudes are no longer our responsibility. Political, social and emotional freedom would mean nothing if we were not genuinely free and responsible in making choices. Further, because the power of choice is entrusted to each person, then an individual can choose his way out of misery and into a vital sense of purpose. Cooperation is rooted in the free moral agency of humanity.

Bruce Barton, a religious writer and Congressman who was also considered by many to be one of the most influential advertising men of the 20th century, once observed, “Nothing splendid has been achieved except by those who dared to believe that something inside them was superior to circumstance.”

The infant Jesus was born into a world of hostile circumstances. Joseph, choosing to follow God’s plan, made the decision to take the child-Messiah, along with Mary, into Egypt for their safety.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew 2:13-15 Following a Dream

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The departure of the magi left in its wake very strong emotions. On the one hand, Mary and Joseph surely felt elation over the unique gift of their son as confirmed by the magi, and whose son, by this time, was several months old. On the other hand, King Herod was furious that the plot to locate the purported “rival” to his throne had been foiled.

God’s will was disclosed, not all at once, but in stages through dreams. In the Nativity of Jesus dreams are the dominant means of communication. Count them: one for the magi and four for Joseph.

The infanticide which followed Herod’s edict traumatized the small village of Bethlehem. Under the care of loving parents, Jesus, a

refugee, found a haven in Egypt. A large concentration of Jews had existed in Egypt for centuries. In Bethlehem the grief was palpable. In Egypt there was immense relief over having escaped the murderous, maniacal Herod. The insanity of evil and the explicable atrocities foisted upon the human race were not powerful enough to thwart God’s redemptive love for humanity.

Discerning and obeying the will of God when personal plans are disrupted is a great test of faith. Unexpected hostility should not surprise anyone who follows Jesus.

Matthew saw the eventual return of Jesus and his family as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 in which the nation of Israel is referred to as a “son.” It is probably best to understand Matthew’s use of Hosea’s prophecy as a powerful parallel with the most epochal event in Israel’s history: The Exodus. Just as Israel came out of Egypt to begin a covenantal relationship with God, even so God’s Son would come from Egypt to introduce the new covenant of grace and love. The exodus parallel is hard to ignore.

The similarity of the return of the infant Messiah from Egypt with Israel’s first deliverance is striking. It is hard not to see that the wickedness of Pharaoh finds future embodiment in Herod the Great. The baby Moses and the baby Jesus have much in common. Both were spared in spite of a government-backed effort to kill them. Both were the recipients of parental, life-saving intervention. Thank God for parents who are sensitive to divine guidance and make hard choices on behalf of their children.

The preservation and deliverance of Jesus as a child was influenced by the choices of parents who trusted the sequential disclosure of God’s will. Every step of the way brought their obedience when others might have resisted. It should not surprise anyone that the hand of God would be more evidential if there were more human cooperation.

The disclosure of God’s will is usually progressive. Rarely is it known all at once. Joseph’s obedience was step by step in response to each dream. Would there have been a second dream if Joseph had not obeyed the first one? Would there have been a third dream if Joseph had not obeyed the second one?

Responding in obedience to what we know positions us to learn more of what God plans and wants for us.

Matthew 2:16-23 **At Home in Nazareth**

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

When power and paranoia come together, innocent people pay a price. The murder of infants followed other crimes perpetrated by Herod the Great. He eliminated his wife, Mariamne, several sons and a brother-in-law. The Bethlehem massacre was in keeping with the character of cruel, insecure despotism.

The reign of Herod the Great began in 37 B.C. Vicious violence often kept his Jewish subjects under control. Their stubborn attitudes toward the king stemmed, in part, from the fact that Herod was half Idumean. Many Jews did not look upon him as a truly Jewish king. The last ten years of his reign (14 - 4 B.C.) were characterized by domestic and civil strife. His sons fell in and out of favor with their father who drew up several wills disposing of his kingdom upon his death. With a play on words Augustus said he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son. It is understandable when one learns that this insecure despot had ordered the murder of three sons and one wife.

Here again, Matthew unapologetically viewed the sorrow in Bethlehem as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15 which records the mourning of Israel as her sons were led into exile. The collective grief of the nation was personified by Rachel who wept for Joseph and Benjamin when their lives were at risk.

The green light for Joseph to return to Israel with his family was communicated through another dream upon the death of Herod in 4 A.D. Trust in God's leadership does not mean that one should be oblivious to danger. Upon learning that Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great, was now ruling over Judea, Joseph sensibly altered his plan and located his family in the district of Galilee, in Nazareth in particular. Again, Joseph's choice to obey stands in stark contrast with the hostile climate spawned by the paranoid rule of Herod's family. Herod's kingdom was quartered, with Archelaus' cruelty rivaling the character flaw of his father. Antipas, another of Herod's sons, was given jurisdiction over Galilee and was not perceived in the same light as Archelaus.

The reign of Archelaus (4 B.C. - A.D. 6) got off to a bad, violent start. He killed about 3,000 people during the Passover before he left for Rome. His brutality toward both Jews and Samaritans is well documented. Given the hostility between the Jews and Samaritans, it was most impressive for them to come together in a joint complaint to Rome against Archelaus' tyranny. In addition, his own brothers, Philip and Antipas, registered a formal complaint with Augustus. The result was that Archelaus was eventually deposed in A.D. 6 and banished to Vienna in Gaul. Joseph made a life-saving choice by settling in Nazareth beyond the jurisdiction of Archelaus.

Matthew viewed the fact that Jesus became a resident of Nazareth as a fulfillment of yet another prophecy, although identifying which one is problematic. While a specific reference is elusive, it could be that Matthew was alluding to a very general motif in prophecy, in that the Messiah, the "born" king, would grow up in obscurity just as he was born in tiny, insignificant Bethlehem. Such a theme is certainly compatible with Isaiah 52-53. It would also be consistent to accept the idea that "Nazarene" was the equivalent to the contemporary slang of "redneck" or "country bumpkin." It becomes understandable why Nathaniel would ask Philip, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46).

God's Will Today

Eleanor Roosevelt understood the need to maximize her influence, believing that she could make a profound, lasting difference. She traveled the nation, visiting hospitals, coal mines and squatters' camps. She sat with kings, presidents and the destitute around the world, empowering others with a message of hope and compassion.

Mrs. Roosevelt's mantra, "No one can make you feel inferior unless you allow them to," influenced many lives.

Following four years of hard work, Eleanor Roosevelt persuaded the newly formed United Nations to adopt the Bill of Human Rights. This document has formed the basis for the constitutions of 60 nations. Firm, difficult choices made Mrs. Roosevelt very influential.

Our choices determine outcomes. Those who feel they are making no difference will never find a sense of meaning and purpose in life. To take away a person's ability and freedom to choose would be to render him or her purposeless. If outcomes are already predetermined, then it becomes difficult for a person to feel that he or she is making a positive difference in the world.

Such is not the case. The biblical record is replete with examples of individuals who chose to be the difference in otherwise bad situations. Discerning and doing the will of God is not always accomplished with accuracy or precision. In Jesus Christ one finds ultimate freedom. Setting people free is the mandate of the gospel. The power of choice is the result of such freedom.

Nearing the end of his life, George Bernard Shaw was challenged by a reporter to play the "What If?" game. The reporter acknowledged that Shaw had been around some of the most famous people in the world. "You are on a first-name basis with royalty, world-renowned authors, artists, teachers, and dignitaries from every part of the continent. If you had your life to live over and could be anybody you've ever known," the reporter asked, "who would you want to be?"

Mr. Shaw replied, "I would choose to be the man I could have been, but never was."

It is a sobering thought. The gap between who we are and who God wills us to be is explained by the choices we have made.

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