



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode One

Follow, not believe: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 4:18-22 (NIV)

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. **19** "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." **20** At once they left their nets and followed him.

21 Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, **22** and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Sermon Summary

The call of the first disciples (Matthew 4:18-22) is curious on many counts. To begin with, it is curious who Jesus invites to follow Him. In Matthew 4:17 we are told that Jesus has begun his public ministry based on a call to repent because the kingdom of heaven – the reign and rule of God on earth as it is in heaven – is near. This is a global declaration with universal implications and, you'd expect, that Jesus would invite the movers and shakers of His world to join him; the priest, the influential teachers, the nobility and others in Jerusalem. Instead, He begins His ministry in Capernaum, a long way from the centre of the Jewish world, and with fishermen, certainly not movers and shakers who are well placed to change the world. Furthermore, discipleship in the first century began with the initiative of the disciple. They would find a teacher who they wanted to follow and apply to follow them. Jesus invites men, who have expressed no desire or initiative, to follow Him. This is curious.

It is not, however, the only curious thing in this narrative. The nature of the call is also curious. What does it mean to "fish for people"? Jesus never clarifies this in his teaching and, when you think about it, it is more of an image of judgement than salvation. When a fish is caught it isn't saved, it dies. On top of this ambiguity is the simple fact that Jesus has done nothing to prove Himself to the disciples. He hasn't healed anyone, cast out any demons, calmed any storms, nothing apart from beginning to preach. All of this makes it utterly remarkable that these men would drop everything and begin to follow Him. Curiouser and curiouser.

Finally, the invitation to follow Jesus has no conditions placed upon it apart from a willingness to begin to follow. Jesus makes no demands on belief, knowledge, or righteousness. In fact, when you read the gospels it is striking how long it takes the disciples to really understand who Jesus is and what that really means.

This curious fact is critical for it demonstrates that following Jesus is prior to belief. This makes sense of some of the other curious aspects of this text. Jesus didn't need to prove Himself immediately since they would learn about Him as they followed. He didn't need to give a clear, seven-point outline of what it meant to follow Him as this would become clear as they followed. He didn't need to find the "right" people because knowledge, righteousness, and faith would come. All they were called to do initially was follow, and that is all we are called to as well.

Now, it is important to state up front that following Jesus will bring about a crisis of faith. As we'll see in this series, His claims (e.g., to forgive sins) bring us to the point of asking

whether we believe this or not, but we do not need to believe in order to begin to follow. And even when we come to a point of belief we are not done following. Jesus wants followers, not mere believers. Belief modifies how we follow, but does not for an instant remove the call to continue to follow Jesus.

This is the basis of all that we will examine in this series; that anyone can begin to follow Jesus and that belief doesn't absolve us from continuing to follow.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Understanding following as learning life from someone or something, what is the difference between following, and belief in that same person or thing? Feel free to think more broadly than the context of faith. Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 4:18-22 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. What do you think "fishing for people" might mean? (See Matthew 13:47-50; Ezekiel 29:4; Amos 4:2 for other uses of this metaphor in the context of judgment)
4. What are some reasons we might identify as disqualifying us from following Jesus? What are the reasons we might disqualify others?
5. Doubt and belief (or faith), are two sides of the same coin. Doubt often provides us with an opportunity to exercise faith. In the light of this, how might we respond to those who have doubts, in their journey following Jesus?
6. As a church we want to invite everyone to follow Jesus. If some "fishermen" of our day begin to follow Jesus and spend time with us, what sorts of patterns, behaviours, language, and practices will they find among us? Are there things we need to do to be more consistent as followers ourselves?

7. At some point the claims of Jesus will bring us to a point of crisis, where we have to decide what we believe about Him. Have you experienced this crisis of faith and what did it look like?

Prayer

Jesus invites us to learn life from Him, to follow Him. Belief modifies the course this following takes, but the following never stops. Take some time to pray for each other, perhaps in renewing your commitment to follow Jesus, or in leading you through a crisis of faith. Ask God to lead you by His Holy Spirit, who is our guide as we seek to follow Jesus.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Two

Who is Jesus?: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 3:1-17 (NIV)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea **2** and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." **3** This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. **5** People went out to him from

Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. **6** Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. **9** And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for

Abraham. **10** The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. **14** But

John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Sermon Summary

Expectations can be a funny thing. The higher our expectations are, the greater our disappointment when things don't turn out to be as great as we expected, but the greater our joy when things are even better than we hoped.

Matthew's account of Jesus opens with a series of events that heighten our expectation of Jesus. Or at least they should. Sometimes our familiarity with the text desensitises us to the radical presentation of who Jesus is. This all begins with Matthew's infancy narratives where Jesus is linked to King David and Abraham in the genealogy; as an extraordinary human being in His divine conception and birth; and as a fulfilment of prophecy. And not just any prophecy, but those from Hebrew Scriptures that had shaped the Jewish hope for a new age of the Spirit in which the kingdom of heaven would be revealed.

The expectations are then heightened some more with the appearance of John the Baptist; himself a fulfilment of prophecy who declared the imminent coming of the Lord. The arrival of the Lord necessitated a removal of the wicked and a renewal of righteousness. Many people were baptised as a symbol of their commitment to righteousness as they awaited the Lord's coming, and when the Lord arrived there were even more signs of something special. As Jesus came out of the water after being

baptised as a symbol of His commitment to the plans and purposes of God, the heavens were opened, the Spirit descended on Him, and God spoke.

By the time we get to Matthew 4 we are invited to be on the edge of our seats in expectation; what will Jesus go on to do? He is, as far as Matthew is concerned, the most significant, important, and interesting person in the whole history of the world.

What I find remarkable is that Matthew presents Jesus in this history-shaking sort of way, despite Jesus' early ministry most commonly being regarded as a major disappointment. He didn't do what most people expected Him to do. The religious leaders thought He was a fraud, His disciples didn't fully believe or understand either, and the crowds just thought He was amazing. But Matthew is convinced, alongside countless others since, that Jesus is not a disappointment, but a source of incredible joy as He exceeds our wildest expectations.

As we begin to follow Jesus there are no conditions placed upon us, apart from a willingness to follow (as we saw last week). However, as we follow Him it quickly becomes evident that a crisis of faith will come. The claims that are made about Jesus bring this on. Is He really the most significant person in history? And Matthew invites us to bring our questions, doubts, and scepticism to his account as we listen to what Jesus said and did.

For those of us who believe and follow Him it raises the question, "How much do we expect Jesus to do in our lives?" Matthew presents a portrait of someone who will do amazing and incredible things in our lives, but do we expect it or are we only expecting small changes?

The gospel of Matthew urges us to heighten our expectations of Jesus and what He will do in Matthew's account, and in the lives of those who choose to follow Him.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Take some time to think about a time where you have had expectations about an event or moment. How did your expectations affect your experience? Were they met and exceeded? Share your reflections with the group.

2. Read Matthew 3:1-17 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Given the details of Jesus' baptism and John's preaching, what do you think people expected from "the one to come"? How did the reality of who Jesus is challenge those expectations?
4. We can often slip into a pattern of presuming we know who Jesus is, but when we consider afresh the extraordinary life and ministry of Jesus, we are invited to be surprised again by the challenge He brings even to our own expectations of Him. Take some time to share stories of how learning more about Jesus has surprised you or challenged your expectations.
5. What do you expect Jesus to do in your life in the near future?
6. Sometimes it seems as if Jesus has failed to meet our expectations and we can become disillusioned by disappointment or seemingly failed promises. How can we support and encourage each other when it feels like this is the case, and what personal steps might God be inviting us into in these times?

Prayer

Take some time to consider each other's answers to question 6. Our Heavenly Father, the creator of the universe, understands all human emotions and is big enough to deal with all our disappointments. Bring each others failed expectations before Him now, and invite Jesus to lead you into a future following Him, bringing everything before God.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Three

Jesus is the perfect Israel: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. **6** "If you are the Son of God,"

he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,

and they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.

9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Sermon Summary

Matthew's presentation of Jesus has heightened our expectations of what Jesus will accomplish. This continues in 4:1-11 as Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tested. Even on the surface, this is an extraordinary text. Whilst we may take comfort in the fact that Jesus was tempted even as we are tempted, this temptation scene is unlike our ordinary experience of temptation. First, it is set at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry; the first thing He does after being baptised, as a symbol of His commitment to the plans and purposes of God. This placement tells us that Matthew sees what happens as foundational to Jesus' ministry. Second, these temptations are brought by the devil and involve significant challenges to Jesus' identity. Notice that the first two open with a question: "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus' identity is a critical question in the gospels, and these are surely meant to be temptations aimed at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

There are, however, some less obvious, but equally important connections to the Old Testament. Perhaps the most significant of them is that Israel, like Jesus, were led into the wilderness by God and, whilst there, they were tested. This wilderness season for Israel was foundational for the nation and is presented in both a positive and negative light. On the positive side, this was a time when Israel spent time alone with God. On the negative side, it was a time when Israel failed to trust, obey, and honour God. Time and again they failed. Matthew, having already identified Jesus with Israel in chapter 2:15 by referencing Hosea 11:1, now makes clear that he sees Jesus as the ideal Israel. Jesus represents all that Israel was meant to represent, but where Israel failed, Jesus succeeds. He refuses to provide for Himself by making bread from stones; He refuses to force God to save Him by leaping off the temple; and He refuses to worship anyone else but God. In all these ways Jesus fulfils all that Israel was meant to.

This has important implications for understanding Jesus' ministry, but also for following Him. In Exodus 19:5-6 Israel is called to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. This language, while it is strange to us, is the language of mission. The people of God were to

represent God among the nations as priests do. They were to instruct people on how to approach God and how to please Him like priests do. They were to be set apart (holy) in their behaviour, living out what it looks like to live in relationship with God. This was all part of the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3). As we begin to follow Jesus we must see that His ministry is accomplishing something with universal implications, but also recognise that when we place our faith in Him, we become heirs to the promises and purposes of God for His people. We are brought into the mission, to be a blessing to the world. This is not an additional extra, but is central to being a Christian, because it is central to following Jesus in His ministry.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Where have you seen someone near perfectly perform or demonstrate one of your hobbies or interests. This might be the time you saw a professional succeed in a sport you're interested in, or hearing a piece of music exquisitely performed, or someone in your field of work demonstrate extraordinary skill. How, if at all, did this change how you personally engage with that hobby or interest. Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 4:1-11 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Jesus represents Israel, the people of God, and succeeds where they fail. What does this invite us to consider about His ministry?
4. The three temptations Jesus faces all relate to a commitment to trust in God. What contributes to the temptation to trust in someone or something else other than God?
5. Jesus makes a way for us to carry out the mission to the world that God invited Israel into. What are some of the characteristics of that mission for us today?

6. Jesus resists the devil by quoting Scripture. How does knowing and understanding Scripture help us resist the lies and temptations of the enemy? What practical steps can we take towards being better equipped this week?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each other, and in particular, consider each other's reflections on question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to begin to refresh and transform your reading and understanding of Scripture. Ask God to help you see the Bible as the double edged sword that cuts off the lies of the enemy, releasing you to carry out God's mission for His chosen people, and to truly live a life changed by Jesus.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Four

The kingdom and the law: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV)

The Fulfilment of the Law

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. **18** For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. **19** Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others

accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon Summary

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matt. 5:17) At first glance it seems strange that Jesus would have to defend his approach to the Law, but the gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus clashed with the religious leadership over how to interpret the Law. And the clashes were over pretty significant issues such as keeping the Sabbath and clean/unclean food which were at the heart of Jewish practice. Regardless of the background to this defence, Jesus makes it clear that He holds the Law in high esteem. Very high esteem in fact.

The word “fulfil” is used elsewhere in Matthew’s account to describe the fulfilment of prophecy. It is more than obeying the Law, but completing it; fulfilling its purpose. This raises the question of what, precisely, was the purpose of the Law. We can often treat rules like suggestions, things to do to stay out of trouble, or as a burden, but rules are about defining the good life and, therefore, have as their ultimate purpose lawlessness. Consider road rules. Speed limits, use of indicators, seat belts, right of ways, road signs, prohibitions on phone use and alcohol levels, are all designed to keep everyone safe as they travel. If we recognise these we should internalise them until they become second nature. For instance, I no longer have to think about putting on my seatbelt. It is second nature stemming from consistent practice but also the internalised recognition that seat belts save lives. I have, in a sense, become law-less; I no longer need to law to remind me.

This is the purpose of the Law in the Old Testament as well; to define the good life and to promote lawlessness. The good life, according to the Old Testament, is lived in relationship with God. Relationship is foundational to understanding lawlessness as well. Consider your own relationships. All relationships have “rules” - expectations about how people act towards each other. The more significant the relationship the more “rules”, but the more significant the relationship the more “lawless” they are. When you are in a deep relationship with another you don’t think about the “rules” but about the relationship and you keep the “rules” without needed to keep a list of them in your pocket. It is the same with God and the Law. The Law was given to define the good life and to promote – through consistent practice and belief – the adoption of the law as second nature. This is what Jesus has come to fulfil; the purpose of the Law. Jesus didn’t just obey the Law, he fulfilled it. It was completely second nature to Him because of His relationship with God. And so, Jesus can affirm that every bit of the law is important and that our righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were fastidious in their attempts to keep the Law, but to clarify, Jesus goes on in the sermon on the mount to point out what

He means. It is not enough not to commit homicide, we are to rid ourselves of anger. It is not enough not to commit adultery, we are to rid ourselves of lust (Matt. 5:21-30).

The implications for following are important. Firstly, it points out that a “lawless” relationship with God lies at the heart of the kingdom. Secondly, and following on from this, we are reminded that following Jesus will bring about a crisis of behaviour. Our lives are meant to be aligned in such a way to the will and purpose of God that we no longer have any need of the Law. As followers of Jesus, therefore, we need to consider our behaviour, and where our lives need realigning to the plans of God, as well as the nature of our relationship with Him. Thirdly, we will quickly be confronted by the realisation that our righteousness is insufficient. Lest we despair and stop following Jesus too early, it is important to recognise that Jesus fulfils the Law; he succeeds where we fail. This truth lies at the heart of the good news and we’ll return to it later in the series. However, until the good news becomes clear in the gospel account, remember that Jesus allowed “sinners” to eat with Him without (or so it seems) making any demands about their behaviour (This is suggested by the fact that the religious leaders were confused about why He would eat with them at all – if they were being called to repentance they might not have been so troubled.) The crisis of behaviour may still be before us, but we do not have to immediately confront it to continue to follow Jesus.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don’t feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Describe a time in which you have had to completely rely on someone else. How did dependance on another make you feel? What were the challenges involved? In reflection on that time, what have you learnt about yourself? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 5:17-20 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you’ve been lead to.

3. Describe your understanding of the lawlessness of relationships. How does this change how you understand the nature of the Law in the Bible?
4. Whilst the Law is not meant to be a burden, it does help us identify where we are not living as God intended. What patterns of behaviour in our own lives does the law challenge?
5. How does the realisation that our own righteousness is insufficient make you feel? How have you consciously or subconsciously responded to this realisation in the past?
6. What are the implications for us that Jesus has fulfilled the Law?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each other, remembering that Jesus has fulfilled the Law, invite the Holy Spirit to continue the work of realigning your behaviour towards the good life.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Five

The ethic of love: Marc Rader

What is the Law?: Insert on page 4

Bible

Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV)

Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46** If you

love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon Summary

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus begins a section in the Sermon on the Mount focused on the kind of life that is required of those who follow Him. It is summarised in two statements. The first is in 5:20, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven", and the second in 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In between Jesus gives a series of examples of what He means. Each of them follow the same pattern: Jesus quotes the Law from the Old Testament, and then reflects on the resulting heart issue. For example, in 5:21-22 Jesus points out that we cannot really say we fulfil the command not to murder if our hearts are filled with rage, which is the source of murder. Likewise, in 5:27-28 avoiding adultery is not enough if our hearts are filled with lust. In 5:43-48, the last example from this section, Jesus says it is not enough to love those who love us if our hearts are filled with hatred. Referencing Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbour", Jesus calls us to love those who we might see as our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

What we are called to is an alignment of our heart and actions. When we love those who love us, we do so in an unconscious manner; we don't just stick to rules in our relationships, but seek the best for those we love almost naturally. The purpose of the law is to promote this kind of 'lawlessness;' when our relationship with God no longer requires the law, but we live the right way naturally. This is what Jesus calls us to; to love even those who hate us as naturally as we love those who love us. Now, the precise way we love our enemies will differ from how we love our friends; but we can seek to protect their reputation, avoid speaking ill of them, seeking to be kind in our words and deeds, forgiving quickly as we do with our friends, and so on. In doing so, Jesus says, we will be identified as God's children.

There appear to be two resulting implications for following Jesus. First, this is the kind of life we are called to; where our hearts are aligned totally to the will of God. A life where we no longer harbour anger, lust, or hatred in our hearts. This should be our desire and aim. However, it leads into the second implication which is simply that we cannot live up to this ideal. Instead of jumping right to the good news that by faith we share in Jesus' righteousness, can I urge you to sit with this tension of our inability. By jumping too quickly to the good news we can forget why we need it. Matthew doesn't "solve" this in chapter 5 either, but adds this to the overall tension that drives his story forward. The good news is coming, let us hunger and thirst for it.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Describe a time where the choice to love another has been painful or costly. How did this make you feel? What emotions were stirred up in you? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 5:43-48 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Our 'enemies' come in many forms, from those who undermine or belittle us, to those who seek to cause physical harm. Deeper than the surface offence we might experience, what is at the heart of the difficulty of loving our enemies?
4. Even just being kind to those we don't like, can come from a place of duty or obligation. How does this fall short of what Jesus calls us to? What does this begin to highlight about our relationship with Jesus?
5. How does sitting with the tension of not jumping to the good news make you feel? Do you struggle with a sense of self condemnation? Or is this a helpful exercise for cultivating thankfulness?
6. How might we begin to overcome the challenges described in our reflections on question 3? What might help to align our hearts with God's; to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

Prayer

Whilst we sit with the tension of the good news to come, we are still being invited to follow Jesus more and more faithfully. Take some time to pray for each other, and in particular, consider each other's responses to question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into practices that increase our ability to love our enemies.

What is the Law?

This series, and indeed, Matthew's gospel, continually invite us to reflect on the Law. The following insert is designed to briefly help us engage with what that term describes.

The relationship of Christians with the Law in the Old Testament is often a little strained. The central issue is application. Why is it that some laws are regarded as permanently valid while others have been set aside? And what do we do with those sections of the Law that really have been superseded? Some of these questions are relatively simple. The sacrificial regulations, for instance, have been superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus. More difficult are those aspects of the Law that Jesus radically reinterpreted such as the clean and unclean food laws. And more difficult still are those that seem to have been set aside by social change such as the Sabbath regulations.

The Law, as a whole, was meant to describe what a relationship with God looked like. This had implications for every aspect of life; there was nothing that was exempt. This is demonstrated in Leviticus 19, for instance, where regulations about worship are included alongside regulations about agriculture and horticulture, sexuality, the treatment of the elderly, business practices, and even fashion (e.g., hair cuts, garments, and tattoos). This has not changed. Every single area of our lives should be impacted by our relationship with God, and the Law continues to provide a contextual portrait of what this looks like. What we mean by a contextual portrait, is that the Law was set in the ancient near east and would have made a lot more sense then than it often does today. The principles, however, are clear. For example, the regulations about what to do with a bull that gores someone may not have a one-to-one relationship to anything we experience, but the principle of responsibility is one that we can grapple with.

The other aspect of the Law that is important to note is that it was given in order that it might not be necessary. If the Law had been internalised by the people of Israel the Law would have ceased to be necessary. Law-less living – where the Law wasn't necessary – is the aim of the Law. This is what Jesus has come to make possible for us; that through His Spirit we might be changed into people who no longer need the Law but who live out our relationship with God as second nature.

The question about applying the Law to today then, has a couple of answers to it. First, what is the principle that the regulations illustrate and how can we apply that. Second, what difference does Jesus make to how we understand the regulations? Jesus affirms what we might call the spirit of the Law; the essence of what relationship with God looks like and this can take a very different shape than in the Old Testament. One example of

this are the regulations about tithing. In the Old Testament the people of God were to give a tenth (and maybe more depending on how you read the regulations) to the Lord. In the New Testament Jesus affirms the principle of giving but without reference to the tithe. It seems that Jesus sets us free to be generous rather than contained, limited, or burdened by the tithe. Generosity is a much higher standard that fulfils the Law. This may also be where the Sabbath needs to be considered. The principle of rest is an important one and one that we are not very good at keeping, but Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made for humanity, rather than the other way around. We need rest because of how we have been created, but how we observe this is another matter and, like generosity, is a harder one to apply than a observing a sacred day.

This is not a simple issue, but one that is good to grapple with and we hope this clarifies some of what we are dealing with when we engage with the Law.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Six

The power of Jesus: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 9:27-34 (NIV)

Jesus Heals the Blind and the Mute

27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"

28 When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

"Yes, Lord," they replied.

29 Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you"; **30** and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." **31** But they went

out and spread the news about him all over that region.

32 While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. **33** And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

34 But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

Sermon Summary

This week we turn from Jesus' teaching to His miraculous healing; what they say about Jesus and the implications for following Him.

It is important, right off the bat, to recognise that there aren't that many healing accounts in the Old Testament. In fact, nearly all of the healing miracles are performed by Elijah and Elisha. Their ministry took place in a time when the people of God had abandoned Him for the Baals and other false idols, and the miracles the prophets performed demonstrated God's supremacy. So, when Matthew piles on healing after healing in chapters 8-9 we should take note; this is extraordinary. And while Jesus performs some of the same miracles as Elisha – healing a leper and raising a child to life – Matthew makes it clear that Jesus exceeds any of the Old Testament prophets in the last healing that he includes in these chapters; that of the blind and mute. We might not think these healings are the most significant but they are miracles that were associated with the age to come and the Messiah (see Isaiah 35:5-6). These actions demonstrate that, in Jesus, the presence and power of God is active; the Kingdom of Heaven is indeed near.

One of the important features of many of the healing accounts is the role of faith in those who are healed. What is critical to note is that faith was not created by the miracles, but preceded them. Those who approached Jesus in Matthew 8-9 express some sort of faith that was exercised in their approach and request of Jesus. The important implication of this is that their faith didn't depend on the miracle. They may have been disappointed if Jesus hadn't healed them, but their faith preceded it.

It is also important to note that miracles are no guarantee of faith. The Pharisees, at the end of our text, having seen what everyone else has seen, ascribe Jesus' power to the devil! The crowds are amazed but don't "do the math" and remain only amazed rather than finding faith.

The implication for following Jesus is to begin to ask what we believe about Jesus. This is the question that Matthew is forcing us to answer as we read his account and the central one of the gospel. And if we have some faith in Jesus we can begin to exercise that faith by approaching Him in prayer and asking Him to change our lives. One of the things that Matthew makes clear is that Jesus is not the refusing type; everyone who approaches him receives what they have asked. And while the question of unanswered prayer is a thorny one, we continue to ask because our faith is in Jesus not in a miracle given in His name.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Take some time to list from memory, your beliefs about Jesus on a piece of paper. Try to include characteristics that have an impact on the way you live, as well as descriptions of who you believe Him to be. Take turns to share your lists with the group. What ideas are common and unique to your lists?
2. Read Matthew 9:27-34 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. The Bible records very few instances of miraculous healing in the Old Testament. Whilst many more healings are recorded in the New, the fact that the majority of those are attributed to Jesus, and seemingly so effortlessly, makes them all the more significant. What do these healings suggest about Jesus?
4. It is important to recognise that in the accounts described in Matthew 8 and 9, faith was evident before healing occurred, and that healing is not dependant on us, or more specifically, our perceived level of faith. In light of this, how would you describe the relationship between faith and healing?
5. How does the distinction between a faith in Jesus and faith in miracles help make some sense of unanswered prayer?
6. How might the discussions you've had tonight affect your prayer life, and more specifically your expectations in prayer?

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each other, and in particular, consider each other's responses to question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to pray, perhaps with greater expectation, as He leads us to greater hope in Jesus.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Seven

The community of Jesus: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. **18** And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

20 Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon Summary

The passage we are looking at now (Matthew 16:13-20) represents a turning point in the gospel. It is at this point that Jesus begins to shift his disciples understanding of what it meant for Him to be the Messiah. This paradigm shift revolves around His suffering and death as we'll see, but it begins in this passage with Peter's confession and Jesus' teaching on the community formed on this confession.

Jesus and his disciples have gone about 40 kilometres north of Galilee to the region of Caesarea Philippi which was Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. On the way Jesus asks them who the people are comparing Him to. The list is impressive: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another of the prophets of Israel. Each of these individuals had powerful ministries among the people of God and put Jesus in unique company. However, as we have read the gospel account we already suspect that Jesus demands a new category. John the Baptist may have been a big deal, even leading some to think he might be the Messiah (Luke 3:15; John 1:19-20) but Jesus is presented as a much bigger deal. Elijah was a mighty miracle worker, but as we have seen Jesus' miraculous power is unprecedented. Jeremiah spoke powerfully in a critical time for the people of God, but Jesus has been presented as one more like Moses than any one else. It doesn't surprise us then that Jesus asks the disciples who they think He is, nor are we surprised that Peter speaks on their behalf (as Peter is presented as the leader of the apostles), "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This confession of faith leads to a shift in Jesus' teaching about His ministry as we'll see. What is more noteworthy perhaps is that Jesus speaks about the community founded on this confession.

The founding of a community would have been expected of any prophet and has been foreshadowed in Jesus' selection of twelve apostles paralleling the twelve tribes of Israel. This is, however, the first time that Jesus has taught about this community. There are three things that are noteworthy.

First, that this community is founded on divine revelation about Jesus. This comes with the important implication that the church is still founded on the same divine revelation. Unlike human organisations and movements whose leaders inevitably die, leaving the followers to interpret and implement the original vision, the church is still the domain of the living God who helps us interpret and implement the vision.

Second, the vision of the community is that it is an extension of life to the world. The community founded on this confession of Jesus is set against the gates of Hades; against the realm of the dead. This is not a community set against Rome or the political powers,

nor is it a religious group set against the religious establishment, but a group set to extend life in the face of death. And in this task it will not fail because it has the backing of Jesus.

Third, the church is invited to participate in the extension of forgiveness. This seems to be the essence of the binding and loosing language (see Matthew 18:15-18). While the ultimate authority to forgive resides with God, we are invited to participate with Him in this task. This is a mystery, but it is also a paradigm shift of a kingdom that requires a different kind of Messiah. The kind of Messiah this kind of kingdom requires will be explored in the rest of the gospel.

It also represents a paradigm shift for us about what the church is. We are not just a religious group, but are set to offer forgiveness in Jesus' name to a dying world; to offer life in the face of death; and to do so in the name of Jesus, the Son of the living God. This vision and mission is given to the church to fulfil wherever the church is gathered and is for us to engage in.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What groups, organisations or movements have you seen or read about, that sought to bring change to society? Examples might include the civil rights movement, led by Rev Martin Luther King Junior, or the 'Me Too' or 'Times Up' movements, led by figures from the entertainment industry, that have sought to bring an end to abusive power. How did they go about trying to bring change? How effective was that? What limitations have stood in the way of that change lasting? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 16:13-20 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been led to.

3. Jesus has established the Church, His community of faith, to extend life in the face of death. Where do you see 'death' at work in our world? How might the Church as a movement be involved in bringing change in these areas?
4. What do you think it means for us to bind or loose on earth? What do you think is the relationship between binding and loosing, and forgiveness?
5. The confession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God, is central to the Church, yet we so often stand divided, arguing about many other things. How can we as a local expression of the wider Church, as well as individuals, pursue unity around this confession in the face of disagreement?
6. What are some of the actions and activities of the church, that hinder our mission to extend life in the face of death? How could we begin to think and act differently?

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6, take some time to pray prayers of confession on behalf of the Church, and perhaps even your church or group. Ask God for forgiveness for where we have failed to engage in His mission to bring life in the face of death, and for guidance and courage to carry that mission out in the future, both corporately and individually.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Eight

The method of Jesus: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 12:15-21 (NIV)

God's Chosen Servant

15 Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. **16** He warned them not to tell others about him. **17** This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

18 "Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

19 He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.

20 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,

till he has brought justice through to victory.

21 In his name the nations will put their hope."

Sermon Summary

From time to time Matthew provides us with some editorial commentary on the significance of Jesus' life. Remember, he had followed Jesus for three years, heard him teach, seen him heal, watched him die, witnessed his resurrection, had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and watched the transformation of lives in Jesus' name, as the church expanded throughout Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Matthew had experienced a great deal and had reflected deeply on the significance of Jesus and these reflections help us understand Jesus.

Matthew's editorial comments are perhaps most clear whenever he makes reference to an Old Testament prophecy that Jesus fulfils. These provide pointers for how to understand Jesus' ministry and we have an example of this in Matthew 12:15-21. There are some important reflections to observe.

Firstly, Matthew returns to his presentation of Jesus as the representative of Israel. The opening words of the quotation from Isaiah 42 are reminiscent of the words spoken by God at Jesus' baptism (see Matthew 3:16-17) which precedes His temptation, where Jesus parallels the experience of the people of Israel. It is worth noting, however, that in Isaiah 42 the servant of the Lord could also be taken to mean the people of Israel (see Isaiah 41:8-9). There is something about what Jesus is doing that is greater than just one man.

Secondly, the task that Jesus is fulfilling is not just an itinerant healing and preaching ministry, but the complete victory of justice. It is easy to think that Jesus was just trying to teach and heal, especially as He withdraws from the religious leaders and tells people not to speak of His miracles, but this under-sells His ministry. It was, as the servant of the Lord, to bring justice to the nations.

Thirdly, the strategy for achieving this justice is one of extraordinary gentleness (see Matthew 11:28-30) where a bruised reed (on the edge of breaking with no chance of healing) is not broken and a smouldering wick (on the verge of going out with no hope of being lit again) will not be extinguished. Where there will be no quarrelling and no shouting. This is a strategy that doesn't seek power or influence but transformation of the lives most in need of justice.

These are the things Matthew wants to point us to as we consider Jesus' ministry. But what are the implications of following Jesus? There are at least two. First, that we are caught up in the same ministry that Jesus had; to bring justice – the way of the kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven. Second, we should use the same strategy of service that Jesus does; serving those most in need without condition. Jesus doesn't demand that

those He has healed believe in Him (though they probably did), nor that they change their behaviour (though this may have been an outcome), He served them as a sign of the way God's kingdom works. We are called to do the same.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What groups, organisations or movements have you seen or read about, that sought to bring change to society? Examples might include the civil rights movement, lead by Rev Martin Luther King Junior, or the 'Me Too' or 'Times Up' movements, lead by figures from the entertainments industry, that have sought to bring an end to abusive power. How did they go about trying to bring change? How effective was that? What limitations have stood in the way of that change lasting? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 12:15-21 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Read the original prophecy referenced by Matthew in Isaiah 42:1-9. What other connections are there between this passage and Jesus' ministry?
4. Jesus has established the Church, citizens of His kingdom, to bring justice to the nations. In following the example set by Jesus, how might the methods of the Church differ from, or mirror the methods of the world in seeking to achieve this mission? Where is our church getting this right already, and where can we improve?
5. Reflect on a time where you have had the opportunity to bring justice on behalf someone else. Did you take up the opportunity? How did you go about it? was your method one of gentleness and love? What was the impact of your actions?
6. Where might God be inviting you to carry out His work of bringing justice?

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6, take some time to pray for each other, that we might take up the mission of Jesus to bring justice in our contexts. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you in this, shaping your actions to reflect the gentle method of Jesus.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Nine

Turning point: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 16:21-28 (NIV)

Jesus Predicts His Death

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the

concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. **26** What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? **27** For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his

angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

28 "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Sermon Summary

Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (or the Messiah) marks a turning point in Matthew's gospel. From this point on Jesus begins to teach the disciples what it means for Him to be the Messiah. And the bottom line is that He will suffer, die, and be raised again. This is not at all what was expected by the disciples and they struggle to come to terms with this teaching. In Matthew's account this is highlighted by the "misunderstandings" that occur after each prediction of Jesus' death (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). In fact, the focus for Matthew in these predictions is not on what Jesus' death accomplishes or means, (we have to wait to learn the answer to this most important question) but upon what it means to follow a suffering Messiah.

Each of the predictions are followed almost immediately by a "misunderstanding" where Jesus teaches about discipleship. In the first instance, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for even suggesting that the Messiah would suffer and die (resurrection or not!). Jesus identifies any other form of Messiah as reflecting the plans of Satan not God and then teaches that followers must deny themselves and take up their cross (the first mention of the cross in the gospel). The second prediction is followed by the disciples asking who was the greatest in the kingdom (18:1-4). Jesus responds by bringing a child into their midst and calling them to become like them and to welcome them. This is not a call to innocence or naivety but a call to set aside status, power, and influence and to welcome those who cannot offer you anything in return. The third prediction is followed by the sons of Zebedee asking for places of authority when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Jesus then confronts the indignant disciples with their desire for power and teaches that followers must become the servant of all.

This provides the pattern for following Jesus. And the pattern is essentially about submission to the will of the Father. This is what Jesus did as He faced His suffering and death and it is what we are called to do. This act of submission lies at the heart of the crisis of faith that following Jesus eventually brings.

Submission is made up of two emotions. On the one hand (the one that we tend to emphasise) is acceptance. Submission includes an acceptance of the position, authority, privilege, rights, or power of the one to whom we are submitting to. This acceptance may

be based in trust which makes submission easier, but it is only one half of the emotion. The other side of submission is apprehension based on a fear that the one whose authority, power, privilege, or rights we are accepting may not use their position for our benefit. This fear is what makes submission difficult but it must be acknowledged. In the Garden of Gethsemane we hear both sides in Jesus' request that the cup of suffering be taken from Him (apprehension) along with an acceptance of the Father's will (not my will, but yours be done). This act of submission is the essence of discipleship.

For any one who has begun to follow Jesus this is where the crisis of faith will eventually take place; our apprehensions about what happens when we accept God's will for our lives coupled with an acceptance of his goodness, love, and grace. For anyone who has come to accept Jesus submission is an ongoing act as we continue to bring our apprehensions and acceptance to a position where we can submit.

In the weeks to come we will see what Jesus' death means and what it accomplishes in more detail, but at this point in the gospel Matthew is concerned to show us what it means to follow the suffering and dying (and resurrected) Messiah.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What does healthy submission look like? Describe a context in which you have had to submit to someone else. How did submitting in this context make you feel? Did you experience apprehension or acceptance or both? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 16:21-28 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.

3. Jesus confronted a clash of expectations from His disciples who wanted power, influence, authority, etc. Instead Jesus calls them to self-denial and service. How does a desire for our own good get in the way of submission?
4. Are there areas in your life where you have apprehensions that make it hard to submit to Jesus? Take a moment of silence to reflect on this question. You may want to answer it on paper for yourself and invite the group if anyone is willing to share.
5. In August 2017 TIME magazine reported that the secret to happiness was helping (or serving) others. Whilst following Jesus may not guarantee happiness, Jesus does invite us into the best way to live. How might our love of Jesus, and more specifically, God's love of us, inspire practical steps towards a life in service of others this week?
6. As we approach Easter, how might we begin to engage with Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane this week. What gives you confidence in God's will?
Matthew 26:39 (NIV) Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Prayer

Take some time to pray for each other, and in particular, consider each other's responses to question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into areas of more faithful submission to Jesus, inviting God's will to be done in our lives.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode 10 - Good Friday

The last supper: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 26:17-30 (NIV)

The Last Supper

17 On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

18 He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" **19** So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

20 When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. **21** And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

22 They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?"

23 Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. **24** The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

25 Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?"

Jesus answered, "You have said so."

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying,

"Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

30 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Sermon Summary

To this point in Matthew's gospel Jesus has predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection on three occasions but has not explained why he must die. Each of the predictions has led to a discussion of what it means to follow him, but we still are in the dark about why Jesus has to die. It isn't until we get to the Last Supper that Jesus really fills in the details and when he does, he gives us a great deal to think about.

Jesus brings together a series of Old Testament themes when he shares this last meal with his disciples and we can only really briefly explore them here. First, it is important to note that Jesus reinterprets the Passover meal on the night he was betrayed. The Passover was the first and oldest festival of the Jewish people that remembered the definitive act of God's salvation when he brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and the angel of death "passed over" their houses. The bread that Jesus breaks and the cup that he takes is the bread and cup of the Passover, but Jesus reinterprets these symbols as referring to his own death. In other words, he describes his death as the definitive act of God's salvation.

When Jesus takes the cup he refers to the blood of the covenant. A covenant is a formal relationship (e.g., a contract) with terms and conditions that define the relationship. In the Old Testament God had entered into a covenant with his people with the Law outlining the terms and conditions. The summary of the covenant was that the Lord would be their god and they would be his people. In other words, the Lord would do all the things that the gods were supposed to do: protect, provide, and guide; and the people would be marked by their relationship with him. The people of Israel, however, failed to live faithfully in this

relationship which led to condemnation and promise of a new covenant. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 the prophet predicts a time when the Lord would make a new covenant with the people; one that would be written on their hearts. This seems to be what Jesus is referring to.

There is a third reference. Jesus speaks of his blood as being poured out for the forgiveness of sins. This refers to the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament when blood was required for forgiveness. Jesus may be referring to the Day of Atonement, the most solemn and holy day of the Jewish calendar when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies and atoned for (or "covered") the sins of the people. The curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies suggests that this imagery is correct.

Jesus is declaring that his death represents forgiveness, a new relationship with God, and the definitive act of salvation. This is a remarkable statement.

His disciples, perhaps distracted by predictions of their betrayal and denial, do not respond to these amazing claims, but we are left to ponder them.

The implications are significant. Will you place your faith in Jesus? Faith in a person can be thought of as trusting in who you know not what you know. Will you acknowledge that you know Jesus? Will you live your life like a follower of his? Will you rely on him to forgive you? To restore your relationship with God? To save you? For this is the crisis of decision that Jesus eventually demands. And if you have placed your faith in Jesus have you remembered that Jesus wants followers (not believers who stop following). Are you continuing to place your faith in Jesus?

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: In the Covenant between God and Israel, the Law (representing the terms and conditions) is the yearned for "good life" - the Law should lead us to where we no longer have need of it. Marc used the example of the "seatbelt law" which having been drilled into us for so long has now become second nature. What

other laws exist in our society for our protection that are now intrinsic to our everyday lives?

2. Read Matthew 26:17-30 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Of the three Old Testament concepts that Jesus incorporates into the last meal with his disciples which do you think is the most significant? Why? Which do you find most difficult to understand? Why?
4. If faith is not what you know but who you know, how do you express your faith in Jesus?
5. What does it mean for you to continually accept the blood of Christ as an atonement for sin? How is the forgiveness and salvation afforded through Christ's sacrifice impacting your life each day? Where do you struggle to accept Christ's sacrifice or to walk in faith?

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 5, take some time to pray for each other, for any needs and struggles identified and that we might know what it is to live in all that Christ has purchased for us through the cross. Spend some time in prayer and encouragement for one another that we might be strengthened as we seek to follow Jesus and have our lives continually transformed by Him.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Eleven - Easter Sunday

The resurrection: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 28:1-20 (NIV)

Jesus Has Risen

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. **3** His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. **4** The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for

Jesus, who was crucified. **6** He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. **7** Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **9** Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. **10** Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be

afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The Guards' Report

11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. **12** When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, **13** telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ **14** If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” **15** So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed.

And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

The Great Commission

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Sermon Summary

After Jesus' predictions about his suffering and death came to pass it is a little surprising that his followers didn't consider the resurrection as a possibility! The women who go to the tomb do so to pay their respects, not to watch for the miraculous. Upon their arrival an angel appears, rolls away the stone, and tells them that Jesus is no longer there, but has risen and is going ahead of them to Galilee. As they hurry away to tell the disciples they are met by Jesus who also urges them to tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee. After a slight digression to explain and condemn the religious leaders for the “fake news” that they published about the resurrection, Matthew records Jesus' commission to tell the whole world the good news. And with that, the gospel concludes.

Given all that Matthew could have told us about the resurrection it is interesting to consider what he did tell us and the implications according to Matthew. First, it is worth noting that if Jesus was raised from the dead, it must have been by the power of God by whose will he had gone to his death. This makes the resurrection an act of vindication; the divine “I told you so”.

Second, the women and the disciples worship Jesus and this is absolutely appropriate. Jesus shares in the divine in such a way that worship natural. Matthew doesn't explore

the theology of either of these issues, leaving the wider reflections on the resurrection and divinity of Jesus to the rest of the New Testament.

There is, however, one other implication that is very clear in Matthew's account and that is that the resurrection needs to be shared. The angel tells the women to come and see the empty tomb and then go and tell the disciples. Jesus repeats this mission and then gives a broader command to all his disciples. The resurrection is to be talked about. This is the central implication of Easter Sunday according to Matthew.

It is also worth noting that the angel and Jesus still do not demand that his followers believe or get their act together. The women are conflicted with both fear and joy and at the mountain in Galilee there are those who worship and those who doubt. They are all told to "come and see" and "go and tell". Anyone can begin to follow Jesus and the crisis of decision is wrapped around the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is not demanded immediately. This is remarkable and reminds us how important it is to continue to follow and not count ourselves (or others) out. The resurrection is a talking point; one that has changed our lives and our world. Who are you going to tell?

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What habits or traditions have you held throughout your life in regards to celebrating Easter Sunday? Consider the stories shared, songs sung, eggs consumed and services attended at this time of year. Which have been helpful to your faith? Which celebrations would you like to see continued in your family?
2. Read Matthew 28:1-20 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.

3. What strikes you as most interesting about Matthew's account of the gospel? Why? Does this point of interest hold a challenge for your own life?
4. Leading up to this point Jesus has predicted what would take place, and been proven correct. The pharisees and chief priests knew about Jesus predictions and had posted guards at the tomb. Though the disciples had seen Jesus' predictions eventuate they still aren't looking expectantly towards a resurrection. Where have you seen this behaviour/ thinking in your own life? Can you think of times that you've struggled to be expectant for God's answers despite his previous faithfulness to his promises?
5. Why do you think that Matthew included the 'fake news' of the religious establishment?
6. How are you challenged by the Great Commission (vv16-20)? Who are you going to tell? Or, what is the next faithful step you can take as a follower of Jesus?
7. The women and disciples worship Jesus. This is a big thing for Jews (as monotheists) to do. Matthew sees it as appropriate to worship Jesus, as sharing in the authority of God. If we worship (show honour, respect, reverent fear) what we believe controls our destiny then we could find ourselves worshipping money, status, or relationships. Everyone is a worshipper, it's what we worship that counts. Spend some time reflecting on your life and identify any areas that could easily become a focus of worship. If you feel comfortable to share you may want to discuss these as a group.

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 7, take some time to pray for each other, that we might give appropriate worship to Jesus and put all other areas of our lives in their rightful place. If you have discussed (in question 6) who you are going to tell about Jesus then pray for those people now, that they may have receptive and curious hearts.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Twelve

The claims of Jesus post resurrection: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV)

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. **14** When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

16 Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

17 "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

18 "Bring them here to me," he said. **19** And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. **20** They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples

picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. **21** The number

of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon Summary

The feeding of the 5000 is one of only a handful of stories that is told in each of the four gospels. In Matthew and Mark this story has a second, 'lesser' companion when Jesus feeds 4000. It is also referred to in Matthew 16:5-12 and alluded to in 15:21-28 (in the 'crumbs') and most significantly in the last supper when Jesus "took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples". This repetition reveals that this is obviously a significant story in Matthew's account.

The political context of the miracle shapes our understanding of its significance as much as the repetition and allusions do. The passage opens by reporting that Jesus withdrew to a solitary place "when he heard what had happened". Because the preceding passage narrates the execution of John the Baptist, at first glance it seems that Jesus withdraws due to grief at John's death. However, going back a bit further provides a different understanding of Jesus' retreat. Matthew 14:1-2 states that Herod the tetrarch had heard about Jesus and thought he must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. Matthew then tells us how John met his death. What Jesus heard was not about John's death, but about Herod's interest in Jesus. As a prophet and Messianic figure, Jesus would have been perceived as a threat by Herod and, as has happened elsewhere in the gospel, when there is political danger Jesus withdraws (2:22; 4:12; 12:14-15).

Craig Keener, in his commentary on Matthew, points out that there is another parallel between these two passages that is found in the two feasts: Herod's birthday feast (marked by fear and death) and the feeding of the masses in the wilderness (marked by healing). This miracle, then, contrasts two types of kingdoms and two types of kings.

This political contrast set up by Matthew is further strengthened by the fact that Jesus, upon arriving at the crowded solitary place, has compassion on the crowds (rather than being angry) and heals their sick (rather than retreating again). The reference to his compassion reminds us of Matthew 9:35-36 where we are told he had compassion because the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd. This is a metaphor used in the Old Testament to describe a people who have no leadership or poor leadership (see Num. 27:15-17; 1 Kings 22:17; Zechariah 10:2). Herod's leadership leaves a great deal to be desired; motivated more by fear than by compassion.

Jesus heals those who are sick until it is late at which point the disciples suggest that he send them to the surrounding towns to buy food. Jesus responds by saying that the crowd does not need to leave to be fed and then commands the disciples to give them something to eat. The disciples respond by listing their limited resources; two fish and five loaves. Jesus takes what is in their hands, has the crowd sit down, and then gives thanks, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples, who feed the crowd. All 5000 men (plus women and children) eat and are satisfied and there are twelve baskets left over.

The clear reference to the last supper points to the abundant provision of Jesus to all who need forgiveness (one of the primary meanings of Jesus' death). This is strengthened by the allusions to examples of God's provision in the Old Testament. The provision of manna in the wilderness under Moses (Exodus 16:4); the provision for Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16); and the provision of a crowd under Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44). The provision of Jesus is more than sufficient for all that we need; no one is outside of his provision and no need exceeds his provision.

There is, however, one other very important thing to note: Jesus invites his disciples to feed the crowd and this continues to be the case. In the face of all the need in our world we are sent as the twelve were here. "You give them something to eat." Jesus takes our insufficient resources and multiplies them to make them more than enough to provide for those who are looking for Jesus.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Have you ever seen a miracle? What was it? For those who have not seen a miracle, do you think you would react with fear, amazement or scepticism if food started multiplying at a gathering?
2. Jesus was retreating to a remote place when a crowd of people set out on foot and met him at his landing. Today crowds of fans will try and track down where a celebrity is staying in order to get access to them. What do you think your response would have

been to hearing that Jesus is appearing somewhere? What kind of efforts do you make in your week to seek him out?

3. Though many of us would be angered to have our moment of retreat interrupted Jesus has compassion for the people and begins healing them. He has a hard time hiding from those who want to find him. Can you recall a time where seeking God resulted in your needs being met?
4. How does understanding the political context help to shape your understanding of the miracle?
5. Reflecting on the things that we need Christ's provision for, what does it mean to you that there is more than enough for you?
6. Who do you know who needs all that Christ offers? How can you "give them something to eat"? What do you have in your hand that you can give to Jesus to multiply for that purpose?
7. What keeps you, if anything, from acknowledging Jesus as healer or provider? What keeps you from giving others "something to eat"?

Prayer

This week each person needs a pen and paper to write down prayer points for themselves. Have members of your group answer these questions on their paper.

- * Something that could keep me from recognising Jesus in my life is...
- * A doubt I want to conquer is...
- * A miracle I want to see happen is...
- * A part of my life that I'm struggling to let God control is...
- * An area I want to grow in is...
- * A relationship I need to help meet a need in is...

After completing these, or all that you can, you may wish to swap lists with someone beside you so that in pairs you can pray for each other through the week.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Thirteen

The destruction of the Temple: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 24:1-8, 22-30 (NIV)

The Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times

1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. **2** "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. **5** For many will come in my

name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. **6** You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. **7** Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. **8** All these are the beginning of birth pains.

22 "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. **23** At

that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. **24** For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. **25** See, I have told you ahead of time.

26 "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.

27 For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. **28**

Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

29 "Immediately after the distress of those days

"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

30 "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.

Sermon Summary

One of the most difficult passages to understand in Matthew is Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple in 24:1-35. It is, however, well worth tackling. This is due to the simple fact that it is the only explicit charge Matthew includes in his trial (26:59-61). This suggests that this was more than a premonition of what would indeed take place in 70 AD.

To understand this text we need to understand the theological importance of the temple as the place where heaven met earth. The temple was a magnificent building, but as the house of God it was unique in all the world. It was where the offerings and sacrifices – which made up a significant percentage of the Law – were to be made. It was, in a theological sense, the very centre of the world. For Jesus to predict its destruction was, therefore, a big deal. However, there is more to it. To speak of its destruction wasn't just to describe a military failure or architectural disaster, but a theological judgment. This was how its destruction by the Babylonians was portrayed in the Old Testament and the reason for judgement of this scale was always the sin and unfaithfulness of God's people. This gets us closer to understanding why Jesus' enemies focused on this prediction at his trial. Jesus has stood in conflict with the religious establishment throughout the gospel, but his coming to Jerusalem in Matthew 21 sees this conflict escalate. When Jesus first enters

Jerusalem he clears a section of the temple quoting Jeremiah 7:11. This passage was an extended message of coming judgement on the temple in Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day. In the very next story Jesus curses a fig tree that has no fruit in what many commentators see as a metaphor for the temple; it looks fantastic, but it is fruitless and is destined for judgment. Then after a series of conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders Jesus predicts that the temple will be torn down.

What makes the passage more difficult is the kind of language that Jesus uses to describe this catastrophe. In Matthew 24:3 the disciples ask two questions: 'when will the temple be destroyed?' and 'what will be the signs of your coming at the end of the age?'. These two questions occupy Jesus' response. In vv. 4-35 Jesus answers the first. He is certain about the things that will happen and even declares that the generation listening to him would not pass away until they had happened (v. 34). In vv. 36-51 Jesus answers the second question about his second coming, about which he is not certain. He states that he doesn't know the timing of his second coming and urges watchfulness. This is all well and good, except that in describing the destruction of the temple Jesus uses language that sounds like the end. He even uses that phrase in vv. 6, 13-14. This apocalyptic language is actually a clue about the significance of the temple's destruction. Its destruction is an end, but what sort of end?

The help we need to unravel this text is in v. 29 when Jesus quotes Isaiah 13:10, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." In its original context this is a prophecy of destruction of Babylon. What is important to notice is that the cosmic signs point, not to the end of the world, but to a judgment within history. What happened to Babylon is that it passed out of relevance in world history, it was reduced by God from a super power to an also ran. The same pattern is found in Isaiah 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8 and Joel 2:31. What Jesus is saying, therefore, is that the temple's destruction will be a sign of its irrelevance. The one place on earth where heaven met earth will be severed. But what will replace it? And when will this happen?

It turns out that the better question is, "Who will replace it?". There is one other Old Testament passage that sheds light on this question and that is Daniel 7:13-14 where one like a son of man approaches the ancient of days and is given all authority, dominion, and power and receives worship. His coming to the ancient of days is "with the clouds of heaven". This seems to be the passage that forms the basis for Jesus' favourite self-designation "son of man". In Matthew 24:30 we have an allusion to this same passage when there will appear the sign of the son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven with power and glory. If you return to the trial of Jesus he also cites this passage when he says that from now on the religious leaders will see him at the right hand of the Mighty One

and coming on the clouds. What happens next, of course, is Jesus' death and resurrection. To return to the questions about the temple, Jesus says that he will replace the temple as the one place where heaven meets earth and that this will happen at his death and resurrection. This might explain the tearing of the temple curtain at his death as well as his affirmation that he would rebuild the temple in three days, his acceptance of worship from his followers at his resurrection, and the statement in Matthew 28:18 that "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me".

The actual destruction of the temple in 70 AD then, was the final destruction of an irrelevant institution; made irrelevant by Jesus' death and resurrection. I think we can understand why this was such an important charge made against him.

The implications for following Jesus are significant. Perhaps the most significant is that a building has been replaced by a person. One of the temptations of religion is to be content with being shaped by spiritual disciplines and practices rather than being transformed by relationship with God. The goal of the temple and all that it stood for was relationship with God but too often what resulted was a reliance on ritual. What was needed was a change of heart so that the rituals could be performed in integrity.

When Jesus replaced the temple as the place where earth meets heaven he placed relationship at the very heart of Christian experience. This requires trust in Jesus rather than in our ability to perform the rituals or observe the commandments or do good deeds. All of these are important and good things, but must come from a changed heart. This is what Jesus promises. So following Jesus becomes a journey of allowing him to change our hearts in order that we might have a genuine relationship with God.

Once again we see the crisis of decision that following Jesus creates in our lives; his outrageous claims demand that (eventually) we ask the question, "Do we trust him?".

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. As Jesus talks with his disciples he uses a lot of imagery, metaphors and parables, leading them to bring their questions to him. If Jesus stood before you prepared to answer any question you had, what would you ask?
2. Read Matthew 24:1-36 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they?
3. Read Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8 and Joel 2:31. What other parallels are there between these passages that increase our understanding of Jesus' use of this imagery?
4. Rituals, habits and disciplines shape our lives in particular ways. How do your own habits shape your life? What role does the heart play in these habits?
5. Despite the temple's significance being superseded by Jesus as the place where heaven meets earth, Christians continue to place importance on particular places and objects (church buildings, liturgical furniture, treks to holy sites etc). In your own expression of following Jesus, where are you tempted to rebuild your own temple? What rituals are kept individually and corporately that we rely too heavily upon?
6. What is the difference between ritual and relationship? How have you seen these differences in your expression of faith?
7. What has been the biggest change in your life since choosing to follow Jesus? If you don't remember a specific time of beginning that journey perhaps you could share how you see Jesus leading change in your life today.

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6 and 7, take some time to pray for each other, that we might be a people continually transformed by Jesus as we seek authentic relationship with Him.

If you want to go a little deeper with each other:

If we are the dwelling place of God (his temple, 1 Cor 6:19, Ephesians 2:21-22) and called to be a holy place, then what one thing within you would Jesus want to 'overturn' or 'clear out'? This could be an attitude, the way you treat people, your thought life, a particular behaviour or the way you prioritise. Share this in pairs and pray for each other.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Fourteen

Faith - From following to belief: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. **22** A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

27 "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

28 Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Sermon Summary

As we near the end of this series we need to turn our attention to faith. Faith plays an important role in the miracles of Jesus and with faith, we are told, all things are possible. At the same time, however, the disciples are several times described by Jesus as those with little faith. There are two examples of great faith in Matthew's account: the faith of the centurion (8:5-13) and that of the Canaanite woman in today's passage. In this brief story we learn several important things about faith.

First, we are reminded that faith can blossom in the most unexpected places. The description of this woman as a Canaanite emphasises her outsider status. She is not just a Gentile, but a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the traditional enemies of the people of Israel and it is a little unexpected that she has great faith. Unexpected, but not totally surprising. Remember that Jesus' genealogy contains five women, two of whom – Rahab and Ruth – were foreigners who expressed faith in God. This woman is like those faithful women.

Second, it is important to note that it is the woman's need that makes her faith visible. Like a spy in some thriller using powder to expose the infrared alarm system, need makes faith visible. Her daughter's suffering drove her to exercise her faith in approaching Jesus. It is when she approaches Jesus that we see the most significant feature of her faith according to Matthew; her persistence.

She follows after Jesus and His disciples, crying out for mercy. What is strange is that Jesus says nothing to her. She persists to the point that the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. His response is to remind them that His mission is to the "lost sheep of Israel". He does not, however, send her away and she persists, eventually coming and falling at His feet and asking for his help. Once again Jesus takes us by surprise and reiterates His priority to the children of Israel. At first glance He is being a bit rude, seemingly calling her a dog, but it is a simple comparison demonstrating priority. He might have said, it isn't right to have dessert before you've finished your vegetables. She persists and answers in the same analogy suggesting that even the dogs eat food that falls from the table. Jesus declares that she has great faith and grants her request.

This shows us a few other things about faith. To begin with it is worth noting that Jesus invites persistent faith. He does not send the woman away, and does not outright reject her request, but invites her persistence. Jesus is always on the lookout for faith. Second, this shapes His mission. Yes, He was sent to Israel, but He was really sent to all who have faith in Him. Jew or Gentile didn't matter; faith did.

This reminds us that faith is ultimately not about what you know but who you know. This woman believed something about Jesus, namely that He could help her daughter and that the children (in the parable) would not miss or begrudge her the crumb she needed. So great was Jesus' power that a crumb was all she needed.

All of this urges us to recognise our need and bring our need to Jesus in faith. And in case we fear we don't have enough faith, note that Jesus is sensitive to faith. Like a seismograph that picks up tremors in the earth that we wouldn't, Jesus is sensitive to faith in those who come to Him. This woman probably didn't have a completely formed faith or understanding of Jesus, but He felt her faith and, to use the image of a seismograph, felt an earthquake. What do you need from Jesus? What do you believe about him? Bring your request and your faith to Him. He invites faith and is sensitive to it and responds to what He finds.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Jesus seems to point to persistence as a central feature of faith. Where in your life has need inspired you to be persistent? This might be in your faith or it may have appeared somewhere else; a medical diagnosis prompting the need to get fit for example. What are the challenges and rewards of persistence? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 15:21-28 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. What aspect of faith in this story strikes you as most significant?
4. How would you have responded to Jesus' soft refusals? Would you have persisted? What makes persistence so difficult?

5. If faith is more “who you know” than “what you know”, how does this change your understanding of faith?
6. What do you believe about Jesus? What do you truly believe He is able to do and accomplish in your life and in the world?

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6, take some time to pray for each other, that you might continue to grow in your knowledge of, and relationship with, Jesus. Invite the Holy Spirit to stretch your faith as you invite Jesus to be at work in situations you may once have thought impossible to change.



Study Series

Follow Me: Episode Fifteen

An invitation to follow Jesus: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 11:25-30 (NIV)

The Father Revealed in the Son

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. **26** Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

27 "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the

Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

29 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. **30** For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Sermon Summary

As we come to the end of this series we want to return to the invitation to follow Jesus. In Matthew 11:25-30 –before Jesus has even begun to predict His death and resurrection – He extends a remarkable invitation to those who have begun to follow Him, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” This invitation is pretty appealing as it stands, but when we fully understand the offer it is even more so.

Jesus’ promise of giving rest is expanded by His offer of a yoke. This agricultural tool is used metaphorically to describe being bound together like two oxen would be bound together by a yoke. This is how Paul uses it in 2 Corinthians 6:14. Jewish teachers of the law would use this metaphor in a couple of ways. First, to refer to the yoke of the law; that which binds us to God. Second, to refer to the yoke of their teaching; their interpretation of the law. Jesus appears to be using this image in the same way. In fact, in the very next section in Matthew’s account He records two conflicts that Jesus has with the religious leaders over the interpretation of the Sabbath laws. It would seem more than a coincidence that Matthew would include Jesus’ offer of rest just before the controversy over the day of rest.

Jesus is offering an interpretation of the law that stands in contrast to that of the religious leaders of His day (see Matthew 23:4 for his description of their teaching); one that is light and easy. It is important to recall that the purpose of the law was to promote relationship with God. This relationship, like all good relationships, was to be one that was easy where the actions and attitudes that promote the relationship came from the heart and were second nature. This is the lawlessness that the law was meant to bring – a situation where the law was no longer necessary because it had become internalised. However, because the law was not written on the heart, but on tablets of stone, it had become a burden. Jesus has a second-nature relationship with God; He lived out the law because he had internalised it and the made the relationship with God light and easy; just like our best relationships. Jesus offers to share this life with God, with us, and give us rest from chasing after God or trying to prove ourselves to Him (which is always tiring in relationship).

This invitation is based on Jesus’ close connection with God (as shown in v. 27) and comes by revelation which itself comes from spending time with Jesus. This is the revelation that Peter has in 16:7 when He recognises who Jesus is. There was no bright light, no voice from heaven, no angel, only time spent with Jesus that led to the revelation of God. As we spend time following Jesus we too will have a revelation of who Jesus is and this demands a decision be made.

In 11:20-24 Jesus condemns the villages and towns of Galilee who had seen the miracles and had not responded to this revelation. The desired response is repentance which simply means to acknowledge that a particular way is not working and to choose to do something else instead. In a religious sense it has implications for how we live in relationship with God and is tied to what we believe about Jesus. If, for example, we believe that Jesus forgives sin, we need to repent of trying to earn our salvation by being good. If we believe that Jesus brings us into relationship with God, we repent of those things that disrupt that relationship. And so on. This is the crisis of decision and faith we have been talking about. When we believe something about Jesus – whatever it may be – we need to respond by thinking about the implications of that belief and how it might change the way we follow Him. This is the ongoing challenge of following Jesus since our faith in Him is always changing and growing. We are continually confronted by the central question of the gospel, “Who do you say that I am?” and then left to repent of those attitudes and actions that do not line up with that belief. This is not a one off, but a continual process and one that takes a lifetime. It is, therefore, appropriate for us to end there; with the basic challenge of following Jesus before us.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Do rules bring freedom? Where have you seen that outworked, and what effect did those rules have on the lives of those who were invited to adhere to them? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 11:25-30 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.

3. Jesus invites us into rest, or the kind of life where the law of God is written on our hearts, such that we follow Jesus in relationship, rather than simply adhering to regulations. But what gets in the way of us living this way? What draws us back into following rules, or what causes us to give up following Jesus altogether?
4. How has this series shaped your understanding of who Jesus is? What do you believe about Him?
5. Have you discovered that any of your views about Jesus have been inaccurate? What consequent actions, based on these misconceptions, might you now need to repent of?
6. Where are you experiencing weariness or burden? Is it in trying to work out what this life looks like following Jesus? Is it in feeling like you're failing to live as you believe God would want you to live? Take a moment to write down your reflections on this question. If you feel comfortable share these with the group.

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on all of these questions, take some time to pray for each other, perhaps in 2s or 3s, bringing your burdens before Jesus. Invite Him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to lift the weight of sin and expectation from you as you repent, giving these things to Jesus and asking His forgiveness, and then take some time to ask Jesus to lead you into life; To be the one you follow.