



THE WAY OF THE COMMUNITY: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Chapter 2: Moses 2.0

Open with Prayer

Discuss:

Did anybody read the whole Gospel of Matthew this week, or any part of it? Thoughts or comments?

Video

While watching the video, make note of any questions or comments you wish to share with the group.

Matthew's Jewish Setting

This study assumes that this gospel was written in direct response to the situation created by the aftermath of 70 AD. After the fall of Jerusalem and subsequent exile of thousands of Jewish people, the religion experienced a kind of identity crisis.

Jews all over the known world faced three central questions in the wake of 70 AD:

1) Without a nation or temple, what was the identity of the Hebrew people, the supposedly-chosen ones of God?

2) What is the relation of Jew to Gentile?

3) What should one think about the Messiah?

One group which attempted to answer these questions faithfully were known as Pharisees. Over time, this group became the face of Palestinian Judaism. Pharisees were a kind of reform group. They came to see the events of 70 AD as divine punishment for the sins of the nation.

They answered the first question by claiming that the only way to remain God's chosen people was to be strictly obedient to the Torah. Second, they urged isolation from, and rejection of, Gentile ways. They believed that Jewish identity was bound up in being distinct from others. Third, they believed the Messiah had not come yet, and in fact, any expectation of dramatic divine deliverance was to be downplayed.

Matthew answered these three questions quite differently from the Pharisees, and thus, he portrays them as fierce opponents of Jesus in his gospel. He mentions the Pharisees more than any other gospel writer, and in almost entirely negative terms.

In answer to the first question, Matthew responds by arguing that Jesus stands squarely in the line of prophets sent by God as a sign of God's covenant faithfulness to the people of God.

Regarding the relation of Jew to Gentile, Matthew also reveals a different direction. He portrays Jesus as being open to Gentiles, particularly in the story of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus initially balks, claiming that he has come only for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). But nevertheless she persisted. Jesus ends up healing the girl. By the end of the gospel, Jesus is sending his disciples into the world to "go and make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

And concerning the Messiah, Matthew claims that Jesus is he! This is perhaps the most shocking claim that Matthew makes. After all, Jesus clearly did not conform to the common expectation of the Messianic figure; he died like a criminal at the hands of the Romans. But Matthew insists that Jesus will yet return and establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Matthew's community in Antioch is torn in two directions. On the one hand, they want to cling to their Jewish identity. They see themselves as being sons of Abraham; they read the Hebrew Scriptures; they want to attend synagogue and be part of the Jewish community.

But on the other hand, they are starting to see themselves as “other.” Their commitment to Jesus puts them at odds with the dominant Jewish voices in Antioch. Their practices distinguish themselves from the other Jews in the city.

Scholar Donald Senior suggests that Matthew is writing out of an urgency that his community not lose its Jewish foundations: “His urgent pastoral concern was that the Jewish tradition would be lost in a church inexorably becoming Gentile ... His vision was that of an assembly or church in which both Jew and Gentile would flourish together.” However, this did not happen. In the century after Matthew’s gospel was written, Christianity became predominantly Gentile, and Jewish Christians were marginalized from Gentile Christians who increasingly dominated the new religion.

In fact, Senior calls this gospel “a monument to a failed hope.”

Discuss:

What would Christianity look like if we actually celebrated and embraced our Jewish origins?

Who is This Jesus?

In the first chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we find five different titles for Jesus: Messiah (or Christ), son of David, son of Abraham, Jesus (“God saves”), and Emmanuel (“God with us”).

Keep an eye out for the titles for Jesus in the gospel, because each one gives a different perspective on his person.

Here are the main titles used for Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, with the number of times used:

- Lord (34)
- Son of Man (30)
- Christ/Messiah (17)
- Teacher/Rabbi (14)
- Son of David (10)
- Son of God (9)
- King (of the Jews/Israel) (8)
- The Coming One (7)

Discuss:

Which of these titles are familiar? strange? Are there any titles which are unfamiliar to you?

“He Will Save His People From Their Sins”

In chapter one, verse 21, the angel tells Joseph that his wife will give birth to a son, and “you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” As noted in the video, the name Jesus, Yeshua in Hebrew, means “God saves.”

Matthew is telling us that Jesus’ main business will be to “save people from their sins.” But what does this phrase mean?

In 20th century Protestantism, salvation has taken on a very individual, privatized understanding. Many of us were raised to believe that each one of us must be forgiven of our individual sins so that we might be “saved,” which means to be put in a right relationship with God.

Matthew certainly would have agreed with this sentiment, but it doesn’t encompass the whole meaning of this phrase. Matthew is not just speaking about individual souls, but about the whole people of God, the entire community.

Like many Jewish leaders of his time, Matthew believed that the sin of the people was responsible for the destruction which occurred in 70 AD. He thought that Jerusalem had been destroyed because the people had been unfaithful to God, particularly in their rejection of Jesus.

So when Matthew puts these words into the mouth of the angel — “he will save his people from their sins” — he doesn’t mean merely that people can now feel a personal sense of forgiveness; Matthew is suggesting that Jesus will eventually unite the people, rally them around his person, and restore them to their position as God’s own people.

Matthew’s understanding of what it means that Jesus will “save the people from their sins” challenges our conception of sin. We are used to thinking of sin as personal and private. Yet we also can probably grasp the idea that there is sin that is larger than any one person; sin can be located in systems, in society, in the unspoken and unwritten codes of life itself.

Racism has proven to be an insidious feature of many of our social structures; the results are clear, even if individuals in society profess not to be racist themselves. Likewise, we know that the use of fossil fuels degrade our environment and lead to

climate change; yet all of us still participate in the use and consumption of fossil fuels. In what sense can we as a people be forgiven for the sin of racism and environmental destruction?

Matthew doesn't give us an easy answer to these questions. But he does point us toward a way of life which puts us in step with God's purposes for the whole world.

Discuss:

Personal sin is easy to understand; we screw up, we ask God to forgive us, we reconcile with others, we feel better. But how does corporate sin and forgiveness work?

Close with Unison Affirmation:

**In the confidence that God is with us,
we go on the Way with Christ.
May the Spirit lead and guide us.**