

## JESUS, LORD OF ALL

### Study 1

#### FOLLOWING JESUS—THE ARRIVAL OF THE KINGDOM

—Matthew 4:17–25

#### Introduction

Introduction in the context of postmodernism. Issues to take up.

The Bible studies I have chosen for this series challenge us to a fresh understanding of the person of Jesus. The subject ‘Jesus, Lord of All’. I trust that as a result of our turning to this part of God’s word and of learning more about Jesus and his authority we as Christians will be encouraged to lift our horizons, to broaden our vision in wonderful ways. It may be for us life-transforming, it might encourage us and transform our hopes. In this introductory study I want to begin with the opening of Jesus’ ministry.

Matthew introduces Jesus’ public ministry with a summary of the message of his preaching and healing. He mentions the call of the first disciples and a summary of his ministry to the crowds. Preaching and healing sum up the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, and together these confront people with the question of Jesus’ identity. Who is this Jesus?

What I want to say tomorrow about the Sermon on the Mount must be understood in the light of the preceding section (4:17-25). The words ‘from that time’ (4:17) refer back to the events described in 4:12. The phrase marks the beginning of a significant new stage (the public proclamation of Jesus), as it does in 16:21 (private preparation of disciples for the approaching passion).

#### 1. Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom (4:17)

The burden of Jesus’ preaching is in itself identical to that of John the Baptist. The core of their message was the same. The revolution! But when John says these words, they are placed in an OT context that highlights his function as the forerunner who looks forward to the Messiah and his kingdom (3:2-12). When Jesus says the same words, they are linked (by ‘from that time’) with an OT context that insists Jesus fulfils the promises of a light rising to shine on the Gentiles (note esp. 4:14-16 re Immanuel’s coming).

Jesus’ message, like John’s, called for repentance from sin. *Repentance* in Greek traditionally implied a change of mind or attitude, but under Old Testament influence it took on the sense of a change of action as well. Note the significance of the concept of *bwv*/repentance in Jer. 3:7; 4:1; Hos. 6:1; 7:10; 14:1. John was asking

his hearers ‘to change their way of life as a result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness’ (Louw and Nida). So radical an appeal stemmed from the belief that a new era in world history was dawning.

*has drawn near* points to the present as the decisive moment of the kingdom’s arrival. God’s kingly rule. Relates to the mighty inbreaking of that rule into history in a new and dramatic way with the advent of Jesus the Messiah. The kingdom is both present and future. The decisive intervention of God who confronts men and women with repentance and conversion.

## 2. **Calling Disciples for the Kingdom (4:18-22)**

This incident emphasizes that the call to repentance involves *following* Jesus. However, Jesus’ disciples were not simply ‘hearers’; they actually followed their Master around and became trainees. were also collaborators as ‘fishers of men’ (Note the imagery of Jer. 16:16-18—fishing out men for judgment. There the Lord sends ‘fishermen’ to gather his people for the Exile; here Jesus sends fishermen to announce the end of the Exile and the beginning of the messianic reign (cf. 1:11-12; 2:17-18.)

In the vicinity of his new home in Capernaum, Jesus finds two brothers who are fishermen and commands them to become disciples. Simon and Andrew have already encountered Jesus when Andrew was a disciple of John (John 1:35-41), so Jesus’ call is not as abrupt as might be thought. Yet their decisive response is stressed.

The pattern of call and response is repeated with the second pair of fishermen brothers. Peter, James and John will form the inner core of Jesus’ followers—his three closest disciples (cf. 17:1 and 26:37). Jesus elsewhere will stress the priorities of God above those of family (10:37). We do not know whether James and John had previously heard of Jesus. The focus of attention is solely on the immediacy of their response on this occasion (‘at once’ in v. 20 and ‘immediately’ in v. 22: both cases the Greek is *eujqevw*). When Jesus calls a person to discipleship, there is no excuse for delay or disobedience.

## 3. **Spreading the News of the Kingdom (4:23-25)**

As Jesus’ public ministry gets under way, he travels throughout Galilee, preaching spontaneously to open-air crowds and making guest appearances in local synagogues (cf. Luke 4:16-17). The message he preaches is *eujaggevlion*. Jews, yes but ultimately Gentiles in view.

Jesus’ miracle working understandably attracts crowds, but those in the crowds will need to be instructed on what true discipleship involves if they are to become genuine followers.

Chapters 5-7 exemplify Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom: its blessings and demands, and the character of those who enter it. The beatitudes are addressed to those who have already made some progress, perhaps slight, as followers of the

Messiah. The sermon was not delivered at the beginning of the Galilean ministry for the people would not have been ready for it. It implies a good deal of previous preaching and we should consider 4:23-25 as a summary of months of work.

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## Study 2

### **FOLLOWING JESUS—THE KING IN HIS KINGDOM**

—Matthew 5:1–16

#### **Introduction**

\* Notes on the issue of citizenship.

No other piece of teaching in the history of humanity has attracted the attention which has been given to the Sermon on the Mount. Philosophers and activists from many non-Christian perspectives who have refused to worship Jesus nevertheless have admired his ethic. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps the most famous.

#### **1. The Norms or Standards of the Kingdom (5:1-12)**

Matthew presents us with five great discourse sections, bringing before us in each one different aspects of Jesus' teaching. In chapters 5-7 the unifying theme is the kingdom of heaven: it envelopes the Beatitudes (5:3, 10) and appears in 5:17-20 which details the relation between the OT and the kingdom. It returns at the heart of the Lord's Prayer (6:10), climaxes the section on kingdom perspectives (6:33) and is presented as what must finally be entered (7:21-23). Within this kingdom theme the issue of 'righteousness' is significant (cf. 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33—it is a characteristic term in these chapters).

##### *(a) Introduction (5:1-2)*

Not just a case of Jesus withdrawing and training his disciples so that they would multiply his own ministry. A 'disciple' refers to someone who is merely following and learning at that moment, without reference to the level of commitment. Out of the huge crowds assembling from all over northern Palestine, perhaps a smaller crowd of disciples followed Jesus to the quiet hill country west of Galilee in order to receive more extended teaching; and perhaps more and more joined the class, partly because of Jesus' rising reputation and partly because a crowd attracts a crowd. This fits 7:28. It is confirmed by the fact that Jesus presses these disciples to enter the kingdom, to enter into life (7:13-14, 21-23).

Jesus sat down, that is, he assumed the traditional position of a teacher in a synagogue or school. He 'opened his mouth'—he was going to say something that was solemn and extremely important.

##### *(b) Who Belongs to the Kingdom? (5:3-12)*

1. What on earth are the 'beatitudes'?

These beatitudes are *not a list of conditions* for entering the kingdom, but rather a word of congratulation for those who are already in it. Otherwise it is back to a works doctrine of righteousness.

‘Blessed’ (makavrio"+ yrva = ‘Oh the blessedness of’, an interjection) calls attention to a state of blessing which already exists and recommends it. Usually the word makavrio" describes the person who is *singularly favoured by God* (happy in God’s sight) and therefore it is not describing a state of inner feeling on the part of those to whom it is applied (‘I feel good’). The church father Ambrose called them eight paradoxes, for according to the divine assessment, blessedness begins where we think misery begins. In God’s universe there can be no higher blessing than to be approved by him. If God’s blessing means more to us than the approval of loved ones no matter how cherished, or of colleagues no matter how influential, then the beatitudes will speak to us very personally and deeply.

## 2. Who are these people and what are they like?

(a) The Beatitudes must be understood against the OT background. They are an expression of the fulfilment of Isaiah 61, the OT promise of the time of salvation, in the person and proclamation of Jesus. In this OT passage a kingly prophetic figure, anointed with God’s Spirit, proclaims to the ‘poor’ (μϑwn[, RSV ‘afflicted’) and those that ‘mourn’, because of the captivity and suffering of God’s people, that the *longed-for comfort, security and restoration of Israel are at hand*.

Two verses in Isaiah stand close in meaning to the poverty of spirit of which Jesus speaks: ‘Thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit’ (Isa. 57:15). And, ‘To this man will I look, namely to him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word’ (Isa. 66:2).

The other descriptions (‘the meek’ and ‘the pure in heart’) recall passages from the Psalms, identifying the godly or true Israelites in contrast with the wicked. So Ps. 37:11 speaks of the ‘meek’ inheriting the land, Ps. 42 speaks of the godly person hungering for God and his deliverance in the midst of oppression, and Ps. 24:3-6 indicates that he who has ‘a pure heart’ will experience the salvation of God.

So these ‘poor’ (the whole series of parallel expressions refer to the *same people*, not eight different groups), are ‘the oppressed who cannot defend themselves, the desperate, the hopeless’—those who know that they are completely thrown on God’s help. Seccombe: Israel born out of the experience of suffering and persecution.

(b) In these Beatitudes Jesus in effect asserts that his disciples are this group and that the kingdom with all its blessings is now theirs. As the true poor (in the prophetic sense), who have come to Jesus, they are designated the nucleus of the kingdom.

Well, Jesus is speaking about a personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy, the conscious confession of unworthiness before God. Like the godly in the Old Testament. As such, it reflects the deepest form of repentance. It is exemplified by the guilty tax collector who said, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. It is not a person’s confession that he is ontologically insignificant that is in view, or

that she is personally without value; rather, it is a confession that he/she is sinful and rebellious and utterly without moral virtues adequate to commend him to God. It is a confession of one's need before God, a humble admission of spiritual bankruptcy before God. Poverty of spirit cannot be artificially induced by self-hatred. It is not equivalent to a low self-esteem. Still less does it have in common with showy humility. And pride based on genuine virtues has the greatest potential for self-deception. Poverty of spirit insists on full, honest, factual conscious, and conscientious recognition before God of personal moral unworthiness. It is the deepest form of repentance.

#### 4. What do they receive?

What benefits are their as citizens of the kingdom? The blessings proclaimed are all different aspects of OT promises about the coming kingdom and the age of salvation: being comforted, inheriting the land, being satisfied, obtaining mercy, etc. Each blessing in any of these eight beatitudes is not arbitrary. The thing promised in each case grows naturally (or better supernaturally) out of the character described. In v. 6 the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is filled (with it). In v. 7 the merciful are shown mercy. The blessing always corresponds with the condition.

Note the words at the beginning and end of the beatitudes (vv. 3, 10): 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Everything bracketed between these two really can be included under this one theme, the kingdom of heaven. That is why one can refer to these verses as the 'norms or standards of the kingdom'. Note too that vv. 3, 10 speak of the kingdom of heaven as being theirs now? The other promises are future.

## 2. The Witness of the Kingdom (5:13-16)

These verses are addressed to the same group of people. Jesus continues to address them in the second person. The theme of the believer's witness that is implied in the beatitudes now becomes explicit. It is impossible to follow the norms of the kingdom in a purely private way. The righteousness of the life that you live will attract attention. In other words, the Christian is not poor in spirit, mournful over sin, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker—all in splendid isolation!

When the norms of the kingdom are practised by disciples who have truly come under Jesus' kingship, practised in a sinful world, they constitute a major aspect of Christian witness; and this witness gives rise to persecution. In vv. 13-16 Jesus uses two pictures to show how disciples must by their lives leave their stamp on the world which is so opposed to the norms of the kingdom.

The two pictures used stress that the disciples/Christian community are to function like the Servant of the Lord of OT expectation. They are to be the light that lightens the Gentiles (cf. Isa. 42:6-9; 49:1-6; 2:1-5).

#### (a) *Salt* (5:13)

The salt metaphor has behind it a rich growth of allusion, but here the covenant associations of the OT may be the most prominent: salt is a symbol of the

durability of the covenant (Lev. 2:13; Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5). The disciples are a guarantee of the continuation of Israel's vocation.

In saying that his disciples are like salt, fulfilling the role of God's people, Jesus is stating that apart from his disciples the world turns ever more rotten. Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual corruption. If their lives conform to the norms of vv. 3-12, they cannot help but be an influence for good in society. Ultimately this is because they are fulfilling their God-given role, the role that Israel should have exercised in OT times, but failed.

Salt loses its effectiveness in staying corruption, and so must be thrown out as a useless commodity. The purpose of the salt is to fight deterioration, and so it must not itself deteriorate.

The worse the world becomes and the more its corruption continues, the more it stands in need of Jesus' disciples. [Indian commissioner of railways, in A.P. Retired twice.]

#### (b) *Light* (5:14-16)

The second picture that describes the witness of the Christian is light. Christians are the light of the world—a world which is shrouded in thick darkness.

With the imagery of the light of the world and a city set upon a hill, Jesus refers to the small community of the disciples (not the emphatic *uJmei* "ejste, v. 14) assuming the eschatological function of Israel/Mt. Zion (Isa. 2:1-4; cf. 4:2-6). The nations of the world will be drawn to them as the bearers of God's light. They are to function as the Servant community of the OT did: to be a 'light to the nations' so that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6; cf. 42:1-7). Note that this is a community responsibility, not simply an individual one.

In the same way Jesus' disciples are to let their light shine before people. What is this light by which disciples lighten a dark world? The light is the 'good deeds' performed by Jesus' followers—performed in such a way that some at least recognize these followers of Jesus as sons of God, and come to praise this Father whose sons they are (5:16). How shall they praise the Father unless . . . ?

Just as a city on a hill cannot be hidden, so a lamp is not lit and placed under a 'bushel' (a grain measure of about 9 litres). Consequently, disciples are to 'shine' by their behaviour (v. 16), which will mean practising the righteousness spelled out in the preceding (and following) verses, moving people to glorify God, presumably because they recognize him as the true source of their behaviour. So, vv. 13-16 form a bridge, leading from the Beatitudes to the rest of the Sermon.

### 3. Where do we go from here?

The norms of the kingdom, worked out in the lives of the heirs of the kingdom, are the witness of the kingdom. Such Christians refuse to rob their employers by being lazy on the job, or to rob their employees by succumbing to greed and stinginess. They are the first to help a colleague in difficulty, the last to return a

barbed reply. They are honestly concerned about the welfare of others. They reject the easy answer of the doctrinaire politician and the ‘she’ll be all right mate’ stance of the selfish secular man.

Christians have lost this vision of witness, and are slow to return to it. In earlier times there were many transformed men and women who became the light of the world. Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted liquor trade, abolition of slavery and child labour, establishment of orphanages—these and many more the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness. And this has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with the norms of the kingdom.

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Study 3**THE TWO WAYS**—Matthew 7:13-27

During the second world war and in the years immediately following many of our churches were full. Numbers of them had large Sunday schools and fellowship groups. Those who had lived through the dreadful time of the war had gone to church and had prayed for peace. They had hung on during those grim days. In the months that followed the war those who ministered spiritually had the important task of challenging these church people to a renewed commitment. Had they just gone to church to pray for peace? When things were really bad, that alone? In many churches today the same sort of clarion call is needed.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been a challenge to Israel to renew the covenant and accept God into their lives. It was a sermon addressed to those who claimed to belong to the people of God.

Using several illustrations (vv. 13-27) Jesus made it clear that ultimately there are only two categories of people in the world, despite the endless gradations we might otherwise perceive. In each case the first category refers to those who hear, obey, and are saved. The second, to those who only hear and so are destroyed. For both eternal life and judgment are at stake.

Nothing could be more calamitous than to meditate long and hard on the Sermon on the Mount, and then resolve to improve a little. The discipleship which Jesus desires is absolute, and radical in the sense that it gets to the root of human conduct and to the root of relationships between God and us. A person either enters the kingdom or he does not. He or she walks the road that leads to life or the road that leads to destruction. There is no third option. Nothing at all could have more crucial significance than following Jesus. Even if today this is not acceptable to men and women, one day all without exception will have to confess it.

These final verses of the Sermon on the Mount demand decision and commitment of the type that beseeches God for mercy and pardon. Such discipleship is characterized by that deep repentance which hungers for nothing more than conformity to God's will. But because there are only two ways, the failure to make such a deep commitment is already a commitment not to do so. [Person sitting on the fence.] Jesus' way demands repentance, trust and obedience. Therefore refusal, stemming as it must from an unrepentant arrogance, unbelief or disobedience—in other words, self-centredness rather than God-centredness—can only be construed as rebellion.

The Sermon on the Mount ends with four warnings, each offering paired contrasts: two ways (vv. 13-14), two trees (vv. 15-20), two claims (vv. 21-23), and two builders (vv. 24-27). They focus on the final judgment and so make it plain that the theme is still the kingdom of God's rule. If some will not enter it (vv. 13-14, 21-23), the sole basis for such a tragedy is their *present* response to Jesus' words. Note who this Jesus is.

## 1. The Two Paths: The Narrow or the Wide Road (7:13-14)

The general picture is of two gates, two roads, two crowds and two destinations. The narrow gate is clearly restrictive and does not permit entrance to what Jesus prohibits. The 'wide' gate seems far more inviting. The broad road is spacious and accommodates the crowd and their baggage; the other road is 'narrow'. The way of discipleship is narrow, restricting, because it is the way of persecution and opposition—a major theme in Matthew.

But the two roads are not ends in themselves. The narrow road leads to life, i.e. to the consummated kingdom (cf. vv. 21-23); but the broad road leads to destruction—'definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and hopeless destiny of death'. \*Some people don't mind where they are headed as long as they are travelling somewhere. Mr. Jensen travelling on the Manly ferry. Back and forth, cos only \$1—he had retired. Was able to read through all the newspaper!

Many—few: democratic decisions do not determine truth and righteousness in the kingdom. That there are only two ways is the inevitable result of the fact that the one that leads to life is exclusively by revelation.

Entrance through the gate into the narrow way of persecution begins *now*, but issues in the final rule of God at the other end of that way. The narrow gate shows that even the beginning of this path is restrictive. Here is no funnel that progressively narrows down but a decisive break. It is a narrow road now.

Entrance into the kingdom, the way to the kingdom, begins here and now in coming through the small gate, onto the narrow way to persecution, and under the authority of Jesus Christ (cf. vv. 21, 26).]

## 2. The Two Trees: Good versus Bad Fruit (7:15-20)

Jesus now addresses the situation in which greater numbers profess him than actually follow him. He describes some of them as 'false prophets', those who claim to be God's spokespersons but are not. Yet like wolves in sheep's clothing, they give all external appearances of promoting authentic Christianity in both word and work. 'Prophets' as in the OT refer to those who either foretell or forth-tell God's word. The diversity of the identifications argues that Jesus gave a warning with rather broad limits susceptible to diverse applications.

Warnings against false prophets are necessarily based on the conviction that not all prophets are true, that truth can be violated, and that the gospel's enemies usually conceal their hostility and try to pass themselves off as fellow believers. At first glance they use orthodox language, show biblical piety, and are indistinguishable from true prophets (cf. 10:41). So it is vital to know how to distinguish sheep from wolves in sheep's clothing. The implication is that the community is to have the discernment and, by whatever means, it must somehow protect itself from the wolves. Neither the damage these false prophets do nor their brand of false teaching is stated.

Does this mean the false teaching may cover a number of areas? In the light of what has just preceded (vv. 13-14) they probably neither acknowledge nor teach the narrow way to life, subject to persecution [cf. the opponents of Phil. 3:18-19 who perhaps did not want to share Christ's sufferings—always give reasons for the soft line?], and they have never really come under the authority of the king (vv. 21-23). Since the only alternative to life is destruction (vv. 13-14), they imperil their followers. \*How many Christians in the west are willing to undergo persecution?

From a distance the little blackberries on the buckthorn could be mistaken for grapes, and the flowers on certain thistles might deceive one into thinking figs were growing (v. 16). But no one would be long deceived. So with people! One's fruit, that is, all one says and does, will ultimately reveal what one is. The bad spiritual fruit is literally 'rotten' or 'worthless'.

The Semitic way of expression—both positive and negative (vv. 17-18)—makes the test certain, but not necessarily easy or quick. Living according to kingdom standards can be counterfeited for a time; but what one is will eventually reveal itself in what one does. However guarded one's words, they will finally betray a person (cf. 12:33-37; Luke 6:45). Ultimately false prophets tear down faith (2 Tim. 2:18) and promote divisiveness, bitterness (1 Tim. 6:4-5; 2 Tim. 2:23), and various kinds of ungodliness (2 Tim. 2:16). Meek discernment and understanding the dire consequences of the false prophets' teachings are needed.

Judgment for those who were masquerading as disciples leads to eternal separation from Christ. The metaphor of cutting down and burning the plant that bears no good fruit (v. 19) echoes what the Baptist said (3:10).

### 3. The Two Claims: True and False Confessions (7:21-23)

If vv. 15-20 deal with false prophets, then vv. 21-23 refer to false followers. Perhaps some became false followers because of the false prophets—that is, the one leads on to the other. The first group approaches Jesus reverently on that day, the day of judgment, and the address him as 'Lord'.

Their cry of 'Lord, Lord' suggests enthusiasm, fervency. They were really wound up, they seemed to be 'cool'. But finally it meant nothing. Jesus, himself was preparing his followers to put the deepest content in the title. For, finally, obedience not titles is decisive.

Their belief is quite orthodox. And, they have an impressive record of spiritual experience. They have prophesied in Jesus' name, they have exorcised demons in his name, and in Jesus' name they have performed many miracles. The Lord Jesus does not deny any of their claims. (He did not say these things didn't happen.) We may expect in our own day that there are *many* (7:22) people who use the right language and who have performed spiritual wonders in Jesus' name, but who are not genuine disciples. These people regard themselves to be genuine believers and expect admission into the consummated kingdom. But whether now or on the day of judgment, the false claimants will be exposed. Eventually Jesus will disown them.

The determining factor regarding who enters the kingdom is obedience to the Father's will (cf. 12:50). This is the first use of 'My Father' in Matthew and supports the truth, taught throughout the sermon, that Jesus alone claims to be the authoritative Revealer of his Father's will (v. 21).

\*20+ groups at Cheadle, esp. at house party.

Jesus addresses those he rejects by declaring, 'I never knew you'. Perhaps they fooled many on earth, but Jesus knows that they never had a saving relationship with him (= 'I never recognized you as one of my own'). A common biblical note—how close to spiritual reality one may come while knowing nothing of its fundamental reality (e.g. Balaam, Judas Iscariot; Mark 9:38-39; 1 Cor 13:2; Heb 3:14; 1 John 2:19).

V. 23 hints at just how important Jesus is. He not only decides who will enter the kingdom on the last day but also who will be banished from *his* presence ('Away from me, you evildoers' is quoted from Ps 6:8). The words here are final and eschatological in a solemn context of 'that day' and entrance into the kingdom.

#### 4. **The Two Builders: Wise and Foolish Workmen (7:24-27)**

It is not enough simply to hear Jesus' call or even to respond with some temporary flurry of good deeds. In the light of the radical choice of vv. 21-23, 'therefore' (v. 24) Jesus graphically illustrates his point with a parable. The choice can be likened to two builders and their houses. The wise person living in the Palestinian desert would erect a dwelling on a secure rock to protect the house from the flash floods that sudden storms created. The foolish person would build directly on the sand and would have no protection against the devastation of the elements. Each house looks secure in good weather. But Palestine is known for its heavy downpours of rain that can turn dry river beds into raging torrents. Only storms reveal the quality of the work of the two builders.

The wise person represents those who put Jesus' words into practice; they too are building to withstand anything. Those who pretend to have faith, who have a merely intellectual commitment, or who enjoy Jesus in small doses are foolish builders. When the storms of life come, their structures fool no one, above all they don't fool God (cf. Ezek. 13:10-16).

The greatest storm is eschatological (cf. Isa. 28:16-17; Ezek. 13:10-13; cf. Prov. 12:7). But Jesus' words about the two houses need not be thus restricted. The point is that the wise man (cf. Matt. 10:16; 24:45; 25:2, 4, 8-9) builds to withstand anything.

So too judgment day will come like a flood to disclose which spiritual structures will endure. Preliminary crises may also reveal authentic and unauthentic spirituality. In fact, often only in times of crisis can one's faith be truly proven.

#### 5. **Jesus' Authority (7:28-29)**

The crowds (probably a larger group than his disciples) who again are pressing in on him are amazed. The 'teaching' (v. 29) can refer to both content and manner and no doubt the crowds were astonished at both. But their astonishment says nothing about their heart commitment. That was 'terrific', *but . . .*) Like the person who says the sermon was 'terrific' but can't remember what it was about! Had that experience? Is this what James is talking about, viz. person who sees themselves in a mirror but then forgets what they look like.

The cause of the crowds' astonishment was Jesus' 'authority'. The term embraces power as well as authority, and the theme becomes central (cf. 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1, etc.). In his authority Jesus differs from the 'teachers of the law'—citing others, memorizing the received traditions. They spoke by the authority of others; Jesus spoke with his own authority.

The central point is this: Jesus' entire approach in the Sermon on the Mount is not only ethical but also messianic. Jesus is not an ordinary prophet who says, 'Thus says the Lord'. Rather, he speaks in the first person and claims that his teaching fulfils the OT; that he determines who enters the messianic kingdom; that as the Divine Judge he pronounces banishment; that the true heirs of the kingdom would be

persecuted for their allegiance to him; and that he alone fully knows the will of the Father.

This is why Gandhi and others who just focus on the great ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount are wrong. This sermon faces us with two other kinds of questions: (1) Who is this Jesus? (2) How will I stand on judgment day? What have I done personally with Jesus?

Study 4**JESUS' AUTHORITY AND HIS DEMANDS**—Matthew 8:18–9:17**1. Introduction: Some Current Attitudes to Jesus**

There was a time when, if a person said they were a follower of Jesus, you could assume that they were an orthodox Christian. But not any more. Current attitudes to Jesus vary greatly. Who was Jesus? 'I think Jesus is like so-and-so'. People sometimes say that they follow Jesus. But what kind of Jesus? So many don't have the right Jesus and if they have an inadequate understanding of who he is, then they cannot make a proper response.

At a popular level we have three unusual views—the reductionist approaches of Barbara Thiering, A. N. Wilson and Bishop Spong who ask the question: 'Who was Jesus?' and come up with some strange answers.

(1) Barbara Thiering's<sup>1</sup> approach in Sydney is well known, if not notorious! Among many other things, she suggests that Jesus was married (to Mary Magdalene); that he had three children, a daughter and two sons, by her; that they then divorced, and that Jesus married again.

(2) A. N. Wilson<sup>2</sup>, the novelist and prize-winning writer of biographies, claims that the real, historical Jesus has nothing to do with the Christ-figure of Christianity, the church or the eucharist. These are myth. Strip off the layers of colourful dogma and imagery, get back to the real historical Jesus . . . and what you'll find is a simple Galilean holy man who would have been horrified at what is now done in his name.

(3) John Selby Spong, Bishop of Newark in New Jersey, has been championing all sorts of way-out causes: from the ordination of practising homosexuals, the denial of the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, redefining morality to 'rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism'. His book, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* argues that the biblical stories of Jesus' birth are 'midrash', that is, fanciful stories where weren't meant to be taken literally. The notion of the literal truth of the Bible has contributed to the long-standing male dominance in the church, and forced women to fit a stereotyped set of roles and expectations, not least motherhood. The virgin birth was not literally true, since Mary was quite likely the victim of rape. Belief in the virgin birth has contributed to an artificial and destructive view of women. And Jesus was quite probably married, most likely to Mary Magdalene.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls.*

<sup>2</sup> *Against Religion* (London, 1991).

In Matthew 8-9 there are three very significant miracles. Each carefully presses the question on us, ‘Who is this person?’ These three miracles are surrounded by exacting demands for discipleship, the first group have inadequate responses, the other with true and proper responses.

## 2. The Demands of Discipleship: Inadequate Responses (8:18-22)

The cost of following Jesus. The context is of Jesus trying to escape the crowds (cf. 12:15; 14:13; 15:21) probably as he is seeking physical rest (note his deep sleep through the subsequent storm, v. 24) and spiritual refreshment (cf. Luke 6:12).

(a) *The over-eager scribe.* (8:18-20). Lack of commitment.

Jesus commands a group of individuals, most probably the Twelve, to get boats ready so as to cross to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Before he can leave, two other people express their desire to follow him.

The first man stands out because he is called a scribe (‘a teacher of the law’). The man addresses Jesus as ‘teacher’, a title given to Christ in Matthew only by those who do not fully believe in him (cf. 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36). The title is correct as far as it goes, but it is not adequate. [Illustration about Jesus as a great teacher, but don’t follow what he is teaching.] The scribe professes absolute allegiance, but Jesus realizes that the man doesn’t know what such a commitment would actually involve. He describes his itinerant ministry as even more austere than the lives of birds and foxes. Jesus did indeed have a home in Capernaum even if it was a borrowed one, but he was often not there to use it. But he has no place on which to lay his head, because his home is in heaven. He is the heavenly figure, the Son of Man.

Jesus cannot promise those who wish to ‘go on the road’ with him as many material provisions as they might prefer. Potential disciples often long for the glory associated with following Jesus and forget the deprivation that may often precede it.

At a deeper level Jesus’ disciples must recognize that no location on earth provides a true home. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), and life on earth is lived as ‘strangers [sojourners, exiles] in the world’ (1 Pet 1:1).

\*Illustrate. Michael Palmer’s application to CMS and his colleagues in ministry from the same year as College.

(b) *The lethargic would-be disciple* (8:21-22)

The second would be follower is called ‘another disciple’ (this means that the first guy was one). A loose description of someone who follows along with Jesus and shows some kind of interest in him (at this stage of proceedings things not entirely clear-cut). Again Matthew drives home the point that this man’s response is inadequate. His attitude shows he does not demonstrate sufficient commitment. If the first man was over-eager, the second guy is lethargic. Jesus has to remind the scribe that sacrifices would be necessary. He must warn this ‘disciple’ that distractions cannot be countenanced. The man is not ready to follow yet.



But isn't Jesus being a bit too hard? Didn't the man have a responsibility to make the funeral arrangements and the mandatory mourning months that followed? Yes, that is true. But the man seems to be saying a lot more. 'Let me wait until my father is dead'. The man perhaps fears that his family will object. At any rate, other priorities come before discipleship.

Jesus doesn't accept such excuses but requires an immediate response. A future opportunity may not come. Let the spiritually dead worry about the affairs of this life and ceremonies for the physically dead. Blomberg: 'Ironically, the expense of most Christian funerals continues to burden those who grieve their loved ones while lavishing care upon corpses oblivious to such affection'. Worse still, many who are alive postpone their response to the direct call of Jesus because of more pressing human allegiances. Bailey puts it: 'Loyalty to Jesus and the kingdom he inaugurates is more important than loyalty to the cultural norms of our society or parental authority'.

Don Carson observes: 'Little has done more to harm the witness of the Christian church than the practice of filling its ranks with every volunteer who is willing to make a little profession, talk fluently of experience, but display little of perseverance'.

Taken together, Jesus' responses to these two men could hardly reflect a sharper break from Judaism or a more stringent call to count the cost of discipleship (cf. Luke 14:28-32). We don't know exactly what their responses were to Jesus' words. But the passage uniformly warns against inadequate responses to Jesus' call.

Summary of inadequate responses. The cure? A right understanding of who Jesus is? Well, this is an important start.

### **3. Divine Authority over Satan's Realm (8:23-9:8)**

#### *(a) Jesus' response to disaster—stilling the storm (8:23-27)*

True disciples do model appropriate detachment from home and family, which in this case involves physical separation for a time. A sudden squall arises on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew however calls the storm a *seismos* (lit. 'an earthquake'), a term used for apocalyptic upheavals (24:7; 27:54; 28:2). \*Those in a Sydney-Hobart yacht race a few years ago when our relatives came. This was no ordinary storm; instead, it was one in which Satan was attacking. The boat is in danger of being swamped, and lives are at risk. Amazingly, Jesus remains so calm that he continues to sleep.

The disciples did go to Jesus and call on him to save them (physically). They address him as 'Lord' and apparently they believed he could do something about their dreadful predicament. Yet Jesus chides them for their 'little faith'. 'Why are you so afraid?' he says. Then Jesus 'rebukes' the elements; *ejpitimavw* is the same term used in the exorcism stories. Jesus demonstrates his power over the destructive forces of nature, which remain under the devil's sway. As with his healings, Jesus' 'cure' takes effect immediately.

Jesus has exercised the same sovereignty over wind and waves attributed to Yahweh in the OT (cf. Jonah 1-2; Pss. 104:7; 107:23-32). His power can do far more than heal sickness. The disciples wonder aloud about the identity of this man. Terror and awe are compatible with amazement. They pose the crucial question and bring the narrative to its climax. Who is Jesus? We often ask the question: ‘What storms will Jesus still in my life? What’s the cash value of this passage for me?’

But the focus is not on what Christ will do for us. Not on what storms he will still in my life. Instead, it is on who Christ is—the ‘One who has this kind of power can be no less that God himself, worthy of worship, irrespective of when and how he chooses to use that power in our lives’. Sometimes he leaves storms unstilled for good and godly ends (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-8).

(b) *Jesus’ response to demons—exorcizing the demoniac (8:28–9:1)*

Jesus and his company arrive on the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Two demon-possessed men meet him as they come out of the tombs (= burial caves). These epitomized uncleanness, an appropriate abode for the devils. The violence of these two men kept them from the rest of civilization. ‘What do you want with us?’ Like Satan at Jesus’ temptation, they acknowledge him as the Son of God and recognize their eventual doom, but they nevertheless use his name in an attempt to ward him off. They are not concerned to confess Jesus’ identity but are trying to use his name to exorcize him. When they fail Jesus casts them out. To the demons Jesus’ arrival seems premature; Judgment Day has not come.

When the demons recognize that Jesus will cast them out but will delay their total destruction, they request a new home. Swine, like tombs, defiled Jews but gave appropriate refuge to evil spirits. Jesus agrees to the demons’ request. They continue their destructive activity by throwing the swine off the rocky cliffs on the eastern shores of Galilee. The whole herd of pigs perished, which apparently surprises neither Jesus nor the demons. Jesus permits the demons to continue to live, but they may no longer torment these two men. The destruction of the herd convinces the men of the reality of their liberation.

Blomberg says: ‘Readers concerned about the destruction of animal life and the loss of the farmers’ livelihood exhibit a contemporary sentimentality not shared by a Jewish audience who knew these pig farmers should not have been raising animals whose meat was forbidden to eat. [Beare notes that a typical Jewish audience would not have seen this as a calamity but as an occasion for merriment]. Human sanity and salvation, moreover, must always take priority over financial prosperity’.

The farmers naturally spread the word around as to what has happened and like the nearby townsfolk they are distressed. Jesus should have been welcomed, but the Gadarenes dwell only on the loss of their pigs and fear the power that could vanquish Satan so dramatically.

The question who is Jesus? A man with Jesus’ power must be divine and holy, but sinful humans recoil in the presence of holiness because it points out their own shortcomings all the more glaringly.

(c) *Jesus’ response to disease—healing the paralyzed man (9:2-8)*

Jesus once more encounters a paralyzed man (4:24; 8:6). He is brought on a stretcher like cot by a group of friends. ‘Their faith’ is shown in their bringing the man to Jesus. Surprisingly the Lord Jesus refers not to the man’s physical condition but to his spiritual state, and he takes the initiative to declare the man’s sins forgiven without any prompting from the sick man himself.

The scribes mutter among themselves. Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness is a blasphemous usurping of God’s authority (Isa. 43:25). Only God can forgive sins. But Jesus recognizes their objections and simply stresses that they come from evil hearts. Their inner disposition is rebellion against the will of God. To justify his behaviour and prove his authority Jesus commands the paralyzed man to walk and carry his mat back home. The man does this and Jesus’ claim is vindicated. The crowd is afraid, probably combining terror with awe, and glorifies God who had given such authority to men.

Again the fundamental question about Jesus is asked. Who is this person? He exercised the Lord’s authority over wind and waves. He demonstrated his authority over Satan’s servants, and now he displays the very authority of God to forgive sins. Who is he?

This is a very different picture presented in these chapters of Matthew from the presentations of Barbara Thiering, Bishop Spong and A. N. Wilson.

#### 4. **The Demands of Discipleship: Right Responses (9:9-17)**

This group of three miracles should have made plain who Jesus is. So it is possible now to return again to a call for discipleship in the hope of more adequate responses than we had seen before. If a person has a right understanding of Jesus, then this is a good start for making a right response. This is what happens in the call of Levi and the little parables of vv. 14-17. Each of these presents a proper response to Jesus over against criticism from the Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist.

##### *(a) Matthew becomes a disciple (9:9-13)*

Jesus heads for the toll booths on the outskirts of Capernaum. He calls Matthew in words that echo 4:19, 21 and 8:22: ‘Follow me’. Matthew responds as immediately as did Andrew, James, Peter and John. The appropriate response in the light of the burning question: Who is Jesus? But note there is opposition: Jesus fraternizes with the disreputable. This remains a scandal in the predominantly middle class, suburban, Western church.

Has our response been like this—whole-hearted, eager and immediate? Or has it started this way, and then lapsed?

##### *(b) Joyful discipleship in the kingdom (9:14-17)*

The other side to the objection to Jesus’ partying is that he does not fast. John’s disciples pose the question, apparently siding with the Pharisees. Preparation for the Messiah’s coming required repentance and a certain austerity, but now the time for joy has arrived. Neither the Pharisees nor John’s disciples were wrong in

fasting as a prelude to the reception of spiritual blessings. But now those blessings are present. Jesus has come. He has inaugurated the kingdom and this stimulates celebration and rejoicing, as at wedding festivities.

The new age that Jesus inaugurates brings new practices appropriate to changed circumstances. This should lead to the joy of celebration rather than the sorrow of fasting.

(c) *True discipleship today?*

Joyful response to Jesus and his kingdom. Serving the Lord Jesus is joyful. We live in the same period of the new age. There can be

1. Inadequate responses. But we need to
2. Face the crucial question: Who is Jesus? Getting our answer from the Bible.
3. The right response to this Jesus.

## Study 5

### JESUS' UNIQUENESS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

#### *The Rest that Christ can Provide*

—Matthew 11:25-30

#### **Introduction**

I am sure we are all aware of the increasing influence of multiculturalism and pluralism within our society, that growing diversity in Western culture. It affects how we think about ourselves, and it offers both opportunities for and dangers to our evangelistic outreach.

(1) What do we mean when we talk about 'pluralism'? We refer to a growing diversity of race, heritage, religion and sets of values found not only in Australia, but also in other western countries. This is often what we mean by the term 'pluralism'. Recently there was a series of articles in the SMH on different religions within our country.

(2) But the term can also refer to the value of toleration within this diversity. When we speak of a pluralistic society, we are saying not simply that it is amazingly diverse, but also that it is tolerant of this diversity, or at least it should be. Our politicians are at pains to get people throughout the country to accept this kind of pluralism, this toleration. And in one sense evangelicals agree with this.

(3) Pluralism, however, is also used in a third sense. This time it refers to a philosophical stance in which tolerance is required or mandated. In the religious sphere philosophical pluralism asserts that no religion has the right to pronounce itself true and others false. The only absolute creed is this creed of pluralism itself—that tolerance is absolute.

Furthermore, it is not only philosophers and theologians who defend this form of pluralism; it is very common in the thinking of ordinary people. To the popular mind open-mindedness is no longer the willingness to consider alternative views, with the aim of coming to a knowledge of the truth; rather, it is a dogmatic relativizing of all views. In other words, all views are equally valid. No single position or opinion has a special claim to being true. But those who extol the virtues of being open-minded have not been truly open. They have shut out that open-mindedness/tolerance which desires to come to a knowledge of the truth. [Previously tolerance of people, now tolerance of ideas.]

So the proclamation of the gospel, teaching about the uniqueness of Christ, his death and resurrection, all come under the ban of this philosophical pluralism. Our culture is running against us.

In a way, there is nothing new about this situation. It is vital for us to remember that the challenges of pluralism are not new. In pre-exilic times, Israel not only confronted the diversity of deities in the nations that surrounded her but also repeatedly wrestled with the same goings-on in her own ranks. The pathetic decline

during the period of the judges testified to the attractiveness of the surrounding religious claims, while the ups and downs of the monarchy in Israel, both north and south, was in part due to the enticements of pluralism.

It is against this backdrop that I want to turn to Jesus' astonishing claim and his magnificent offer of Matthew 11:25-30. Read the verses. Jesus is claiming to be the only one who can satisfy the deepest needs of men and women.

## 1. **Jesus' Invitation: Presented in the Context of Opposition** (11:1-24)

In the preceding paragraphs of Matthew 11 together with the subsequent chapter 12, opposition to Jesus has begun to mount.

### (a) *Doubts and questions from a follower* (11:2-15)

John the Baptist is having difficulty hanging on. Here is a disciple who is under enormous pressure, and doubts or at least questions (vv. 2-15).

### (b) *Negative reactions to Jesus from the crowds* (11:16-19)

The crowds (= Israel), not just the leadership, are critical of Jesus. They react negatively to him because of his indulgence. Yes, he truly is the friend of tax collectors and sinners, but the crowds accuse him of participating in the sins of tax collectors; he is a glutton and a drunkard. Jesus rebukes them for their wrong responses to John and himself.

### (c) *Rejection by cities which witnessed Jesus' miracles* (11:20-24)

But the most serious rejection comes from those cities in Israel where many of Jesus' miracles took place. He performed signs and wonders in Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, and yet those who witnessed these miracles did not repent. In fact, so immediate, dramatic and straightforward was Jesus' revelation and ministry in these cities, so privileged were they in having him in their midst acting in this way, that their rejection was inexcusable. It was to lead to the severest judgment. Jesus pronounced dreadful 'woes' on these unrepentant cities. In the Old Testament Tyre and Sidon were models of hatred against Israel. Sodom was the epitome of wickedness in the land of Canaan. Yet Jesus says that if these three Old Testament cities had received the kind of revelation that was given to Capernaum, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Although it is hard to imagine, Jesus said it will be more tolerable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for Capernaum.

So Jesus' offer is made in the context of increasing antagonism. His invitation is made over against many other claims for people's allegiance. In the past I have thought that Jesus' invitation to the weary to come to him (vv. 28-30) was made to groups of people who were open, who had no other pressures or choices. I have tended to think that people were simply a blank sheet of paper, and they were just waiting to lap up Jesus' offer. But this is not the case. There were lots of other claims on people's lives, there was increasing opposition to Jesus. There was a pluralism of sorts.

We need to take this kind of opposition into account, and be encouraged in our evangelism, particularly when things are on the slide. We tend to get depressed if things aren't going well. Numbers are falling, church attendance and church life are not what they should be. Indian context of 2.4% make a difference to one's approach, attitudes. Anything is an advance.

This increasingly polarized response to Jesus in fact forms part of God's eternal plan (vv. 25-26). 'These things' (v. 25) refer to the overall significance of Jesus' mission, and they have been hidden by God from the 'wise and understanding', that is, from the self-sufficient in Israel, and those who thought themselves to be truly wise.

## 2. **Jesus' Invitation: From One in a Unique Relationship with the Father (11:25-27)**

### (a) *The close intimate relationship between Father and Son.*

In this remarkable passage it is clear that there is a close, intimate and reciprocal relationship between Father and Son. It is unique. No one knows the Son except the Father. And no one knows the Father except the Son.

### (b) *All authority has been committed to Jesus.*

In the context of this reciprocal knowledge of Son and Father Jesus makes a profound claim. He has all authority. 'All things' have been committed to him by the Father. The only way that one can know the Father is by the Son revealing him. And that revelation by the Son is perfectly reliable because of who Jesus is and because of his knowledge of the Father.

### (c) *Jesus' claims and invitation stand over against all other contenders.*

Jesus claims to be unique because of his special relationship to the Father. He stands over against all other contenders. Over against any kind of syncretism. Hinduism, New Age religion. Because of Jesus' unique relationship to the Father he stands over against Islam.

This unique claim, namely, that one can know the Father only through the Son, stands over against philosophical pluralism, whether ancient or modern. Assess its significance. It is marked by intolerance, an intolerance that is no better, in fact it is worse, than the intolerance it condemns in Christians.

## 3. **Jesus' Invitation: A Call to Discipleship (11:28-30)**

### (a) *Jesus' open invitation.*

Because Jesus is God's unique agent in his plan to save men and women, because of his close relationship to the Father, then he is able to make such a fantastic offer. He has the Father's authority to call men and women to himself (vv. 28-30). So he appeals for a response to his revelation. He gives an open invitation. IQ 000!

(b) *Addressed to the weary and burdened, not the wise and learned.*

All may come, at least all who hurt and who recognize their spiritual need. The ‘wise and learned’ (v. 25) reject his call. They are wise in their own eyes, they do not acknowledge their need and thus show that they were not chosen. Jesus invites ‘the weary and burdened’ (v. 28). The ‘weary’ (the participle *kopiw'nte*) are those who have become worn out through heavy struggling and toil, and the ‘burdened’ (*pefortismevnoi*—the passive side of weariness) are those overloaded like beasts of burden. The burdens may include anything. But especially in view are the ‘heavy loads’ which the Pharisees (and others in Judaism) put on people’s shoulders. All man-centred religion leads to burdens and heavy loads. Burdens of Islam.

(c) *His offer is a yoke! The yoke of discipleship.*

This doesn’t sound like decent offer. The ‘yoke’ put on animals for pulling heavy loads, is a metaphor for the discipline of discipleship. Jesus is not offering the yoke of the law. But nor is he offering freedom from all restraints. It is Jesus’ yoke, and therefore it is discipleship to him.

As one writer has put it: ‘The Son reveals the Father, not to gratify learned curiosity or to reinforce the self-sufficiency of the arrogant, but to bring ‘the little children’ (v. 25) to know the Father (v. 27) and to introduce the ‘weary’ to ‘rest’, that is, the rest which begins now and lasts until eternity (v. 28).

(d) *The character of the One giving the invitation.*

The marvellous feature of this open invitation is that out of his overwhelming authority (v. 27) Jesus encourages the burdened to come to him because he is ‘gentle and humble in heart’. In Matthew’s Gospel there is a stress on Jesus’ gentleness (18:1-10; 19:13-15). This echoes the language of the Messianic servant (Isa 42:2-3; 53:1-2; cf. Zech 9:9, cited in Matt. 21:5) that turns up in 12:15-21. Authoritative revealer that he is, Jesus approaches us with a true servant’s gentleness. He who is the Lord of glory is also gentle and humble.

(e) *It is the rest of God himself.*

And the rest he provides is the Messianic rest. Ultimately, it is the rest of God himself which is available here and now, and right on into eternity.

1. We received this offer when we first accepted his yoke upon us.
2. We probably need to be reminded of the *wonder* of this offer and to be encouraged by it.
3. As believers we need to turn to the Lord Jesus and participate more fully in the rest that he has provided.

Over against pluralism? Jesus is claiming to be the only one, the only alternative who can satisfy the deepest needs of men and women.

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