

## **Study Guide 2: Matthew 3-7**

### **The Beginning of Jesus's Public Ministry**

Following the Infancy Narratives, Matthew moves forward in time, in chapters 3 and 4, to the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. Matthew's narrative tells us of the message of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation of Jesus by the devil, and the call of the first disciples.

These events are all related to Old Testament texts which Matthew continues to use to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah. John the Baptist is identified as the expected forerunner of the Messiah (Is 40:3), calling his audience to repentance and a baptism of water in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven that the Messiah will initiate.

Jesus is baptized to "fulfill all righteousness." "Fulfill" in this context, means to complete or to bring to completion. In biblical thought, **God's** "righteousness" is his saving activity of behalf of his people. Jesus is the bearer of this salvation and models **human** "righteousness" which is the effort we make in response to God by carrying out His will.

The temptation in the desert is Satan's attempt to influence Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Satan tempts Jesus to initiate a Kingdom based on worldly standards of material wealth, power, and celebrity. Matthew's readers will remember how Moses and the Israelites were tested and tempted during their wanderings in the desert. They failed because they did not trust God. Jesus triumphs by being faithful to God's laws. His three answers to Satan are from the Mosaic book of Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Dt. 8:3) "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." (Dt. 6:16) "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." (Dt. 6:13)

Finally, we see Jesus beginning his ministry in Galilee, an area 80 miles north of Jerusalem, Judaism's center. It was not an area highly regarded by the Jewish establishment. Galilee was also home to Gentiles as well as Jews. For Matthew this is again the fulfillment of prophecy in the offer of God's salvation: Out of Galilee will come "the light" to all people sitting "in darkness." (Is 8:23)

In Chapters 5 - 7, we encounter the first of Matthew's five great dialogues. Dialogues are a distinctive feature of Matthew. He uses the form to capture and present the oral teaching of Jesus teaching in a way that highlights the significance of Jesus and the relevance of that message to his community. This is in line with the church teaching about the gospels we spoke of earlier. The evangelists "explained with an eye to the situation of the churches."

The first dialog is the Sermon on the Mount. In it Matthew introduces the reader to Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of God. Matthew uses the expression, Kingdom of Heaven, to avoid the use of the Divine Name, a common Jewish practice. This is unfortunate because it gives some (modern) readers the impression that Jesus is talking about how things are in a future *place*, Heaven. But Jesus is telling us about a way of

*being*, right now, that anticipates the consummation of God's divine plan in the future. We will learn more about the Kingdom of God as we work our way through the Gospel.

Matthew also intensifies his comparison of Moses and Jesus. In the book of Exodus, Moses brings the Israelites to Mt. Sinai where they receive the Ten Commandments directly from God along with a series of Covenant laws that God confides to the people through Moses. (See Exodus Ch. 19-24.) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives the people the Beatitudes, a new, equally basic statement of attitudes and behaviors that define the Kingdom of God. Each beatitude begins, "Blessed are they." These attitudes or behaviors result in the blessing, joy and happiness of being in line with God's will. This is also similar to Moses' speech to the Israelites in Deuteronomy, Chapters 28 and 29, as part of Israel's entrance into the Promised Land: Following God's law will bring them blessing, turning away from God brings disaster.

The first four beatitudes indicate the promise that the Messiah will bring blessing to the afflicted: "the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted," etc. (See Is. 61:1-4.) Matthew presents a deeper understanding of Jesus' teaching ("Blessed are the poor *in spirit*." ) than Luke does ("Blessed are you who are poor"). Being poor does not *necessarily* bring blessing. The characteristic of being entirely dependent on someone outside oneself *can* bring blessing when that someone else is God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*." The "afflicted" suffer because of their devotion to God, a devotion that has changed them.

The change of heart is indicated by the second set of four beatitudes which involve mercy, purity, peacemaking and a willingness to endure suffering in the pursuit of righteousness.

Jesus then goes on to explain the greater meaning behind the Mosaic Law. He prohibits not just killing but anger, not just adultery but lust. Jesus does not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus, through his death and resurrection has brought salvation. He also brings teaching that "fulfills" or makes the intention of the law complete.

Moses, then as now, is the greatest figure in Judaism - law giver, prophet, priest, and leader. Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, who goes beyond Moses. When Jesus comments on the Law, given by God through Moses, he says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Jesus speaks with the authority, not of a mediator, but with the direct authority of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us about prayer, fasting, charity, complete dependence on God, and "the Golden Rule" of how to treat others. Chapters 5 - 7 teach us how we are to live if our lives are ruled by God. This is a key part of the "proclamation of good news" that is the Gospel.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is John the Baptist a prophet like the classical prophets of Israel and Judah?
2. What is the meaning of baptism as practiced by John? Compare that to the meaning of our baptism. (See the Catechism on Baptism.)
3. Compare Jesus and Moses. What characteristics or roles do they have in common?
4. What are the Beatitudes – laws, guidelines, suggestions, idealistic behaviors, etc.? What is their relevance to us today?
6. What does Jesus teach us about the Mosaic Law?

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