

## Study Guide 3: Matthew 8-13

### Miracles, Discipleship, Reaction, Parable Discourse

**Chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew** describe Jesus's actions immediately following the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew collects and organizes what we often speak of as the miracle stories of Jesus.

Many in our scientific age dismiss miracles as impossible and the stories that relate them as entirely fabricated by the author ("myths"). But such a viewpoint is an ideological bias and not a scientifically based conclusion. Miracles were a significant part of the oral tradition that described the *public* ministry of Jesus. These acts had many witnesses and were not denied even by the enemies of Jesus.

We commonly refer to these deeds as *miracles* because that was the word used in the King James Bible translation. *Miracle* suggests a wonder or marvel that just happens, like a magic trick or illusion. This is unfortunate because the Evangelists describe these acts as "*deeds of power*." The basic Greek word used is *dynamis*, which is the source of our English word "*dynamite*." Modern English translations have adopted this change, but the older term, *miracle*, is still fixed in people's minds.

These deeds of power are the *Gospel expressed in deeds*. God's power is used to heal the sick, to drive out demons, and to bring comfort to the afflicted. This is healing that makes a person whole: in body, mind, and spirit. This is the tangible "good news" of messianic expectations.

The miracles demonstrate the power and authority of Jesus. Most Jews expected the Messiah to be politically powerful, to drive out oppressors and to establish a Jewish kingdom like David's. But in the Kingdom of God, which Jesus as Messiah initiates, power is used for healing, as a sign of God's compassion. In Matthew, we see people *coming* to Jesus to be cured. Those sick or afflicted *know* who he is. They address him as Lord, Son of God, and Son of David. They have faith in his power to heal whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

These powerful deeds play a significant role in Matthew's Gospel. They are a way of revealing who Jesus is by how he acts. But the "miracles" have a deeper meaning. Jesus connects them with his power and authority to forgive sins. Matthew 8:17 quotes a passage from Isaiah that explains his actions and anticipates Jesus' death on the cross: "He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases." Matthew is alluding to sin as the ultimate infirmity. It separates us from God. Jesus has power over everything that separates us from the love of God. This is the deeper meaning of the miracles and perhaps this is why Jesus did not want to put too much emphasis on physical healings.

Jesus's mighty acts of power signaled the initiation of the Kingdom or Rule of God. The Mission of the Twelve, presented in **Chapter 10**, continues that process. Jesus names the 12 disciples that he has empowered to heal and cleanse and sends them out on their first mission. The disciples are specifically sent to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Israel was the obvious place to start. God chose the Jews and prepared them through the prophets and the Scriptures. They are best positioned to understand, to accept Jesus, and

to become disciples and apostles themselves. The mission to the Gentiles will come in the near future.

Discipleship is demanding. Nothing is more important or more powerful than the Kingdom of God. Not family, not wealth, not anything of this world.

Discipleship is powerful. For those who have faith in him, Jesus gives the power and authority to perform the mighty works that he did.

Discipleship is dangerous. Jesus claims nothing less than to be acting with the power and authority of God. This claim will be resisted by the power of this world just as Jesus was tempted by the power of this world. It is a reality of Matthew's community that disciples will suffer as the Master suffered. It is a reality that continues today.

But the followers of Jesus are to be courageous under persecution. Believing in Jesus is the key: "Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father," and "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." (Matt 10:32, 40)

Matthew highlights the teaching about discipleship because it addresses the needs and experiences of his community. Differing responses to Jesus caused division in some extended Jewish families. Some family members became Christians, some remained Jews. Jewish survivors of the recent war with Rome saw Christianity as another threat to their existence and were hostile to the community of Christians.

In **Chapters 11 & 12**, Matthew presents reactions to the ministry of Jesus. The introductory question is asked by John the Baptist who has been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee:

"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Matthew has already made it very clear who Jesus is: Jesus' family tree shows he is the Son of David. Jesus is the fulfillment of scriptural Messianic promises. Jesus teaches with an authority greater than Moses and performs mighty acts that can only be done through the power of God.

Jesus's answer to John (Matt 11:4-5) is a short summary of why he should be recognized. It also comes with a warning: "And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (Matt 11:6).

We know that Jesus' earthly ministry will end on the cross. Chapter 12 begins to chronicle the opposition to that ministry by various segments of the Jewish people. Let me introduce you to the cast of characters with whom Jesus interacted. This will help to explain their behavior and their response to Jesus.

The religious groups at the time of Jesus included:

The ***Jewish Common People***, the "crowds," are the "chosen people" looking for help from God and direction from their faith. They are the target audience for various religious groups which sought to provide them with leadership and direction. Exploited and suffering under Roman rule, the common people wait for the Messiah to relieve their suffering permanently. Their primary location is Judea but they are also found mixed with Gentiles in Galilee, Syria, and Egypt and beyond.

The *Sadducees* were the leaders of institutional Judaism. This group of Jewish aristocrats located in and around Jerusalem, sought to control the Temple, its priesthood and Jewish religious life in general. They cooperated with the Roman ruling authority to increase their influence. The Sadducees recognized only the written Mosaic Law (not oral tradition) and rejected belief in resurrection. They were the most conservative Jewish group and were the most severe in their legal judgments.

The *Pharisees* and *Scribes* were religious guides at the local level. They were not priests and their influence was in the synagogue rather than the Temple. Their influence tended to be outside Jerusalem (e.g., Galilee) and they had more connection with the common people. They interpreted the demands of the Mosaic Law recognizing both written and oral law, believed in the resurrection of the body and in angels. They were much less conservative and more merciful in their legal judgments than the Sadducees.

The *Essenes* represented a separatist Jewish alternative. They believed that the Sadducees had corrupted the Temple and also differed with the Pharisees' interpretation of the Law. The Essenes withdrew from public life and established separate communities of believers where they waited for the Messiah and his judgment. The Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea scrolls was an Essene community.

The *Zealots* were grassroots religious extremists. They were intensely "zealous" for the Mosaic Law, believed in its strict observation and kept themselves separate from Gentiles. Some used violence to encourage this separation especially against the occupying Romans. Their effort led to the Jewish War with Rome which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

What can we say about the interaction of these groups with Jesus? Some of the *common people* were open to the good news of the Kingdom of God but many expected a political or military Messiah. Jesus came into conflict with the *Pharisees'* understanding of the Law, (e.g., the Sabbath controversy), and with the *Sadducees'* Temple practices. Jesus's non-violent message was a disappointment to *Zealots*.

The Gospel of Matthew was written after the devastating Jewish War of 70 AD. For Matthew's audience (in Antioch) Judaism had changed dramatically. The Temple was destroyed and the countryside ravaged. The *Sadducees* disappeared; the *Essenes* and *Zealots* were annihilated. Judaism assumed a new form guided by Rabbis whose interpretation of the Mosaic Law was similar to the practice of the *Pharisees*. Worship was centered in the local synagogue and the home. In this environment, hostility developed between *Rabbinic Judaism* and the followers of Jesus, who were seen as a separate sect.

In **Chapter 13**, Matthew presents a collection of parables used by Jesus.

What is a Parable? The Greek word *parabolē* literally means "two things placed side by side for comparison." It is the name of a type of story that is generally in the form of a *developed simile*: "The kingdom of heaven is like..." It is used to present a theological idea in terms of everyday experience. It is often a novel or paradoxical comparison which causes the listener to think.

A parable can assume a number of forms including: *metaphor*, “You *are* the salt of the earth”; *allegory* - a highly developed series of metaphors in which every detail has a meaning; a *proverb*; or a *riddle*.

After an introductory parable, the Disciples ask Jesus an important question: “Why do you speak to them (the crowds) in parables?” (Matt 13:10) Jesus’s answer to their question teaches us about his use of parables and their effectiveness. Parables communicate “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (that which we cannot know on our own) in terms of everyday experiences that we can understand. But only those who are receptive to Jesus and his message are able to make that connection. Understanding is not “given” to those whose hearts are hardened or closed to Jesus. But for those, like the Disciples, who have Faith, whose hearts are open, “more” will be given - in this case a greater understanding.

This is the major point of the first parable presented, the parable of the sower.

The sower broadcasts seed. Some of it falls on the hard path, some on shallow soil, some in thorns, and some in good soil. Jesus explains the meaning of the parable to his disciples.

The “seed” is the Word of the Kingdom, it is revelation. It is “broadcast” – available to everyone. The “seed” does not grow on hard ground or among thorns; it needs “good soil” to “grow” just as the “Word” needs “a receptive heart” to be “understood.” Our hearts cannot be hardened or set on other things. A “seed” that “grows” produces a rich “harvest” just as the “Word”, “accepted”, results in acts of love.

Getting back to the question of the disciples: Why does Jesus use Parables? Matthew 13:35 provides a summary answer:

“I will open my mouth in parables. I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation (of the world).”

Jesus uses parables to explain the mystery of the Kingdom of God to those whose hearts are open to him.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What is my understanding of the miracles of Jesus? Do I base my understanding on faith, reason, or a combination of both? How would I explain miracles to others?
2. Thinking of ourselves as disciples of Christ, in what ways does discipleship today embody the same challenges as in the time of Jesus? In what ways are the challenges different? In what ways does the “New Evangelization” address these issues?
3. Compare the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Do you view one group more favorably than the other?
4. In what ways are the parables surprising or shocking?