

Study Guide 5: Matthew 19-25

Jerusalem and Controversy

Matthew's Fifth Narrative, Chapters 19-23

Part 1: Teaching on the Way to Jerusalem, Matthew 19 - 20

The journey to Jerusalem continues the ministry of Jesus and provides the opportunity to continue the teaching of the disciples. In chapter 19 Matthew presents Jesus teaching on marriage and divorce, the blessing of the children and Jesus's encounter with the "rich young man."

In the story of the rich young man when Jesus says, "If you wish to be *perfect*", the word used for *perfect* is the Greek word *teleios*. It means, "having reached its *end (telos)*, being finished, complete, or whole." Being perfect, in this sense, is being *completely* responsive to God's will. The young man's attachment to wealth and possessions is the barrier that stands between him and God. Jesus's advice is the solution to his problem. Matthew here and elsewhere presents discipleship as being radical and demanding.

Jesus presents wealth as a general problem for the rich which anchors them in the kingdom of this world. With respect to their entering the Kingdom of God, Jesus says that, "it is easier for a camel to pass through the *eye of a needle*." This is taken by the disciples as being impossible. They are reminded that, "with God all things are possible."

In chapter 20, Matthew relates Jesus's parable of The Workers in the Vineyard, his third prediction of his passion, the request of James and John for special privileges and the Healing of Two Blind Men.

The parable of the vineyard workers stands out because it shocks our sense of fairness. It is a good example of how the values of the Kingdom of God differ from our values. For Matthew's audience it is a reassurance that Gentile Christians will be just as valued as the original Jewish audience that Jesus taught.

And while the request of James and John annoyed the other disciples, it provided Jesus with the opportunity to teach his disciples the attitudes required of them.

Part 2: Jerusalem and Controversy, Matthew 21 - 23

We begin chapter 21 with Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem. This is the account we read at Mass on Palm Sunday. There is significant symbolism in the story which would have been readily understood by Matthew's readers. Jesus rode in on a donkey, a humble animal associated with the Messiah who brings peace (see Zechariah 9:9-10). He did not ride in on a horse, which, at that time, was primarily an animal used for military purposes. The early Hebrew princes rode donkeys while the later corrupt kings of Israel and Judah rode in chariots drawn by horses.

Jesus entered Jerusalem via the Mount of Olives, a place traditionally associated with the coming of the Messiah (see Zechariah 14:4). He entered the Temple area by the gate in the eastern wall of the Temple Mount called the Golden Gate. Jews believed the Messiah would enter by this gate.

Jesus's arrival is immediately followed by a decisive act of authority: the Cleansing of the Temple. This directly challenged the Sadducees (who controlled the Temple) and troubled the Romans (who controlled Jerusalem). This act most probably triggered the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus.

Authority was the chief issue between Jesus and his opponents and we are presented with an episode in which the Chief Priests and elders (Sadducees & Pharisees) challenge Jesus to reveal the source of his authority. It is a trick question which Jesus deftly handles (Mt 21:24-27). His authority has already been demonstrated by his deeds of power. The real issue, failure of the religious authorities to do the father's will, is presented by Jesus in two parables, the parable of the Two Sons and the parable of the Tenants. Here again Matthew weaves the actions of Jesus with his teaching. This helps Matthew's readers understand the significance of what is happening.

In chapter 22 Jesus uses a parable about a wedding feast to help us understand what the kingdom of God requires of us. After answering a trick question about paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus explains the nature of the Resurrection to the Sadducees who, unlike the Pharisees, reject the concept. When challenged to identify which commandment of the law is greatest, Jesus responds with a profound summary of the law, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Finally, Jesus asks the Pharisees a question. Whose son is the Messiah? They respond with the commonly held opinion that the Messiah is a son of David. Jesus then provides the insight that the Messiah is not only David's son but has an authority greater than David (one who David must call "Lord"). This is the authority that Jesus has demonstrated throughout his ministry, and that we have seen acknowledged by his disciples. It is now explicitly indicated to his opponents.

At this point the challenging questions cease and Matthew presents the teaching of Jesus in the next three chapters. In Matthew 23:1 – 24:2 Jesus addresses the disciples denouncing the actions of the Scribes and Pharisees. While they are recognized as the leaders and teachers of the Jews, they fail to observe what God has required of them. They are neither just nor compassionate. They burden the common person while exhibiting false piety and arrogant pride. Their behavior is to be avoided by the disciples who are instructed to humbly practice what they have been taught.

Jesus continues his criticism with a series of "woes" directed at the Scribes and Pharisees. These condemnations are similar to those aimed at Jewish leaders of the past by the Old Testament prophets. In another foreshadowing of his own fate, Jesus recognizes that this criticism was not well received in the past: "Jerusalem" killed the prophets sent to correct the behavior of its leaders. The teaching ends with a lament that the rejection of Jesus will bring judgment on Jerusalem in the form of the destruction of the city and the Temple.

The "Eschatological" Discourse, Matthew 24 - 25

The teaching of Jesus continues in the 5th and final discourse presented by Matthew. It is called the "Eschatological" discourse because it deals with the future new age (in Greek, the "*eschaton*") and the coming of the Son of Man in glory. The setting is the Mount of

Olives, the place associated in Jewish tradition with the coming of the Messiah and the end of the world. The disciples ask Jesus, “Tell us, when will this (the destruction of the Temple that Jesus was just talking about) happen, and what sign will there be of your coming, and of the end of the age?” Jesus’s answer in this two chapter discourse mixes both current events and future events. Matthew’s audience is in between. They have witnessed the destruction of Temple during the Jewish War with Rome (70 AD) but await the future Day of Judgment, the 2nd Coming of Christ.

Jesus begins with the calamities and the tribulations that signal the end of the current age and the beginning of the new age. He then talks about the “the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” The disciples, of course, understand that Jesus is talking about himself.

Jesus assures his disciples of the certainty of his coming in glory. But Jesus also warns them that “the Father alone” knows when this will happen, so it is absolutely imperative for them to be prepared by living as he has taught them. This is illustrated by the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful servants, the parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Talents.

Finally, Jesus describes the final judgment of the Nations. This will not happen until the Gospel has been preached to all nations (see Matt 24:14) and so everyone will be judged by their response to the Gospel and on their acts of kindness & mercy.

Questions for reflection:

1. In the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, do you think that the laborers were all treated fairly? What positive message about the Kingdom of God can you take away from it? (Mt. 20:1-16)
2. The cursing of the fig tree is taken as an example of the power of faith. Can you think of any other meaning associated with a fruitless tree? (Mt. 21:18-22)
3. Does the punishment of the servant who buried his talent fit the crime? Why is accepting responsibility for one’s actions so difficult? (Mt. 25:14-30)
4. In what ways are the practices of the Scribes and Pharisees at odds with the Kingdom of God?
5. What meanings are associated with “the coming of the Son of Man in Glory”?