

LENT 2023

FACILITATOR GUIDE



LENT

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The story of Jesus in Matthew is centrally a story about the work of God. God is fulfilling his covenant promises, like the ones we learned about in the Old Testament last fall. And God is fulfilling these promises in and through Jesus the Messiah. This is what Jesus means when he begins his ministry announcing, "the Kingdom of Heaven is now at hand."

Matthew's story of Jesus' life is the story of that announcement coming true. Jesus not only announces the coming of God's Kingdom, but he teaches us to understand it (because we often misunderstand it!), and he teaches us how to live in it.

Our Oasis vision at UALC includes the conviction that we are an oasis community, "a family of brothers and sisters in Christ learning life together in the way of Jesus by the power of the Spirit." We are a learning community, and Jesus is our teacher.

In addition to these small group discussions, we encourage your group to join us in our Daily Worship devotions, reflecting on a different passage throughout the week that correlate and texturize the theme of our Sunday passage. You can find our Daily Worship devotions at ualc.org/dailyworship.

HOW TO USE THE FACILITATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help you guide your group through a Bible-based discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions in an open conversation (remembering to practice good listening and encourage dialogue), and close with a time of prayer with each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie these passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

There are typically more questions that your group will get through. This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at dkidd@ualc.org.
For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit ualc.org/smallgroups

Special thanks to our authors: Katie Borden, Becki Bork, Brian Chandler, and Elaine Pierce.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

MATTHEW 12:15-21

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 1

This week we begin a second half of our series covering the book of Matthew, with a particular Lenten focus, as the story of Jesus moves towards the cross and his resurrection. A large portion of today's passage is Matthew's quotation from Isaiah 42:1-4. It seems clear that Matthew believes and is proclaiming that Jesus is the subject "servant" in Isaiah 42; Christ fulfilling the role of the just King who will bring about shalom justice not in the ordinary ways of empires—returning violence for violence and oppression for oppression—but in a gentle, humble, and sacrificial manner; displaying the character of the God of love and peace.

Note that v.15 begins as a response to v.14, *"But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."* This is important context to the passage, and is one of the principle ways that Matthew views Jesus as the servant described in Isaiah 42; Jesus choosing to retreat away from public attention and the antagonism of the Pharisees. Hence fulfilling 42:2, *"He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets."*

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week we will continue reading through the Gospel of Matthew together, with a particular focus in this Lenten season on his marked course to the cross and to resurrection.

In today's passage, we see again how Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the anointed one (*messiah*), who fulfills the promises of God and grants justice and shalom peacefulness. A major portion of our passage is a quotation from Isaiah 42. Matthew is proclaiming Jesus to be God's servant described by Isaiah, one who will bring justice to all the nations of the world.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Share with the group a time when you received excellent service; a truly 5-star experience.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Father, we thank you for Jesus. Thank you that became human to be God with us. We pray that you would meet us in word and our discussion today; that we would see and know Jesus more clearly, so that we may love you more and experience your remarkable peace. Amen*

SCRIPTURE:

Our focus today is on Matthew 12:15-21, but v.14 gives crucial context for the passage.

- Facilitator, you may want to read v.14 yourself for the group to emphasize it.

Have someone read Matthew 12:14-21. Remember to thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

Our passage begins with Jesus knowing that the Pharisees were plotting to kill him. His response was to retreat away “from that place.” As it happens, a crowd follows him, and he continues his Kingdom work of healing the sick.

- If you were a disciple following Jesus at the time, how would you feel about learning about the Pharisees plots to kill him? Would you expect Jesus to continue his healing ministry for the crowds?
 - Receive all answers. Encourage your group to imagine themselves in this story—where they have devoted their lives to following Jesus, who simultaneously spoke with the authority of God and routinely challenged and infuriated the Pharisees while also choosing to avoid them and seek less attention. Consider with them the threat they might feel, or the confusion about Jesus, or any other things that come up.
- How does Matthew, using the words of Isaiah’s Servant Song, describe the Father’s relationship with Jesus?
 - Jesus is the servant (presumably both the servant of the Father and the servant of humanity who needs him) whom the Father loves. The Father delights in Jesus. And the Lord has put his Spirit on Jesus.
- What do you think it means that the Father delights in the servant, Jesus? What about Jesus is delightful to the Father and how is the Father’s delight expressed?
 - Consider with your group the different relationships that are described between the Father and Jesus: Father/Son, Lord/Servant, Father in Heaven/Immanuel (God with us). Each of these (and certainly others) have distinct expressions of delight.

The passage begins with Jesus healing, which then leads into Isaiah’s prophetic song about the servant, proclaiming he will bring true and worldwide justice.

- Do you think Christ’s healing and Christ’s judgment are related to each other? If so, how?
 - It might be helpful for us to remember that a large portion of the Law of Moses had to do with physical cleanliness and defilement alongside spiritual or moral cleanliness and defilement. How it is with our physical bodies is unavoidably linked to how it is with the wellness of our hearts, minds, and souls.
 - What’s more, so often in the 1st century, and certainly still today, sickness is disruptive, and a cause of isolation, disability, and vulnerability. When Jesus heals the body (for instance, in the case of healing the lepers) we are returned back into a state of thriving in all spheres of our lives. Healing

and restoring—relationships, bodies, minds, heart—is a major way that Jesus participates in justice. He judges what is wrong and he sets it right again.

Isaiah prophesies that the servant “*will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.*”

- In what ways does this describe Jesus? How might being quarrelsome conflict with his character and mission?
 - We might struggle to understand Jesus as not being quarrelsome. The Gospels routinely describe conflicts he has between himself and the religious and political leaders around him. But, it seems that Matthew may be showing us that Jesus wasn’t interested in being argumentative or abrasive without cause or provocation. The bitterness—the homicidal rage—explicitly noted in v.14 gives us some incite into the sin-sickness of Jesus’ enemies.
 - You might imagine together what it would be like if Jesus had been someone who sought out controversy and argument. There are a number of reasons we might choose to argue with others; one of them being that we want to puff ourselves up as being more righteous or better than other people.

Matthew seems to be emphasizing Jesus’ humility, gentleness, and servant-heartedness in this quotation. In Paul’s second letter to his young, fellow leader Timothy, he writes “*the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.*” In his letter to the Roman church, Paul writes, “*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;¹² do not claim to be wiser than you are,*” and “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*”

- Do you think Christians today are generally known for being peace-seeking and not quarrelsome? Why or why not?
 - It would be nice to think so. Perhaps for some that is truly how the Christians are known to be. But, I suspect that often we Christians do not seek peacefulness and reconciliation or to “tame our tongues.”
- Do you know anyone who, by the grace of God, models Christian peacefulness and is not quarrelsome?
 - This might be an opportunity for you to encourage someone in your group or our church community who you know to be peace-seeking and not quarrelsome.

It’s been observed that this prophecy about God’s servant from Isaiah is strange because it is given to Israel while they are in exile. Israel has seen firsthand how violent kings, with dangerous armies, win their conquests and enforce their own forms of justice over others. It must have been baffling to hear that not only would it be a *servant* of the Lord who would bring about justice, but the servant would do so without even breaking a bruised reed, and this justice would be for the whole world—Jews and Gentiles alike.

- Why might servanthood be a key feature in God’s Kingdom work in our world? How does servitude promote God’s will for us?
 - Receive all answers.
 - For those of us who are devoted to Christ, we will follow his lead—he who humbled himself, who sought peace, reconciliation, and who practiced love for his friends and enemies alike.

- Pride, self-interest, greed, and fears of scarcity and may feel like they serve us. But the will of the Lord is that we trust in his provision, and that we serve him by practicing neighborly love. Servanthood is the means by which Christ brings about justice for everyone, and not just the few.
 - How is this word, that Jesus is the servant Messiah, good news for us?
 - Receive all answers.
 - One way this is good news is that it reminds us that God humbled himself to become human so that we could be reconciled to him—even while we were God’s enemies. (Romans 5:10)
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Today’s passage identifies Jesus as the servant Messiah.

Invite your group to prayerfully reflect on the question: How have I experienced Jesus’ reconciliation and restoration recently? And, where might the Holy Spirit bring peace to me in this season?

Have your group share as they are willing and pray for God’s provision and blessing.

PARABLE OF THE SOWER

MATTHEW 13:1-23

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 2

The well-known parable of the sower and the seed is the first parable in the book of Matthew. In essence, it is a parable about his parables (and how they will be received) – a ‘meta’ parable, if you will. This story begins with a crowd gathered around Jesus, and he teaches them from a boat in the middle of the lake, creating an amphitheater of sorts. Let’s take time today to unpack this parable and think deeply about what Jesus is telling us.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This is the second week of our Lenten series, continuing on in Gospel according to Matthew. Today we are exploring together one of the primary tools Jesus used in his teaching: the parable. Jesus is not the first teacher to use parables. In fact, the Old Testament contains a number of parables (see Isaiah 6, Isaiah 55). Together we’ll look at why Jesus used parables, and how his parables differed from other teachers and prophets.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Who in your family has a green thumb?
- What is your favorite houseplant?

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, we ask that you lead us and bless us as we hear your word. Jesus, we long to have ears to hear your word. Train us in your Kingdom and meet us as we read this passage together. Amen.

SCRIPTURE:

Ask someone to read Matthew 13:1-23. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- What is a parable?
 - Receive all answers. Summarize by reminding the group that a parable is a short, fictitious story that Jesus uses to reveal how he is bringing the kingdom of God – he is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy.
 - They are **NOT** first and foremost moralistic tales (which is how other religious leaders used them). Nor do his parables necessarily make complex ideas simpler. In fact, at times Jesus intentionally obscures his message so ‘those who have ears to hear will hear.’
- Why do you think the disciples inquired about Jesus using parables in his teaching?
 - They are clearly confused and notice that others are confused also. Why wouldn’t Jesus simply speak plainly? It is almost as if Jesus was making his word hard to understand.
- How does Jesus’ words, “he who has ears, let him hear,” help us understand vv. 11-12?
 - Firstly, it’s important to note that there is a distinction between those who have ears to hear and those who don’t. There’s also a clear spiritual gift being given to the apostles at this time, that they would hear and understand what would be otherwise baffling were it not for the grace of God.
 - You might consider with your group how the sometimes the Lord’s will and way baffle us, but that, with time and God’s grace, we come to understand him and his work in and through us more clearly.
- How does the quotation from Isaiah (vv. 14-15) describe the way Jesus’ words, including his parables, would be received?
 - Matthew, in quoting Isaiah, emphasizes the recurring problem with God’s prophetic witness—people, because of their “calloused hearts” will hear the word and tune it out; will see but not notice.
 - Note the consequence of those who hear and understand with their hearts: they would turn and the Lord would heal them. This is crucial insight into the Lord’s hope and purpose for such prophetic words and parables.
- Why do you think the disciples understand the parable, but the crowd does not?
 - Receive all answers. The disciples had left their homes and families to follow Jesus. They were all in. The crowd was listening, but many were not ‘sold’ on Jesus. His time to reveal himself had not fully come. He would announce more explicitly announce the Kingdom in due time.

Verse 11 says “ the knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven has been given to you, but not to them.”

- What does this mean?
 - The word ‘secrets’ can also be translated in the Greek as ‘*mysterium*.’ In English that means ‘open secret.’ It has been revealed to the disciples but not to the rest of the people. Just as the prophets of old were misunderstood, so is Jesus. (See Luke 4, when he reads from Isaiah in the temple and is

nearly killed by the angry mob. He clearly states that he has fulfilled this prophecy, and the people are furious.)

In vv. 16-17 we hear, *“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”*

- Are we included in this blessing?
 - Consider that we have been filled with the Holy Spirit and we are gathered among Christians to discuss and understand these words together. We are prepared to hear the word, and so we ask together that the Lord would give us ears to hear.

Let's now take time to consider the parable together.

- Who is the sower in this parable? What is the seed? And what do the different soils represent
 - Jesus is the sower. The seed is the word, and perhaps specifically his parables that tell about us about himself and the Kingdom of God. The different soils are the people who hear the word and received it in various ways.
- In practical terms, what might each of these soils and outcomes look like? How might the person standing on the shore, listening to Jesus' parables, respond in these different ways?
- Do you think it's important to this story that Jesus told the meaning of the parable only to his disciples? Why or why not?
 - Notice that they specifically asked him so that they would understand. They sought understanding for themselves from Jesus. It would seem that seeking understanding from Jesus is a meaningful response to hearing his word.

The prophetic words of the Lord, including his parables, require us to make a decision about how we will respond to Jesus and his Kingdom. We can reject him, ignore him, or follow him.

- How might this word and our discussion invite us to respond to Jesus this week?
 - It's important to remember again that the sower is Jesus. That we can only receive and cultivate the work and gift of the Lord. But, let us have ears to hear his voice, and eyes to see the way of Jesus, that we may follow him forward.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to pray that the Lord will reveal to each of us the state of the soil of our hearts today. Consider praying a blessing prayer over the group, that they would hear, know, and live the word of the Lord.

THAT WHICH DEFILES

MATTHEW 15:1-20

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 3

In this season of Lent, we continue our study of Jesus' life as he draws ever closer to the cross. In today's passage, we will focus on our need for redemption—not external purity, like the Pharisees may have claimed, but internal purity of heart, which can only come through Christ. Supplemental reading from Galatians is recommended, but in the Spirit of today's text, please feel free to omit the supplemental reading if the conversation veers in another direction; allow the Holy Spirit to lead your conversation to the place where he leads your group.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today, we will hear a passage from Matthew that explores Jesus' relationship with the laws and rituals that undergird his shared Jewish faith. We will be talking about the benefits and dangers of rituals, and what Jesus' words about them might mean for us.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- In your family of origin, did you have any traditions or rituals that you practiced? If you're willing, share one of your favorites.
 - Facilitator, you might share an example to break the ice.
- If you are willing to share, what was one of the funniest or most ridiculous rituals your family practiced?
- In general, did your family experience a deeper meaning associated with these and other rituals, or were they simply practiced out of habit? If there was a deeper meaning, what was it?

Today, we are going to be talking about the benefits and dangers of rituals, and what Jesus' words about them might mean for us today

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Holy Spirit, by your power, open our eyes and hearts to the words of Jesus today, that we might experience the presence of the holy and true God today through your word. Open our hearts to examine both what you have to say and what it might mean for us today. We pray this in Jesus' life-giving name. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 15:1-20.

You may want to break this into two sections: vv. 1-11 and vv. 12-20. Be sure to thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- In v. 2, what can you say about the Pharisees' and teachers' posture toward Jesus? Is their question sincerely out of curiosity?
 - Consider discussing the difference it makes to posture out of genuine curiosity versus accusation, malice, or self-preservation.

In v. 3, notice how Jesus elevates the accusation from "break the command of the elders" (v. 2) to "break the command of God." In this moment, the Pharisees are (legitimately) concerned about Jesus breaking one of the 613 laws given in the *Torah*.

- Why does Jesus elevate the accusation against them?
 - Note that the Pharisees, though concerned about the law of God, are more concerned with keeping tradition and doing right than by showing concern for the people and being connected to God. While their intentions are sincere, they are misguided, and Jesus points out that they are missing the proverbial forest for the trees.

In v. 5, Jesus is referring to a type of offering that the Jews would give as ritual sacrifice instead of being used to sustain or care for aging parents.

Read Hosea 6:4-6.

- What does love of the Lord have to do with mercy and sacrifice?
 - Loving the Lord is intrinsically linked to love of our neighbors. We cannot hate those who God loves and love God. If we are unmerciful (as were God's people in the age of Hosea) then our rituals (intended to express our love of God) are hollow and insulting.
- How does what we read in Hosea compare to how Jesus is diagnosing the Pharisees' issue?
 - The Pharisees are concerned with doing the traditionally pure thing, but Hosea points to mercy for those who need mercy as a priority over the sacrifices and burnt offerings that would be considered purification sacrifices. Those who sacrifice but then turn around and refuse to show care or concern for neighbor are not actually made "pure."

Read vv. 8-9 again.

- What does it look like for us, now, to honor God with our lips but for our hearts to remain far from him?
 - Receive all answers.

In v. 16, Jesus says that whatever goes into the mouth goes out of the body and therefore (v. 20) doesn't defile someone, but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles a person.

- What difference does the point of origin (mouth vs. heart) make in this comparison?
 - Things going into the mouth are not indicative of what is happening in one's heart—the heart is where the seat of one's will and dependences (or independence) lies, and thus is where the diagnosis is made. Our sin problem is much deeper than the Pharisees—and we—would often believe.

Read Galatians 5:19-23. Compare the list in Galatians 5:19-21 with the list in Matthew 15:19.

- What similarities do you see?
 - Answers may vary; all are the fruit/result of sin in our lives.

It may be tempting to conclude that Jesus is abolishing rituals in this passage, but we would do well to note that Jesus himself reminds us that he did not come to abolish the Law but rather to fulfill it. While he warns us against leaning on the rituals themselves to save us, some rituals can rightly and helpfully point us to God and serve as means to strengthen our relationship with him.

- What are some faith-cultivating rituals Christians might practice today?
 - Answers will vary; some regular rituals and practices in the life of our UALC community include weekly worship, daily Bible reading, routines of prayer, meeting regularly as a small group (!), and observing the seasons of the church year such as Lent and Advent. These are the types of rituals that have blessed the Church for generations. Our hope and prayer as a community is that these practices draw us closer to God.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

You may want to break into smaller groups to discuss and pray together.

Where in your life are you tempted to depend on your own traditions, rituals, or works to save you? What fruits of the Spirit do you desire to see grow in your life?

Consider sharing these together and praying for one another that God would call each of us to himself in a new way that demonstrates his all-surpassing salvation. Pray together that the Holy Spirit would continually call us to ever deeper dependence and relationship with the Lord.

JESUS PREDICTS HIS DEATH

MATTHEW 16:21-28

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 4

This passage and discussion will focus on the revelation of Jesus' inevitable and immanent suffering, death, and resurrection. We will invite the group to consider situations they could not avoid, but have been formative in their faith nonetheless. There might be a risk here of minimalizing suffering, or blaming God for things God never intended humanity to experience (like suffering or death). But, the Bible witnesses time-and-time-again how the Lord takes terrible situations and uses them for his glory and his Kingdom purposes.

Towards the end of our discussion we reference the hymn, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." You might consider sharing an audio or video version of this hymn with the group, either in group worship before the discussion, when the hymn is brought up, or at the end of the discussion. Here is one version with an updated melody: <https://youtu.be/22KnjHNXReM>

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

As we continue in Matthew's Gospel, we begin to see Jesus preparing the way towards calvary. In today's passage we see Jesus once again as a remarkable and kind teacher. Jesus knows where his ministry is headed; that the cross, his death, and resurrection are immanent. He wants to prepare his disciples for this, that they would be prepared for what would come, and to invite them to continue on this path with him. If they would follow Jesus, self-denial, suffering, death, and—indeed—resurrection is the way.

As we hear this passage together, let us encounter Jesus in his prophetic revelation. We hope that as we reflect on these words we will be empowered and eager to be Christ's disciples.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Share with the group a story—maybe a movie or a book—that you hated the ending. What made the ending so wrong, disappointing, or infuriating? How would you have fixed it?
 - Thinking of stories that end surprisingly, what makes a surprise ending or a mystery successful?
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OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Heavenly Father, as move through this season of Lent, this time of reflection and contemplation, we ask that you would join us through your Word that we will read, lead and guide us to a deeper understanding of you and a closer relationship with you. In your name we pray these things. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 16:21-28. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

This passage begins with a rather strong, and difficult revelation – Jesus telling his disciples that he **must** go to Jerusalem, suffer, and die.

- What stands out to you in these verses about Jesus telling his disciples about his future?
 - Receive all answers.
- Why do you think Jesus says that he *must* suffer, die, and be resurrected?
 - It seems that it's not merely that he chooses to go, but rather he must go. Jesus continues that he will "suffer many things..." and that he must be killed and be raised on the third day. It seems that he is telling his disciples that this wasn't something he could (or would) avoid. Jesus had to do those things.
 - In Greek the word is *dei* – absolute necessity. It's such a tiny, little word, but one that carries profound significance. The idea of absolute necessity is used frequently throughout the New Testament when referring to the suffering and death of Jesus. This was *the* way of Jesus' mission.

We live in a world and society filled with choices. In many cases we can pick and choose what we will or won't do, and we don't always respond well to the "must-haves" that present in our lives. But even Jesus had to deal with "musts" in his life.

- Have you, or someone close to you, ever faced an unavoidable, but formative situation that you simply didn't want to?
- In what ways have you seen the Lord use unavoidable, even painful events for his glory in your life or the lives of those around you?
- How does the Lord minister to us in the events and seasons of unavoidable suffering?
 - God suffers with those who suffer and mourns with those who mourn. God offers us hope and his presence and peace in our suffering.
 - The Lord offers us the care of his church—we comfort each other and share the burdens with each other.

- The end to which Jesus was headed—resurrection from death—gives us hope that even the worst things we will encounter will be temporary and will be set right.

In this moment Jesus is telling his disciples what is about to happen in the coming days—sharing with them, with his closest community, this special insight. But it seems Peter misunderstood that word, *must*, because he seems to think that the suffering and death was just one possibility rather than a necessity. Peter pushes back at Jesus.

- Do you relate to Peter’s response to Jesus? How do you imagine you might have responded to Jesus?
- What thoughts and emotions do you imagine led Peter to respond the way he does?
 - Among the many things Peter might be feeling are fear, grief and loss, confusion, indignation, and perhaps regret.
- Why do you think Jesus responds to Peter so strongly, even harshly?
 - We don’t know for certain, but there seems to be some exasperation in his response. Perhaps Jesus expected Peter, one of his closest friends and the one on whom he planned to build the Christian church, didn’t yet understand Jesus and his mission. Maybe he expected more from Peter?
 - It might also be Jesus was hurt that the response to this tragic revelation about the painful road ahead was met with disbelief or protest.

Peter was hearing things that he didn’t want to hear or believe. He couldn’t see that the **musts** Jesus was referring to were the mission he was called to, the cross he must pick up and bear.

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that “*whoever wants to be my disciple **must** deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” There’s that little word again, *dei*. If we want to be his disciple, we too, **must** deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

- What did that mean for the disciples of Jesus in this story? How would they go on to deny themselves and pick up their own crosses?
- In what ways might we be called to deny ourselves and take up crosses of our own in order to follow Jesus?
 - So if that is the case does it mean that for us to “take up our cross” it will mean something bad or tragic? Not really. Jesus is presenting the cross as something that is, or should be, part of our everyday **life**. The cross is something we cling to each day. The picture of taking up our cross and following Jesus is somewhat counter-cultural in the sense of the cross being a symbol of something tragic. When we take up our cross each day, following Jesus, the cross is symbol of **hope**.
- Have you known someone who has denied themselves and taken up the cross in their pursuit of Jesus?

There's a hymn, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory" that was written in 1825. The hymn opens with these words:

*In the cross of Christ I glory
Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time...*

Early in Christian history, and ever since, many found it baffling that Christians would signify their faith by displaying the torture device that killed God the Son. The cross can often mark what is bad or tragic – cemeteries are filled with crosses, marking places of death. We don't often think of placing a cross at a place of life.

- Why do you think Christians choose the cross as a sign of our faith?
 - Receive all answers. One reason may be that Christians have responded to Jesus' instruction to take up our cross, and this symbolizes the death of former, sinful selves and the resurrection of our selves the way we were created to be.
 - We might also use the cross as a symbol of death's defeat. That even the weapon used to kill Jesus is powerless against resurrection—first for Christ and then for those who follow him.

In Lithuania there is a place called The Hill of Crosses. It began when people were murdered by the Russian Czar and people would place a cross in memory of them. The Russians disliked it and tore the crosses down, but people kept putting them up and today there are thousands and thousands of crosses there. What began as a memorial of death became a symbol of hope. Hope emerged from the cross.

Many Christians have observed that Jesus' direction to his disciples in this passage beckons to all of his followers throughout time. What's more, denying ourselves and taking up a cross is not a single event in our lives, but an ongoing—even daily—activity.

- What might denying yourself and taking up your cross to follow Jesus look like for you right now? In this season; in this week?
- How does the thought of denying yourself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus make you feel?
 - Excited, challenged, terrified?
 - If you or your group members are struggling with this, consider this response together. What is causing this resistance? How might the Lord help? How can you come alongside one another – those in your group or someone in your life – encouraging them to take up their cross and follow Jesus?
 - Remember that we are saved and transformed by the work of the Lord. It is by the grace of God that we can follow Jesus in these sacrificial ways. So, in response, we pray that the Holy Spirit would make it so for us.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

As we've heard, the word **must** is key in this passage. There are things we **must** do to be his disciple. This is not just an option or possibility, as Peter seemed to think when Jesus predicted what he was going to go through, but rather it is what we **must** do to live the Christian life.

Take some time to continue prayerfully reflecting on what this has looked like for you in the past and currently. And how you see or have seen God working in and through you in this way.

Conclude this time by praying for each member of the group – that they would have a sense of the cross God is calling them to take up and how he is leading them to follow him.

UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

MATTHEW 18:21-35

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 5

This discussion concludes with an invitation to practice the Prayer of Examen with your group. Be sure to set aside enough time at the end of your discussion for this time of reflective prayer.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

The Gospel of Matthew tells us the story of Jesus, and especially emphasizes his role as the Rabbi of God's will and wisdom, who spoke with the authority of God (because Jesus was God). In this week's passage we hear another of Jesus' parables, this time about a gracious master and an unmerciful servant.

In today's passages, we enter into one of Jesus' sermons on the nature of judgment; when and how it is appropriately used, and how we might wisely discern what is true from what is false.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever watched or participated in a game where the whole thing felt unfair or unevenly matched? Have you heard a story where one side had a dramatic and unfair advantage over another?
 - Does it upset you when life doesn't seem "fair?" Do you have a strong sense of justice? What might be an example of this?
-

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *God, thank you for your mercy. Though we do not deserve it, you have forgiven us. Help us during this small group time together to think about ways we can better extend forgiveness to others as You have forgiven us.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 18:21-35. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- When Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive others up to seven times, what do you think is his motivation? What does Jesus' response imply?
 - Typical Jewish tradition said to forgive someone three times so Peter's suggestion of seven times is more than double the typical amount.
 - Jesus is trying to get to the heart of the reason we are to forgive. It is not about counting the number of times we forgive someone. By responding to Peter with the number seventy-seven, Jesus is saying that we should forgive so much that we cannot possibly keep count.
- How serious is God about forgiveness? What evidence is there of this in the Bible?
 - Reread verses 33-35.
 - In verses 33-35, God (the master) is angry because his servant wouldn't forgive as the master had forgiven him. Jesus said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."
- Where else in the Bible do we see God's forgiveness in action?
 - Receive all answers.
 - Matthew 6:14-15, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13, Romans 12:17 are a few such instances.

Now we see that God is serious about us forgiving others, but why? Reread v. 26 and v. 32.

- What did the servant have to do to be forgiven (to have his debt canceled)?
 - The servant begged the master for patience and mercy, and the master generously provided both. When we seek forgiveness, just like the servant did, we are forgiven.
 - The servant did not do anything to deserve forgiveness of his debt. It was not earned, but simply given to him as a gift.
- When we are directed to forgive others, is there an expectation that they should be forgiven with provisions attached?
- In your experience, who are those that are the hardest to forgive? Why?
- We're told here that, like the servant in this parable, our sins are forgiven by the Lord, but do you think that means the Lord forgets our sins?
 - Perhaps surprisingly, yes! *"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."* Isaiah 43:25; *"For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."* Hebrews 8:12; *"Then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'"* Hebrews 10:17.

- When we forgive, are we also expected to forget?
 - If we're being honest, most of the time we will not truly forget sins against us. Because of this, we might need to forgive over-and-over again. We may have to let go of our desire for retribution or an even score. We might understandably grumble that it's "unfair" that someone who wronged us is being forgiven. But it's good for us to remember that this is exactly what Jesus did for us.
 - We might also not resign ourselves to being unable to forget. If the Lord can truly heal us, if the Lord can forgive and forget our sins, then perhaps the Lord can, in his mercy, help us to forget also.
- How do we see fellow Christians living out the will of the Father in the day-to-day?
 - It may be tempting to describe a list of disciplines, rule-following, or beliefs, but encourage your group to consider the qualities of good, Spiritual fruit. Share ways that Christians participate in love, peace, patience, gentleness, etc.

Finally, Jesus compares those who hear and put into practice his instructions to the man who wisely built his home on the rocks. This house did not fall in the storm, but it held firm.

- Have you ever known someone that--when the rains poured, the streams rose, and the winds pounded—they remained standing because the Lord was their foundation?
 - Receive all answers and thank them for sharing.
- How might we prepare ourselves to be like the wise man of this story, with a solid and sturdy faith?
 - Most importantly, we tether ourselves to Christ and rely on the Holy Spirit to transform us.
 - Note that Jesus introduces this parable saying, *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man..."* Hearing and practicing wise judgement, discerning what is true from what is false, and devoting ourselves to be led in the way and will of the Father prepares us for the inevitable storms.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

As we transition into prayer and ministry time, invite God's Spirit to speak to us. This may be an opportunity for your group to respond to the call to search ourselves as disciples, so that we might be brought more into attunement with the will of the Father. Consider praying leading your group through the Prayer of Examen.

Begin by inviting the Lord to remind you of your day (the last 24 hours).

Ask God to show you moments or events where you felt like God might be absent or silent, times where you didn't notice God's presence. Give your group 2-4 minutes to sit with this prompt.

Then, ask the Lord to remind you of moments where you clearly felt God's presence or peace. Take another 2-4 minutes.

Conclude by inviting God to draw your attention to him and his will over the next 24 hours.

JESUS COMES ASKING

MATTHEW 21:1-17

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 6

Several Old Testament quotations appear in this passage. We will spend some time reading from and reflecting on how these passages give texture and meaning to Matthew's Gospel about Jesus. The authority and mission of Jesus is emphasized every time Matthew connects him back to the prophets and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

In this final lesson before Easter we will encounter Jesus as he enters Jerusalem on a donkey and her colt, welcomed and praised by crowds, and then as he reclaims the temple for the work of the Lord. This Palm Sunday passage reminds us that Christ is the King of kings, and that his Kingdom is near. As we prepare for Easter, our passage and discussion meet Jesus entering Jerusalem, and the temple, and shows us how the crowds praise him, the sick seek him out, and the religious leaders despise him. These stories set the stage for what will transpire in Holy Week—the betrayal, cruelty, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ our Lord.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever attended a parade? Do you enjoy watching parades? What do you enjoy about them?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, thank you for bringing us back together today. Give us wisdom to hear you your voice as we study the faith of the centurion. May our faith be stretched and grown as we study this passage. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 21:1-17. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

The passage begins with Jesus approaching Jerusalem with his disciples, sending them to fetch for him a donkey and her colt.

- What do you imagine it was like to be a disciple with Jesus in this moment? What do you imagine you might be thinking as you went to fetch the donkey and colt on Jesus' behalf?
 - Invite your group to imagine themselves in the story. It might be helpful to specifically imagine their journey as disciples thus far, what they've experienced of Jesus' ministry before now, and join them in speculating what it is Jesus may be preparing them for as they enter Jerusalem.
 - It's likely that no two disciples felt or experienced the same things, so we might explore a variety of different reactions here.
- What is the significance of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt? What does this event tell us about the character and ministry of Jesus?
 - First, we are told that this was to "fulfill what was spoken through the prophet," Zechariah (more on this in a moment).
 - The prophet speaks of the gentle King entering on a donkey and colt. Notice how the crowds respond to this entry with reverence, and with shouts of praise and "Hosanna." Jesus' messianic kingship is evident in their response to him.

We hear in this passage that Jesus is fulfilling the prophetic pronouncement of the Zechariah (9:9). Let's read some of this passage from Zechariah together.

Have someone read Zechariah 9:9-12

*⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

*¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.*

*He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

*¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with
you,
I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
¹² Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope;
even now I announce that I will restore twice as
much to you.*

- How does this passage from Zechariah further inform us of what Jesus was preparing to accomplish? What does this passage tell us about Jesus' ministry?
 - Notice that Israel's King will come righteous and victorious. This King in the prophecy will take away and break the weapons of war, replacing it with peace. The King will reign throughout the whole earth and, because of "the blood of [his] covenant," the prisoner will be set free from the pit and returned to their fortress—restored "twice as much."
 - Consider together the practical ways Jesus, as King, has and will make these things true.
- How do the crowds receive Jesus as he enters Jerusalem on the donkey and the colt? What does Hosanna mean?
 - "Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
 - Hosanna means "Save!" which had become an exclamation of praise.

This phrase appears in Psalm 118:25-26. The portion of the Psalm before this, vv.22-24 proclaims,

²² *The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*
²³ *the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.*
²⁴ *The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.*

- How does the response of this crowd prepare us (or surprise us) for what comes next in our passage—the cleansing of the temple?
 - Joining the words of the crowd (Ps 118:25-26) with the passage before them (vv.22-24) we recognize that Jesus is simultaneously the gentle, saving King, who brings rejoicing *and* it predicts the rejection of Jesus, the stone who will become the cornerstone.
 - The difference between these receptions—adoring praise and rejection—is noteworthy, and perhaps surprising. The stark difference between how this crowd responds to Jesus and how the scribes and teachers respond to him is important.

Immediately after this story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, we hear that he entered the temple and began to drive out the merchants and overturned the tables and benches of money changers and dove sellers. In doing this, Jesus quoted from 2 separate prophets, Isaiah "My house will be called a house of prayer" (56:7) and Jeremiah, "but you are making it a den of robbers." (7:11)

- Why did Jesus use the words of these prophets to rebuke what was happening in the temple?
 - Isaiah and Jeremiah both issued warnings of judgement against Israel for their corruption and sin, and they prophesied of God's reign and redemption, for Israel and the whole world. Jesus is expressing that he is part of this plan, and, in fact, is the fulfilment of this prophecy.
 - It's a profound indictment to use their own prophets' words against them. They had poisoned the purpose of the temple and were filling their pockets.
- What happens after Jesus clears the temple of merchants and money changers? What does this tell us about what the temple is supposed to be?
 - The sick—the blind and the lame—came to Jesus in the temple and he healed them. Jesus made way for those in need of God's presence, help, and healing to seek and find it.
 - You might consider with your group how this picture of the temple resembles the purposes of the modern church—a place for those seeking to encounter and be healed and restored by Jesus.

In v. 15 we hear, "*But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant.*"

- What conditions led to the chief priests and teachers of the law to respond so terribly to these things?
 - It is remarkably tragic that those whose role it was to serve in God's temple and teach the Law and the Prophets were indignant when God's prayers were sought and answered and the Messiah was rightfully praised. Many things might lead to this—pride, self-righteousness, fear, deception, etc.

- How might Christians today be tempted to miss the healing, redemptive, Kingdom work around us?
 - Receive all answers.

Hosanna is the exclamation the crowds use as Jesus enters Jerusalem, and it's repeated again by the children in response to Jesus' miracles in the temple. *Hosanna* means "save."

- In what ways is Jesus a savior for the crowds of Jerusalem and those who came to him in the temple?
 - He would save them from the fear of Roman occupation (by becoming the King of kings) and the fear of death by offering resurrection. He saved their bodies from the illnesses that plagued them. He saved them from their broken relationship with the Father, and he by cleansing the temple of he saved them from the corruption and blasphemy of those who were meant to lead them in their faith.
- In what ways has Jesus saved us?
 - Christ has saved us from sin, death, and the devil. Christ has atoned for us and reconciled us to God. He has also put our sinful selves to death and created us into new humans—as we were always intended to be, and continues to remake us by the power of his Spirit.
 - These things are true for all Christians. Now take an opportunity to share with each other how Christ has saved you personally. What have you, personally, been saved out of? What have you, personally, been saved into?

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

This discussion concluded with a reflection on how Jesus has saved us individually. Take time to prayerfully ask the Lord to remind each of you of the many ways he has saved you and is saving you.

Spend some time sharing with each other what the Lord reminded you in prayer; how Christ has and continues to save you. What he has saved you from and what he has saved you into. Is there something you need the Lord's help with now?

Pray for God's help and thanksgiving for the many ways he has saved you.

RESURRECTION

MATTHEW 28:1-10

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 7

This guide will include more Scripture reading than usual. Because Matthew's Gospel provides so much about crucifixion, and because the nature and events of the crucifixion have so much to say about the gospel of Christ's resurrection, we want your group to hear and consider the story together. For the sake of efficiency, you might want to assign the passages ahead of the discussion, or prepare the group for multiple readings.

Accordingly, discussion questions are shorter and divided among passages, so that you can read the passages slowly and carefully, without feeling as though you need to speed through them for brevity. Consider encouraging your readers before they begin to read slowly.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Easter has come and Christ is risen! In today's passage we will hear from Matthew the incredible news that Jesus has been raised from the dead, defeating sin, death, and the devil. This week we will spend quite a bit of our time together reading about the final hours of Jesus life, and then concluding with his resurrection. As much as possible, let us try to enter into this story, and hear it with fresh ears and open hearts, so that we will encounter Jesus together as we hear the incredible conclusion of Matthew's Gospel story about Jesus!

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Do you have a favorite Easter hymn or worship song? What is it, and why it your favorite?
- Does your family have a tradition of celebrating Easter a certain way? How did that come about?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, we thank you for the resurrection of Jesus and everything that means. Give us ears to hear and hearts to receive this story, this incredible news, about how you, Jesus, are Lord. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Today's discussion will have the group read several passages from Matthew's gospel's final chapters. Each of these passages will have a few discussion questions following them. You can either read them all at once, up front, or read them periodically throughout your discussion. Remember to thank your readers.

- Matthew 26:20-30
 - Matthew 27:27-49
 - Matthew 27:50-56
 - Matthew 27:59-66
 - Matthew 28:1-10
-

DISCUSSION:

Begin by reading Matthew 26:20-30

- What detail stands out to you in this account of the Lord's Supper?
 - Receive all answers.
- For whom does Jesus say his blood is poured out for? What does he mean by that?
 - It is poured out for "the many for the forgiveness of sins."
 - Jesus is emphasizing that his sacrifice and forgiveness is not intended for the select few, but for many, and that his sacrifice—his death—provides forgiveness for sinfulness
- Why do you think Jesus and the disciples concluded their meal with the singing of a hymn?
 - Receive all answers.

Read Matthew 27:27-49

- In what ways, and by whom, was Jesus mocked as he was tortured and killed?
 - Roman soldiers stripped him and dressed in the costume of a king, including a thorned crown, and then mocked him as they knelt in front of him; they offered him wine mixed with gall, then through lots for his clothes; a sign mocking him as "The King of the Jews" was hung above him on his cross; the rebels crucified beside him mocked him for not saving himself; the chief priests, law teachers, and religious elders all mocked him likewise; they covered a sponge with wine vinegar to taunt him, and then mocked him over their misunderstanding that he was calling out for Elijah
- What do these instances of Jesus being mocked tell us about Jesus? What do they tell us about ourselves and our relationship to Jesus?
 - Jesus knew torment and hatred firsthand. He knew what it meant to love someone who hated him and rejected him.
 - On the one hand, the Holy Spirit may use this story to convict us of our enmity towards God, or convict us of our cruelty towards others (which is, in some sense, cruelty towards Jesus also).

Additionally, we might see in Christ a co-suffer like us, who has himself received torment, rejection, and cruelty. Not only does he—he—suffer alongside us, he somehow makes it so that it will be made right again—if not now, someday.

Read Matthew 27:50-56

- What details stand out to you from this description of Jesus' death?
- What do you notice about who Matthew mentions in the response to Jesus' death? Why are none of the 11 surviving disciples mentioned here?
 - It seems significant that a Roman centurion is the first individual to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God in response to the events around his death. We're also told that many women, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of John and James.
 - It is remarkable that we don't hear of the reaction of the disciples in Matthew's Gospel. In fact, the next time the 11 disciples are brought up is after the women encountered the angel who tells them Jesus is alive
 - You might consider with your group that, even though Jesus had clearly predicted his death, we don't have any mention of his disciples until after he had been resurrected. Were you one of his 11 disciples, how might you have responded to his death?

Read Matthew 27:59-66

- What measures did the priests and Roman government go to in order to secure Jesus' tomb? What were they afraid might happen?
 - They'd heard Jesus predict his resurrection and they wanted to prevent anything that would spread or confirm such a rumor.
 - They covered the tomb with a large stone and posted sentries to keep watch.

Read Matthew 28:1-10

- What does the angel of the Lord instruct the women at the tomb to do?
 - "Come and see where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples..."
 - Consider together why they were first invited to see the empty tomb for themselves. You might also consider why they were told to go "quickly" to the 11 disciples.
- How do the women respond to seeing the living Jesus? How might you have responded?
 - They came to Jesus, clasped his feet, and worshipped him.
- Why is the news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead good news?
 - Receive all answers. Among many answers is that the confirmation that his mission as the Messiah and Son of God were true as he predicted; Jesus' resurrection defeated death and instituted resurrected, eternal life; they were overjoyed to see their friend again; what seemed like a terrible loss, a tragic ending, was shockingly not the end.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Our concluding discussion question asked, why is this story good news? Invite your group to take a few minutes to prayerfully reflect more on this question—in personal, community, and global terms. Pray together prayers of thanks for what Christ has done and the ways his gospel continues to resound in our world today. Then, pray that God’s Kingdom, promised by Jesus, would continue to come and that the Spirit would continue to shape us into citizens under the rule and care of King Jesus.