

Unit 1 Introduction

Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

Initial Issues

The gospel of Matthew was placed first among the 27 writings in the New Testament canon. The term “gospel” came from a Greek word meaning “good news.” It was appropriated by Christians concerning good news resulting from Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. In the early church, Matthew’s teachings were considered normative for Christian life.

Titles for gospels were given based on traditions in the church. While most scholars consider Matthew as being anonymous, traditionally it was attributed to a tax-collector, one of the Twelve. Whatever the case, Matthew’s author was extremely familiar with the traditions and teachings of Judaism. He established a strong connection between Jesus and His Jewish heritage. This feature was of keen interest to Christians having a Jewish background as they faced challenging situations in the latter part of the first century.

A possible dating of AD 85-90 is significant for it follows the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in AD 70. Judaism was threatened, and the Sadducees and priests lost their positions of power within society. The Pharisees, with their focus on fidelity to the law and associated traditions, became leaders from which all future groups within Judaism would derive. In the late first century, they met and asserted their authority to interpret the law, regulate Jewish life, and order worship in the synagogue.

Matthew’s Story of Jesus

With much expansion, Matthew incorporates a good portion of Mark’s story of Jesus into his own and follows Mark’s basic outline for Jesus’ life. He begins with an account of Jesus’ birth (1:1—2:23), including a family tree associating Jesus with Abraham, the father of Judaism; and David, Israel’s king from whose line the Messiah would come. After the infancy story, five major sections in Matthew’s gospel involving an alternating pattern of narrative (story) and discourse are commonly recognized. While scholarly disagreement exists concerning the precise limits of some sections, each discourse ends with the phrase “When Jesus had finished...” In accordance with this observation, the five sections include: 3:1—7:29, 8:1—11:1, 11:2—13:53a, 13:53b—19:1a, and 19:1b—26:1a.

In the **first narrative (3:1—4:25)**, Matthew presents John the Baptist’s activities in the Judean desert and Jesus’ baptism, temptation, preaching, calling disciples, and healing those who are sick or demon-possessed. In the **first discourse (5—7)**, Jesus ascends

a mountain and assumes the posture of a teacher. Delivery of His teachings from a mountain is reminiscent of Moses’ reception and giving of the law on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19). Joined by His disciples, Jesus begins what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. His message presents a type of higher righteousness. He does not abolish the law, but His teachings define its fulfillment involving a life of radical obedience beyond all prior understandings. Jesus repeatedly declares: “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you” and then fills the law with new meaning.

Jesus begins His teachings with nine beatitudes indicating the condition of those for whom His message is good news such as the grieving, meek, and poor in spirit. He then addresses the topics of murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retribution, love for enemies, providing for the needy, prayer, fasting, worrying, and judging. In response, the “crowds were amazed at his teachings, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

In the **second narrative (8—9)**, Jesus heals a man with leprosy, a Roman centurion’s servant, and many others. He demonstrates His command of nature as He stills a storm and then heals the demon-possessed, restores a paralytic to health, and calls a tax collector to follow Him. Jesus answers questions from John’s disciples about fasting, heals a woman subject to bleeding for 12 years, raises a girl from the dead, and heals the blind. After casting out another demon, while being accused by the Pharisees of working through the prince of demons, Jesus “went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.” He announces the need for others to join His ministry declaring: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”

The **second discourse (10—11:1)** shows Jesus instructing His disciples and sending and empowering them to preach and heal. The actions of Jesus and His disciples are linked. Chapter 10:1 reads: “Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” Jesus provides instructions for this mission and for facing the extreme challenges that lie ahead. His disciples are called to a life of total commitment to Him.

In the **third narrative (11:2—12:50)**, Jesus continues preaching and teaching in Galilee. He encourages John the Baptist, warns of judgment on cities rejecting Him, and speaks of rest for his

followers. He responds to criticisms by the Pharisees over breaking rules relating to the Sabbath, heals many, and expels demons while being falsely accused of being in league with them. Pharisees are warned of coming judgment using imagery of the sign of the prophet Jonah. The narrative concludes with Jesus declaring, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

In the **third discourse (13:1-53a)**, Jesus presents a series of parables on God’s rule or reign. The word “parable” means a “setting beside” or “comparison.” A comparison drawn from nature or daily life is used to teach a spiritual truth about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God” out of deference for Jewish sensibilities about speaking the name of God. Parables include: the sower, weeds, mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, pearls, and a net cast into a lake.

In the **fourth narrative (13:53b—17:26)**, Jesus travels to His hometown and teaches in the synagogue. John the Baptist’s beheading and Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand and walking on water are presented. Jesus experiences controversies with the Pharisees and discovers great faith by a Canaanite woman. A feeding of four thousand is followed by challenges from Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew tells of Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, the foundational confession upon which the Christian faith is based. Following this recognition, Jesus predicts His death and appears speaking with Moses and Elijah. The fourth narrative closes with Jesus healing a demon-possessed boy and discussing the temple tax.

A **fourth discourse (18:1—19:1a)** involves true greatness and forgiveness. In God’s kingdom, true greatness is compared surprisingly with childlikeness. The parable of the lost sheep follows and leads into a discussion of church discipline. A certain authority by the church is recognized; however, that authority is presented in the context of forgiveness. Verse 21 reads: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”

Since according to Jewish tradition, three times of forgiveness was expected, Peter may have anticipated commendation. However, Jesus indicates that forgiveness has no limits. He then leaves Judea followed by large crowds.

The **fifth narrative (19:1b—22:46)** begins with Jesus conversing with Pharisees about divorce. The importance of children is stressed, and a questioning by a rich young man about what is required to obtain eternal life is presented. A story about workers hired to work in a vineyard at different times of the day emphasizes God’s gracious nature. Jesus predicts His death and speaks to a mother having lofty expectations for her sons in Jesus’ coming kingdom.

Before triumphantly entering Jerusalem, Jesus heals blind men sitting by the road. In Jerusalem, He goes to the temple and creates a disturbance upon seeing what was taking place at “a house of prayer.” The next day, Jesus curses a fig tree for not bearing fruit and has His authority questioned by religious leaders in the temple courts. He tells a story about two sons asked by their father to work in his vineyard and their differing responses. Another story tells of the owner of a vineyard who rents it to farmers who refuse to pay what is owed. They kill the servants who come for collection, as well as the owner’s heir. A following story recounts a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son, but those invited refuse to come. A Pharisaic plan for Jesus’ entrapment concerning payment of taxes to Caesar and an interchange with Sadducees about marriage at the resurrection of the dead ensue. This section concludes with other engagements with the Pharisees about the greatest commandment and a question about whose son is the Christ.

In the **fifth discourse (23—26:1a)**, Jesus denounces the Pharisees using a series of seven woes. Jesus’ disciples marvel at the beauty of the temple and are warned of its coming destruction. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus depicts the coming of the Son of Man and the end of this present age. His disciples are to remain prepared for this event. Parables of the ten virgins, talents, and sheep and goats follow. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, assumptions about inclusion in the future kingdom are cautioned.

The **passion narrative (26:1b—28:20)** ensues with a plot against Jesus’ life and His anointing with expensive perfume by a woman in Bethany. Judas agrees to betray Jesus, and Jesus shares a Passover meal with his disciples at which He establishes a new covenant. He predicts Peter’s denial and goes to Gethsemane to pray. Jesus is betrayed, arrested, condemned by religious leaders, denied by Peter, brought before Pilate, and handed over for crucifixion. He is mocked by soldiers and religious leaders, but upon His death, He is confessed as being “the Son of God” by a Roman centurion and others guarding Him. Having been placed in a tomb, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to Mary Magdalene and another Mary.

Matthew concludes with Jesus meeting and commissioning his eleven disciples for service. Jesus instructs: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Faithfulness to Christ has a cost for Matthew’s hearers, but Jesus’ followers have chosen wisely and are never left alone.

LARRY MURPHY is professor of Biblical Literature at Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, IL. He is an Ordained Elder in the Church of the Nazarene.