

Themes in Matthew

Lord God, You know that it has been a busy, long day for most of us, and now we come, many perhaps hungry and tired, to be nourished and to be strengthened by meeting with You and Your Word, even in this academic setting. I pray, Lord, that we will be still and know that You are God, that we would study well and think hard but not forget that the goal of our faith is understanding, not some merely intellectual thing but understanding You. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

I'd like to begin tonight by examining the beginning of Christ's ministry. One of the things we notice fairly rapidly in all four Gospels is that they want to be sure that we know who Jesus is. The Gospel of Mark begins by telling us exactly whose good news it is. Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Luke also ensures us that we will know about whom this story is told. We learn in Luke 1 and 2 that Jesus is the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. He is the one who will save His people and deliver them from their sins. At His birth, recorded in Luke 2:11, He is announced as the Savior who is Christ the Lord. That is who is born in the City of David: the Savior who is Christ the Lord. He brings salvation to the Jews and the light of revelation to the Gentiles, according to Luke 2:32.

John chapter 1 begins with the famous words, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

I've already told you why I'm choosing the Gospel of Matthew as the one that we will follow primarily throughout this course. Matthew 1 is a genealogy, which might appear to be the most boring or tedious part of the Gospel, but it is full of information about the identity of Jesus. In fact, we see this in the very first line, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Abraham." In just those few lines we learn that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the one who is set apart for a mission by God. We learn He is a Jew, as "the Son of David," as well. But the title "Son of David" doesn't just mean He is a Jew. It also means He is the son of a king and He is implicitly the ruler, the new king over Israel. We also see He is a human being; He has a genealogy. He is the promised seed of Abraham—"The son of Abraham"—and He is the hope of the Jew and the hope of the Gentile, the one through whom all nations will be blessed. Even the very name Jesus means "Savior."

But we have some other interesting information, too. He is the son of King David, but of all kinds of kings, good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, as well. There is also another righteous/unrighteous mix. Notice the women described in the genealogy of Christ: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (not given by name of course, but mentioned as the wife of Uriah the Hittite). All these women were Gentiles. Tamar was a Canaanite, Ruth was a Moabite, Rahab was from Jericho, and Uriah the husband of Bathsheba was a Hittite (a non-Jew). Some of them had sordid pasts: a woman who prostituted herself on one occasion, a prostitute, and a woman who committed adultery. The case of Ruth isn't quite so clear, but she did go to the place where a man slept, uncovered his feet and lay at his feet. Even if nothing more happened, in that society such behavior would be dubious. In the genealogy we already have some hints that Jesus is descended from Gentiles, descended from a human line, and even descended from a sinful line. From this description His humanity comes to the fore, as does His universality. Although it is a Jewish genealogy, you can't miss that the women, in three cases out of four, are Gentiles.

But Matthew is eager to make sure we notice a number of other things. In Matt. 1:18 - 2:12 there is further information about Jesus. The end of verse 18 says that Mary was found to be with child through

the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus is descended from, or He is the seed of, a human. On the other hand, He is conceived, not by a man, but by the Holy Spirit. He is named Jesus, according to verse 21, because He will save His people from their sins. He is also called the King of the Jews (2:2), the Christ (2:4), and Emanuel (1:23), which means God with us.

The Emmanuel prophecy comes from Isaiah 7 and 8. Ahaz, one of the most wicked kings of Israel, received the Emmanuel prophecy from the lips of Isaiah the prophet. When God gave the message that Emmanuel would come and “this will be a sign to you,” Ahaz was entirely disinterested. He wanted no part of it. He was being invaded, and he wanted no part of God’s assurances that in this invasion he would be cared for by the power of God. Instead, he wanted to make an alliance with Assyria, a pagan nation. This was a very political move. When he did that, Isaiah repeated the Emmanuel prophecy, saying in essence, “I promise and I offer you ‘God with you’ to bless you. But if you reject that and choose your own path—if you choose to find political salvation through Assyria—then, still, Emmanuel. If God will not be with you to bless you, Ahaz, then He will be with you to curse and to condemn.”

Jesus is Emmanuel. This is a blessing. But it is also a stark reality for those who do not want to receive that blessing. He is God with us, whether you receive it or not. So these statements don’t just tell us who Jesus is; they also suggest how we ought to respond to Him. Christ is with us whether we like it or not. In Him God is with us, to bless or to curse.

Matthew is also very eager that we know that Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. According to his genealogy Jesus is the promised Son of David, the promised seed of Abraham. Throughout Matthew 1-4, the Gospel alludes to several prophecies: the statement that God will redeem Israel, the quotation of the Emmanuel prophesy, and the prophecy of a light of revelation to the Gentiles, which Jesus also fulfills. All the Gospels have the theme of Jesus fulfilling prophecy. Luke 2, for example, also alludes to the prophecy that God promised to reveal Himself to the Gentiles and in Mark’s Gospel there is a reference to Isaiah 40.

John never quite quotes the Old Testament, but his Gospel establishes that Jesus not only is a real man and is truly God, but is also the hope of the Old Testament. From John 1:1 it is clear Jesus is God. Verse 14 says, “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The reference to “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us,” uses a Greek word that can be translated “pitched his tent” or “tabernacled with us.” The verb that is used is related to the word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) for the tabernacle and for God’s dealing with His people in the tabernacle given in Exodus 33-40. John is saying that Jesus fulfills that sign, that type, that hope you had in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament there was one place, one highly localized place in a tent in the Holy of Holies, where God dwelled. But now, as Jesus said, something better than the Temple or the tabernacle is here—not a cloud, highly restricted so that only high priests could see it once a year, but rather something that anybody could see as He walked among His people. So Jesus fulfills the hope of God dwelling among us. Later in John 1, it says that “the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Christ Jesus.” That is not necessarily a condemnation of the Law. In fact it is not condemning the Law at all. But it *is* saying the Law cannot redeem. Jesus is the source of grace that the Old Testament cries for.

So the Gospels claim that Jesus is God, that He is a real man, and that He fulfills prophecy. The fourth thing that the Gospels are eager to do is to connect Jesus’ birth, His incarnation, and His humanity with real places and real times, so it’s not just some intellectual event, but a real historical event. For example, the Gospels let us know that Herod was the king when Jesus was born and that when he found

out that Jesus was born, he planned to kill Him. A little research into extrabiblical historical sources reveals that the Gospel's portrayal of Herod is very consistent with his character.

Another sign of Jesus' humanity, of the reality of the incarnation, is that when He was under threat from Herod, He didn't get a gang of angels around the town He was in. He didn't get an awesome miraculous intervention so that when the soldiers came their swords melted or became butter. When Herod sent the troops, Jesus had to leave because if a sword had run through the baby Jesus, He would have bled and died. God made sure that didn't happen. I'm not saying that God's purpose could be thwarted, but the idea is that when the troops came around, Jesus had to flee like anybody else would have to flee; He was a real child.

The Gospel of Luke makes it most clear that we're trying to locate things in real space and in real time. Luke 2:1 says, "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." When? While Quirinius was governor of Syria. This is real history! Luke 3:1 sets the date in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (another king, another Caesar). He tells us that when Pontius Pilate governed Judea, when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, when his brother Phillip was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came. He's making it as clear as he possibly can to his readers exactly when the ministry began. The Gospels are eager to point out that this is real history, that these things genuinely happened. They are emphatic regarding the fact and importance of establishing Jesus' identity as a real historical figure who is God, man, and the fulfillment of prophecy from Israel.

The goal of the infancy narratives is to establish Jesus' identity, not just the fact of His birth, and to evoke a response. Matthew records the story of Jesus' birth in chapter 2 and we will focus on 2:1-12, the visit of the magi. The characters who appear in the story are Herod, Jesus, the scribes, chief priests, Mary, Joseph, the people of Jerusalem, and the magi. It's important to understand who these characters are. Herod was not fully Jewish. His mother was an Edomite, so he was a "half breed." Additionally, he was always afraid that someone would take his power. He would go to any length to protect and empower himself. According to the historical record he murdered his own sons and his wife. The account that we have in Matthew 2 is totally consistent with what we know about Herod. It not only fits with his murderous intentions, but also specifically with his paranoia about losing his reign. He is a man who *would* murder babies.

The magi were Persian astrologers from the east seeking the fulfillment of prophecies. Despite the popular English Christmas song, "We Three Kings," they were *not* kings and, as far as we know, there were not three of them. The idea that there were three seems to come from the three gifts, but there were probably a whole bunch of them. A town of 40,000 people—which is our best estimate of the size of Jerusalem in Jesus' day—with a few more thousand nearby would probably not be stirred if only three people arrived. It is much more likely that it would take a group of fifty or a hundred. After all, if you were carrying gold all that distance, you would probably want a few armed men to help you and protect you in the desert. Furthermore, frankincense and myrrh could be more valuable than gold, ounce for ounce. You would want a larger group of people, especially because you would need to carry a great many supplies. It seems that they traveled a long time, at the very least several months and possibly up to two years. This would explain why Herod killed all the children two years and under. My guess is that they traveled a year and Herod decided, just to be safe, to kill everybody two years and under. So they certainly traveled many months, probably a whole year, and maybe even more than a year.

The fact that these men were magi from the east means they were advisors to kings. Some of these people were legitimate, some charlatans. These magi were knowledgeable people whom God used, to

whom God spoke. Because the magi studied the stars, God gave them a star to get their attention. That is how He got them to the place that they could actually worship—He gave them a star so that they would find the Christ. The story says that they came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” It is hard to imagine anything worse you could say to Herod. Since the magi were not referring to any of Herod’s own children he would find this question extremely threatening.

The magi also say that they have come to worship this new king. The word “worship” could mean “to pay homage to,” not necessarily to worship as God. The word in the original language is ambiguous. When Herod heard this, he was disturbed. He heard it as a threat, not as good news. Matthew notes that all Jerusalem was disturbed with Herod. This was because when Herod was not happy, everyone suffered. The people of Jerusalem did not love Herod, and may have been hoping for the Messiah, for a new king. Knowing this, Herod did a clever thing. According to verse 4, he called together the chief priests and teachers of the Law (the scribes) to ask them where the Christ was to be born. The chief priests were ordinarily from the Sadducee party in Israel. Most of the scribes or teachers of Law were associated with the Pharisees. Therefore, Herod was bringing together the leading people from the Pharisee party and leading people from the Sadducee party. He knew they despised each other so he must have been thinking, “If I can bring together these two groups (that aren’t fond of me) and question them both simultaneously and they both say the same thing, then I’ll know it’s the truth.”

They did agree. They said that according to the prophecy the Christ would be born in Bethlehem in Judea (verse 5). Upon hearing this, Herod secretly called the magi and found out from them the exact time the star appeared (verse 7). He then told them to make a careful search and report back to him as soon as they found the Christ. It’s not hard to see what Herod’s intentions were. Although it is clear in the English, it is even clearer in the Greek that he questioned them intensively. The word for “questioning them” is one that implies that he was asking them repeatedly—“Tell me exactly, tell me all you know, tell me precisely when, precisely where and then immediately make a report to me.” What a strange thing for Herod to do! If Jesus is the Christ, the king of the Jews, why does Herod think he has a chance of killing Him? And if He’s not, why should he worry? Yet, that is the folly of the wicked. They believe just enough to be terrified and angry, but they don’t believe enough to realize how futile it is to fight against God.

While Herod’s response to the prophecy was fear, paranoia and intent to murder, the scribes and chief priests responded differently. They did nothing. They should have asked the magi if they could go with them to worship the king. But that is not reported. To be fair, it is possible that some of them might have gone. But we have no reference, no statement that they went as a whole group. They gave Herod the answer and probably went back home. The people of Jerusalem as a whole took no action to search for Christ either, most likely because they were worried about Herod.

Unlike the others, the magi not only went to see Jesus but also brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. People study those three gifts very carefully, speculating about the significance of each, for example saying that since myrrh was used for embalming, it was a symbol of Jesus’ eventual death and burial. But it is unlikely that the magi thought about this. They simply brought the best and most expensive things they could. Gold is always the metal of kings and always the most valuable metal. Maybe something better has been found since then, but through the ages gold is the way of saying, “I’m going to bring you the very best.” Frankincense and myrrh were probably the most expensive spices in the ancient world. They were the best gifts they could possibly lay their hands on. In today’s terms, they came bringing gold, the top of the line computer communications center, and a luxury automobile.

Matthew has introduced Jesus to the reader, saying that He is God, He fulfills the prophecies, and He is a real man. But he also wants us to see that the responses to Christ differed. These are the four classes of response that exist even to this day. There are still people like Herod who are filled with hatred toward God and will do all they can to destroy God, His work, His church, His people. There may not be many, but there are some.

Perhaps the greatest number are like the people in Jerusalem who basically say, “I hope this doesn’t cause me any trouble.” As one person once said to me, “I would be a Christian if it just wasn’t for the tithing part because that involves money. If it just didn’t involve money, then that would be all right.”

Then there are the scribes, a group that’s pretty common today. These are people who have the orthodox answer, who know the facts and do nothing about it. They believe perhaps that Jesus Christ is God and maybe that He’s the Savior, but it means nothing to them. They can give you the catechetical answer. They know they’re sinners. They know that God loves them and gave His only begotten Son. They know a lot of Bible verses and have some theological knowledge, but there’s no response.

Interestingly, it was the magi, in some ways the group that knew the least, that actually responded properly to Jesus. They didn’t know much, but they acted on what they knew. (I encourage you to use this method of listing the characters in the Gospel narratives, as they are often representative of the ways people respond to God’s work. You can read more about this method in my book, *Getting the Message*.)

As we continue to our introduction to the life of Christ, we come to the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ’s ministry. The ministry of John is located very specifically in history in the time of Tiberius Caesar. John’s message was clear, and it is recounted in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “Repent for the kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven) is at hand.” The Gospel of Luke takes the most interest in John the Baptist. Though we are mostly following the Gospel of Matthew, we will turn to Luke for a little more detail about the message of John. The message of John was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3).

It is quite possible that when John first said, “Repent for the kingdom is at hand,” the people thought of the reign of God as the overthrow of Rome. But if you listened further you could see that this wasn’t really what John had in mind. He was not talking about violent political action. Rather, he had a deep interest in sincere repentance and saw this repentance as a ministry of preparation. In keeping with prophecies from Isaiah, John called people to repent, to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight paths for Him, and through that manner all mankind will see God’s salvation. In other words, if you want to be ready for the coming of the Messiah, for the new thing that God is doing, you must be faithful to what God has already done. If you want to be ready for the new covenant, then be faithful to what you know of the old covenant. John is calling people to the code of holiness, the law of God. He is not saying that they can earn favor from God by working hard and trying to get things together. Instead, he is calling them to repentance and loyalty. Loyalty to God is shown by sorrow for sin.

John’s call to repentance has four traits. First, it is an urgent call to repentance. The ax is already laid at the root of the trees. When you chop down a tree you look at its size, tap it a couple of times with your ax and then the third time, you chop. Now, God has already tapped it a couple of times and He is ready to start chopping. It’s urgent.

Second, repentance needs to be sincere. John says, “You are a brood of vipers; if you are really repentant you must produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:7). He also tells them not to dream they have Abraham as their father because God can take stones and raise up children for Abraham.

Third, repentance should be decisive. Repent and *be baptized!* In the region where John had his ministry there was plenty of water for a washing that symbolized sorrow and repentance. John's baptism was a decisive step and very few people did it. It was a radical declaration: "I need to be cleansed; I need to be purified from my uncleanness."

Last, repentance must be concrete. John told the rich they should share. He directed the tax collectors that they should be honest. He told soldiers to be content with their pay and not resort to brigandage or looting in order to supplement their salaries.

Toward the end of John's ministry, Jesus came to him and was baptized. John was astonished that Jesus should come to be baptized and said, "I need to be baptized by You, not You by me." But Jesus said, "No, let it be so to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, Jesus was baptized in order to do everything that an observant Jew ought to do. Now the average observant Jew was a sinner and therefore ought to partake of the sign of repentance. Jesus was not a sinner, but He was an Israelite. He identified with His people, even to the point of identifying with them in their sin. He did that on the cross and He's already doing it here, in baptism.

After He was baptized, He was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted. People are perplexed by the idea that Jesus, being God, could have been tempted. Because Jesus is God, and God is totally pure, people are prone to think that the temptation story is merely a game. But Jesus *could* be tempted because He was a man. The temptation was a real event. It was not a charade; it was genuine. All temptation involves the appeal to a man or woman for something that is good in itself. Imagine for a moment that there was a new commandment given today, "Thou shall not eat caviar." Since you don't like caviar you would say, "That's wonderful." But what if the new commandment prohibited something you like, such as "Thou shalt not eat pizza?" You would redefine pizza, saying, "This isn't pizza; it's just Italian bread dough with cheese and pepperoni, so I can eat it." My point is that to be tempted is to be tempted *by something*. It has to appeal to you. You can't be tempted to do something that is repulsive.

The things that were laid out before Jesus were all things that were desirable. Food was a temptation because He had been fasting for forty days. I understand the second temptation to be one of knowledge. Knowledge was desirable, so jumping off the temple to see that God would take care of Him was a temptation. It would be nice for Jesus to know that God would take care of Him no matter what. The idea of having all the kingdoms of the world is very appealing because, after all, Jesus is the ruler of the world anyway and this would be an easy way to get that. Thus, bowing to Satan was tempting. These would all be things that would have some real appeal and they're exactly the way temptations are always made for all of us.

Temptation is always or almost always the opportunity or lure to take something that is good in itself at the wrong place, at the wrong time, when it is not yours to possess. One temptation we think of easily is sexual temptation. Sex is not bad, but sexual temptation is. You can't be tempted toward your spouse whom you love, because that's called desire, love, affection or romance. It's not called temptation, because it's good and it's yours to have and to enjoy. It's called temptation when it involves someone to whom you're not married. Although sex is good, it's not good to have sex with people to whom you're not married.

Jesus is tempted by desirable things: bread, which is good, but in the wrong place and the wrong time; knowledge, to throw Himself down in order to know if God will take care of Him (knowing in a selfish,

vain or empty way, testing God); and power, which wasn't yet His to take. In these three things, Jesus proved Himself to be the true and faithful human.

It is worthwhile to distinguish between being tempted and actually sinning. To be tempted is to have the thought, the idea, or the opportunity to do something that is evil. If you reject it rapidly and decisively, you have resisted temptation. To have the thought occur to you is to be tempted. To act on it is to fall to the temptation. To think about acting on it, plan on acting on it, but chicken out because you're afraid you'll get caught, is also falling to it. If you entertain it for six months and then finally say no, you've probably sinned. If you entertain it for six minutes, you probably didn't sin, but I can't be sure. Consider Eve in the Garden of Eden being tempted by Satan. I don't think that the minute Satan appealed to her and she thought about it she sinned, but the minute she said, "I have to decide. Now, it's up to me to tell who is telling the truth," that was a sin, because she was taking on God's prerogatives.

All three of Jesus' temptations are temptations to take something and thus are like the temptation that befell Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:6, we see that the first way in which temptation came to Eve was a temptation to take something that is good for food. The Bible says that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, but it wasn't hers to take. It was from the forbidden tree. Jesus passed exactly where Eve fell. The test to Eve was to take something good when it was not hers to take. Eve said, "I'll do it." Jesus said, "I won't."

Second, Eve was tempted with knowledge. The fruit of the tree was pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom. Satan said, "Go ahead and take it because when you do your eyes will be opened and you will know good and evil." Knowledge is good, but Eve wanted to seize knowledge that God didn't have for her. Adam did too. They said "Yes" to grasping knowledge in a secretive way. Jesus said "No." He passed the test where Eve failed.

The third temptation was the temptation to bow down. That is ultimately what Eve and Adam did. If you consider the situation carefully, it looks like Eve is hearing two voices: the voice of God saying, "Don't eat" and the voice of Satan saying, "Eat." God says, "Trust me, you can have everything you want, except don't eat of the tree." Satan says, "Listen, that's the one thing you *do* want and God is afraid that you'll have His powers and prerogatives. That's why He doesn't want you to have it."

When did Eve fall? Did she fall when she bit the fruit? Or did she fall when she put herself in the position as the arbiter between the voice of God and the voice of Satan? I'll say to you the fall was already in progress the minute she started to weigh the options and weigh one voice against the other voice because she had already begun to exalt herself. It became easier for her in time, once she had exalted herself and committed the basic sin, to in fact bow to Satan. All temptation is ultimately a test: To whom will you bow? Here's the voice of God, the voice of Satan. She might have thought, "Well, I just think this seems more plausible." I don't know why she would think it would be more plausible to listen to a snake than to God. It looked like she was simply weighing options, but in fact she was bowing.

When Jesus said "No" to Satan, He said "Yes" to the cross, because all three of these temptations were temptations that could have brought Him glory without the cross. First, "Make these stones into bread." What a ministry! There were a lot of stones in Israel. Satan was offering, "You can make a lot of bread in Israel and people would love to call You Messiah." John 6 tells us that after Jesus feed the 5000 many people came following Him for the bread. When He said "No" to making the stones into bread, He said "Yes" to the hard path.

Second, when He said “No” to jumping off the temple, He was saying “No” to the way of security: “I will not guarantee that My life stays safe.” Third, when He said “No” to bowing down to Satan He was embracing the cross. Satan was tempting Him to take the bloodless path. He was offering, “I’ll give You glory *now*.” In refusing, Jesus was saying “Yes” to the path that included the cross. When Jesus said “No” to Satan, He was also defeating him, beating him. He was seeing through Satan’s ploys. There was combat. There was spiritual warfare going on, and every time He answered by the Word of God and every time He said “No,” Satan lost a little bit more. Finally he gave up and left Jesus alone, not for good, but to come back another time.