

Reading Together
New Testament Bible Reading
November 21 - 27

Monday, November 21 – Matthew 18: 10 – 35

Jesus has just finished speaking about the importance of even the smallest children in the Kingdom of Heaven, and to help to make his point, Jesus points out that even they have angels who watch over them. Don't make the mistake though of just thinking that angels only watch over the youngest children. Jesus' point is that angels watch over everyone from the greatest to the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. To point out the importance and significance of each person in the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a lost sheep. Even though the shepherd had 99 sheep that were safe, he left them to go find the one that was lost. Notice what Jesus says in verse 13, when the shepherd finds the lost sheep he is happier over the one sheep he has found than he is over the 99 that did not wander off. Sometimes we write off people and assume they are too lost to ever be found by Jesus, but those are exactly the people Jesus is looking for and is excited about finding. Shouldn't we also be?

Next, Jesus tells his followers how to deal with a brother who has wronged you. Remember the point of the previous parable is finding those who have wandered away, and so it is natural that Jesus would next have a discussion regarding how to restore those who are lost. Look how Jesus tells us how to deal with these people in verses 15 – 20. First, you go to them yourself and point the way they have wronged you. If they will not listen to you, then you go back to them again but this time you take a witness along with you, so there will be a witness who can give credible testimony that the offending party refuses to repent. Finally, if this fails, then you take the matter to the whole church and let the church deal with them. Remember these two important points. First, the whole point in this is to get conflicts resolved rather than to sweep them under the rug. Second, the goal is that the offending party, the lost sheep, will repent and return to the flock again.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of repentance and forgiveness by teaching the parable of the unmerciful servant. This parable is in response to Peter's question about how many times he should forgive someone who has offended him. Peter thinks he is going the extra mile

by being willing to forgive someone seven times, but Jesus says seven isn't enough. Different translations translate the number Jesus gave Peter in different ways, some say seventy times seven and others say seventy seven times. The point is that Jesus is not giving a definitive number of times someone should be forgiven, but that forgiveness should be without limit. In this parable there is a servant who owes his master an extraordinary amount of money, 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars. The servant's master forgives the enormous debt, but right after that happens, the servant who was forgiven so much finds a fellow servant who owes him less than a day's wages. He begins to strangle his fellow servant and has him thrown in prison until the debt can be paid. When the master hears what has happened, he asks the servant why he didn't forgive his fellow servant as he was forgiven. The point of the parable is that through Christ God has forgiven each of us for the enormous debt we owe to him, and if we truly understand that forgiveness we will be more ready and willing to forgive those who have wronged us.

Tuesday, November 22 – Matthew 19: 1 – 12

In chapter 19, once again, the Pharisees try to test Jesus and trap him with a question about divorce. There were two schools of Pharisaical teaching on the issue of divorce based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4. One group of Pharisees took what Moses wrote in those verses as saying that man could only divorce his wife for marital unfaithfulness (adultery). The other group of Pharisees believed that what Moses wrote taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever, including something as simple as burning his dinner. Notice how Jesus answers their question from Scripture by quoting from Genesis 1: 27 and 2:24. He says that when a man marries a woman they become one and, therefore, what God has put together should never be separated by man. Notice how the Pharisees phrase their next question in verse 7. They actually say that Moses commanded them to divorce. Jesus corrects them immediately in verse 8 by saying Moses didn't command, he permitted divorce only in instances where the covenant of marriage has been broken by marital unfaithfulness.

Wednesday, November 23 – Matthew 19: 13 – 30

There is a really wonderful contrast in these verses between the humility of the children who come to Jesus in verses 13 – 15 and the rich young

man in verses 16 – 30. The disciples thought the little children were not important enough to bother Jesus, but Jesus wanted them to come because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who have humility like that of a little child. In the very next verses, a rich and important young man comes to Jesus to find out what he must do to inherit eternal life—be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. You can bet the disciples were excited to have someone like this man come and want to be one of Jesus' disciples. But when Jesus tells him he must be willing to give up his wealth in order to be a follower of Jesus, the man goes away sad. What does this tell us about the man? His wealth came first in his life and his pursuit of the Kingdom came second. God will not take second place. In response to Peter's statement that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus, Jesus promises his disciples that those who willingly give up all to follow him will end up with eternal life and much more than they could ever dare to dream. "He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." (a quote by Jim Elliot, missionary to the Auca Indians, martyred for Christ January 8, 1956.)

Thursday, November 24 – Matthew 20: 1 – 19

In today's reading, Jesus tells a parable about an owner of a vineyard who needs to hire workers to bring in the harvest. Because the harvest is so large, the owner is out all day long hiring laborers to help. He promises the first laborers he hires a full day's pay (that's what a denarius represents), as he hires other workers, throughout the day, he promises to pay them "whatever is right." Some of the workers work all day in the heat and others only work for an hour or two in the cool of the evening, and yet, at the end of the day they all receive the same pay. Of course, the workers who worked the whole day grumble about this and think it is unfair. But the owner points out to them that he paid them exactly what he had agreed to pay them, and if he wants to be generous to the workers who had not worked for as long, that was not really any of their concern. Jesus' point in this parable is that the gift of God's grace is poured out equally on all who come to Christ in faith. The rewards of eternal life are a free gift and they are not based on years of faithful service.

In verses 17-19, Jesus once again predicts his death on the cross, which will be the means by which the free gift of the grace of God will be

poured out on each one of us. Take time today to thank God for that grace.

Friday, November 25 – Matthew 20: 20 – 34

In this passage, we can clearly see that even Jesus' disciples were having trouble grasping the humility that Jesus practiced and preached about throughout his whole ministry. James and John's mother come to Jesus with a request that her sons be given the honor of sitting at Jesus' right and left hands when he comes into his Kingdom. These places, right next to the king, would have been the places of the highest honor. In Jesus' response, in verse 22, he asks them if they can drink from the cup he is about to drink from, and by that Jesus meant could they endure the suffering of the cross the way he was going to. I am pretty sure that James and John had no idea what they were saying yes to, but in their haste to try to grab the best places next to Jesus they were ready to say yes to anything. After Jesus tells them that they will indeed have to drink from the same cup he is about to drink from, he informs them that the places of honor they were seeking were not his to give, but were the Father's to give. Naturally, when the other disciples hear about this they are outraged at James and John. Why would they be outraged? Because they wanted those places for themselves! Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach them what they should be starting to understand already. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't about being a master and being served; it is about being a servant who is willing to serve. That is the example Jesus sets for us—he came and served us by meeting our greatest need by giving his life as a ransom for many.

Saturday, November 26 – Matthew 21: 1 – 22

Matthew 21 contains the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a day that we now know as Palm Sunday. Matthew's Gospel makes a point of showing how this event rightly portrays Jesus as King and also is in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is like that of a conquering king returning victoriously from battle. The spreading of palm branches and cloaks on the road was a way that homage was paid to a king, and in the shouts of the crowd (verse 9), Jesus is acknowledged as the Son of David, which is a clear reference to Jesus being the one who should ascend to the throne of Israel. The shout of hosanna literally means to save. Now think how appropriate all of this is for Jesus as he rides into

Jerusalem the week before he would be crucified. Jesus is ascending to the throne, but it is by way of the cross. In Philippians 2, Paul makes a point that Jesus ascended to the highest authority in heaven because he became a servant and went to the cross. Jesus also rode into Jerusalem to save his people from sin and death. He is the conquering king who rules over our lives and subdues our triple enemies: Satan, sin and death.

As a symbol of his authority, Jesus drove the money changers and the sellers out of the temple. This was probably the straw that broke the camel's back and led to his arrest and crucifixion. Notice that after Jesus clears the temple, he is worshipped by even the little children. Think about Jesus' words that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like little children. The little children got who Jesus was. The Pharisees did not.

What happens next is very symbolic of God's judgment on Israel for the unbelief and lack of spiritual fruit, in spite of all that God had done for them through the ages. Jesus comes to a fig tree that is not bearing fruit and he it curses it and it immediately withers and dies. Be sure to see this as a symbol of two things: first, how God judges unfaithfulness and, next, how God answers the prayers of the faithful (verse 21 and 22). I should mention that we need to understand that there is an underlying assumption to what Jesus said in verse 22, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." And the assumption is this, that what we ask for would be God's will and would be to advance the Kingdom of Heaven and not our own kingdom.

Sunday, November 27 – Matthew 21: 23 – 46

In today's reading the Pharisees confront Jesus and in response to their confrontation, Jesus confronts them with the truth about the hardness of their hearts. The confrontation begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus where his authority comes from to clear out the temple. The answer to their question is obvious. By the miracles Jesus did it was clear his authority came from God, and Jesus said as much on many other occasions. But this time, rather than answering them, Jesus responds to their question with one of his own. Was John's baptism from heaven or from man? As you can see in verses 25 and 26, Jesus question poses a real dilemma for the Pharisees. If they answer the question, either their lack of belief will be exposed or they will risk a popular revolt

because the people believed John the Baptist was a prophet. The confrontation seems to end in a draw, but clearly Jesus was the winner.

And in the rest of this chapter Jesus continues to press his advantage and show the Pharisees how their lack of faith has led to their spiritual demise. Jesus begins by telling a brief parable about a father who asks both his sons to go work in the fields. One son refuses, but then has a change of heart and goes. This son represents the sinners Jesus talks about in verses 31 and 32 who at first were disobedient to God, but have since come around to obedience by trusting in the Son. The second says he will go work, but he too has a change of heart; however, his change of hearts leads him to not do what he said he would do. This son represents the Pharisees, who claimed to obey God but really were not because they did not believe in Jesus.

Jesus immediately follows this parable up with another parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard and then entrusted the vineyard to tenant farmers to care for in his absence. This was a fairly common arrangement in Jesus' day, and the expectation was that the tenants would share in the harvest with the landowner. In this parable, the landowner is God and the tenants are Israel. Israel was often pictured as God's vineyard in the Old Testament. As the landowner tries to collect on his share from the vineyard, he sends representatives to the tenants. The first representatives are servants of the landowner and they represent all of the prophets from Isaiah to John the Baptist who came and called Israel to repent. Many of these prophets were beaten and mistreated for their efforts. Finally, the landowner sends his own son, who clearly represents Jesus in this parable. The son is killed by the tenants. Jesus concludes the parable by asking the Pharisees what should happen to these tenants, and their response condemns them, because they say that the landowner should kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others. In verses 42-44, Jesus tells the Pharisees that this is exactly what will happen to them. God is going to take the Kingdom away from them and give it to the Gentiles. Verse 42 is a quote from Psalm 118, where the Psalmist prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus was born that what was about to happen to Jesus would indeed happen. He would be rejected by his own people, but would rise again to become both the cornerstone and the capstone of his church—the Kingdom of God on earth.