

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER

20

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER 6

20

THE TRANSFIGURATION

MATTHEW 17:1-13

SEPTEMBER 6, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Matthew 17:1-13. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: SIX DAYS AFTER PETER'S CONFESSION OF CHRIST AT CAESAREA PHILIPPI, JESUS TOOK THREE OF HIS DISCIPLES TO A MOUNTAINTOP WHERE HE WAS TRANSFIGURED BEFORE THEM.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: JESUS' MOUNTAINTOP TRANSFIGURATION PROVED THAT HE IS GOD'S SON, THE PROMISED MESSIAH.

GOSPEL CONNECTION: WITH THE CROSS LOOMING AHEAD, THIS BRIEF GLIMPSE OF JESUS AS THE LORD OF GLORY ENCOURAGED THE DISCIPLES TO CONTINUE FOLLOWING JESUS TO JERUSALEM.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

- 1 Brainstorm a list of characteristics or descriptions of worship.
- 2 What are some of the key aspects of corporate worship at First Woodway?
- 3 On the other hand, what are some ways we worship when we are outside of the walls of our church?

Worship is central to our lives. Through worship, we celebrate and reflect on who God is and what He has done for us. Worship also gives a public declaration of God's glory, and it is a way we can encourage one another in our faith. If we are not connecting to God in worship, then we will have a hard time connecting other people to Christ and community.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

The disciples were with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi when He asked them about their views of His identity. Peter gave the correct answer that Jesus was the Christ, but Peter rejected Jesus' teachings regarding His suffering and death. Six days after the experiences at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took three disciples who were especially close to Him—Peter, James and John—to a high mountain.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 17:1-4.

- These verses describe Jesus' transfiguration, which means transformation. What stands out to you from this scene?
- What did Jesus' physical transformation signify?

Notes:

On this mountain Jesus was transfigured, or transformed, before Peter, James, and John. They saw Jesus in His divine glory as His face shone and His clothes became as white as light. In Scripture, the color white often symbolized purity. Light often is associated with God and His presence (1 John 1:5). The three disciples saw Jesus as they had never seen Him before, and they responded to Him in worship.

- Compare Mark 9:2-6 and Luke 9:28-33 with Matthew 17:1-4. What additional information about the transfiguration do these Gospels reveal?
- What was the significance of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus?

After Jesus' physical appearance changed, the disciples saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus. Moses received the law from God at Mount Sinai, and Elijah was a significant prophet in Hebrew history. These two leaders represent the Old Testament law and prophets. The presence of these figures reminds us of Jesus' relation to the old covenant. Jesus, fully God and fully man, was the fullest revelation of God, but He built on the revelation already available to God's people in the Old Testament. Matthew did not report what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah discussed, but Luke recorded that they were discussing Jesus' coming "departure" or death at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). The Greek word translated "departure" in Luke 9:31 is the basis for our term "exodus."

- What was Moses' exodus experience? What was Elijah's (see 2 Kings 2:11)?

Notes:

- What would Jesus' exodus entail? How did it compare to what Moses and Elijah accomplished? How does it make Him worthy of our worship?

What Moses and Elijah began and waited hundreds of years to see was about to happen. To them, Jesus represented promises kept by a faithful God. Moses led God's people on the exodus out of physical slavery. Elijah experienced a personal exodus out of this world on a flaming chariot. Jesus' exodus was greater than both of theirs. He died, was resurrected, and then ascended to heaven. Through this work He provides all of us with a way out of spiritual slavery. Jesus' exodus is our means to salvation and eternal life with Him.

- Read verse 4 again. What did Peter's statement reveal about his experience in the presence of God?
- Why is it easy for us to want to stay in our "mountaintop" moments, times when we are worshiping in the presence of God? What is the danger in doing so?

We sometimes describe moving spiritual experiences and times of worship as "mountaintop experiences." Peter didn't miss the greatness of this mountain-top moment. In fact, he loved the encounter so much that he wanted to build tents and stay there forever. As meaningful as such experiences are, they are not the norm. Moving back into the routine of everyday Christian living and serving may be difficult, but it is necessary. Staying on "the mountain"—or choosing only to connect up without also connecting out and in—is an abandonment of the ministry to which God has called us.

- What was your most recent mountaintop spiritual experience? How has that experience prepared or motivated you for service?

Notes:

Such mountaintop experiences can help prepare us for difficult days ahead. Jesus soon directed the disciples to go down the mountain. There they found a crowd and a man who needed Jesus to heal his demon-possessed son (Matt. 17:14-16). Moving from a meaningful mountaintop encounter with the Lord to service in a world that needs our ministry is essential for Christ's followers today.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 17:5-8.

- Why do you think God voiced His approval of Jesus in the presence of the three disciples?
- Compare Matthew 3:16-17 with Matthew 17:5. What is different and what is the significance of that?

As Peter was making his offer to build shelters, a bright cloud enveloped the three disciples. Many times in the Old Testament a cloud represented God's presence among His people. A voice from the cloud repeated the message God had spoken at Jesus' baptism. The heavenly voice at Jesus' transfiguration stressed not only that Jesus is God's Son (see Ps. 2:7) but also that God loved His Son. The voice then commanded the disciples to listen to Jesus.

The disciples had heard Jesus preach and teach, but they did not always comprehend what He was saying. God instructed them to pay closer attention; what Jesus said was absolutely essential to their faith and their future ministries. The implication is that they were to do whatever He told them. Likewise, listening to God must be an essential part of our worship.

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- What do you learn about worship from the disciples' response to God's voice?

Notes:

- What evidence in your life demonstrates that you regard Jesus as preeminent?
- How often and how well do you listen to Him?

Think about spiritual mountaintop experiences you have had and how these influenced your life. Our mountaintop experiences should not be ends in themselves but should lead us to obey "the Lord of glory."

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 17:9-13.

- Why do you think Jesus forbid the disciples to speak about His transfiguration until after His resurrection?
- Read John 1:14 and 2 Peter 1:17. What can we infer about the impact of the transfiguration on John and Peter?

Jesus' transfiguration had given these disciples a glimpse of Jesus' glory. As the group moved down the mountain, Jesus told them to keep quiet about what they had seen. Following God's timetable in sharing what Jesus revealed to His disciples was essential. Eventually His followers could talk openly about Him, but in the short term they did not need to broadcast the transfiguration experience. They did not have the full picture. They had yet to witness His suffering on behalf of sinful humanity, His dying, and His being raised to life. After seeing all of those events, they could tell everything they had heard and seen on the mountain.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- How has our discussion of worship challenged you today?
- What insight do we gain for our own mountaintop experiences from the disciples' response to the transfiguration?
- Are you worshiping God daily? What is one practice or habit you can try this week to make worship a more natural part of every day?

PRAY

Lead your group in prayer, thanking God for His work on the cross and for the joy that is found in responding to His work in worship. Ask Him for forgiveness if you have placed your focus on anything other than Him. Pray that we would be individuals and a church body that worships as a means of connecting people to Christ and community.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - What is one way you have worshiped God outside of our church this week? What moved you to worship?

 - What has competed for your worship this week? How have you responded to that temptation?

- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

- > The challenge to memorize Matthew 17:5.

- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Matthew 18:21-35.

MATTHEW 17:1-13

17:1. This is one of the few precise time references in Matthew connecting the Transfiguration with Jesus' statement in 16:28. The events and teaching of the preceding chapter are clearly linked to this experience on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Notes:

Peter, James, and John were Jesus' inner circle among the Twelve. They, together with Andrew, were the first four disciples whom Jesus called (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:10-11). They are listed as the first three of the Twelve in four different lists (Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:16-17; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). These three alone witnessed Jesus raising the dead girl (Matt. 9:25), witnessed the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1), and accompanied Jesus at Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37). These three and Andrew questioned Jesus privately about the end times (Mark 13:3; cf. Matt. 24:3), and these four may have been the only ones of the Twelve present at the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29; cf. Matt. 8:14-15).

Jesus had used mountains as retreat locations before (Matt. 14:23). This high mountain may have been Mount Hermon, 9,200 feet in altitude, north-east of Caesarea Philippi, the location of Peter's confession (16:13-20). It is unlikely that it was Mount Tabor to the south, the traditional setting most frequently visited by modern tourists.

17:2. Without further preamble, Matthew came right to the point. Jesus was transfigured before them. The three disciples observed the entire process. Matthew's emphasis here is important, because they would be the only eyewitnesses of the event for others. Regarding Jesus' shining face, Moses' face also shone, but with reflected and transient glory (Exod. 34:29-35; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; also Matt. 13:43, which takes wording from Dan. 12:3). Compare Jesus' shining garments with the white clothing of the angels in 28:3. This was not simply "white." This was of such brilliance that it partook of the very nature of light itself. To understand the Transfiguration, we must

stretch our minds to another dimension beyond earthly white (Mark 9:3).

The word transfigured is the passive form of the Greek verb metamorphoo, meaning “to transform.” It is the word from which we derive our English term metamorphosis. Aside from the parallel passage in Mark 9:2, this verb is used only in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, both describing the inner transformation that takes place in a believer. It is noteworthy that 2 Corinthians 3 also compares this transformation with that of Moses when he met with God. But in that instance, it was the transience and superficiality of Moses’ outer transformation that was emphasized, compared with our deep and lasting inner transformation.

Notes:

17:3. As if the dazzling transformation of Jesus’ appearance was not enough, Matthew drew attention to the appearance of two additional figures with the phrase just then. Moses and Elijah may represent the two most prominent of the prophets from two divisions of the Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets. Although there is a third division, the wisdom books, “the law and the prophets” was a common phrase summarizing the whole of the Old Testament. The presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus indicated their complete unity with him.

We know from Scripture that Elijah did not die but was taken directly into heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11-12). But Deuteronomy 32:50; 34:5-6 states that Moses died and was buried by God, although the site of his grave was unknown. Both men had prophetic roles beyond their lifetime. Moses was a model future prophet (Deut. 18:18) and Elijah was a model for Jesus’ fore-runner (Mal. 4:5-6).

Those two revered historical figures must have loomed high over Jesus in the disciples’ minds because of their limited understanding of Christ. The reality was that Jesus was the one who loomed over the rest, for he was their Creator and the mighty God who gave Moses and Elijah the prophetic words they spoke and wrote. “Listen to him,” the Father commanded (Matt. 17:5). One purpose of the

Transfiguration was to rearrange the order of priority that Jesus and the human prophets had in the disciples' minds. Note that the theme in Peter's recounting of the Transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:12-21) was the accuracy and reliability of God's inspired Word.

Notes:

17:4. Peter, consistent with his character, did not know what to do. But he wanted to do something. It is good for us to be here! is an expression of his amazement and joy. Any Jew would have recognized the privilege of being in the presence of the glorious Messiah as well as Moses and Elijah. Feeling the need to do something, Peter offered (if you wish) to show reverence to Jesus and the two prophets by building three shelters. Evidently what Peter had in mind was not protection from the sun or weather, but sacred shrines, like the tabernacle or other Old Testament memorials. Jesus apparently did not wish for such an expression of reverence, because he did not respond to Peter's offer.

17:5. Peter's offer was interrupted by the appearance of the Father himself. There is a connection between the cloud's appearance and the Father's voice and Peter's offer to build the shelters. Matthew says the cloud enveloped them while he [Peter] was still speaking. God recognized Peter's good intention in wanting to honor Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, but he corrected Peter's misperception by elevating his Son above the others.

In addition to Jesus' dazzling transformation and the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the awesome display drew to its climax as the cloud of the Shekinah glory came down and the voice of God spoke from the cloud. The cloud was bright, with the same glory that shone from Jesus, face and clothes, reminding us of the cloud of God's presence during Israel's wanderings (Exod. 13:21-22), and his indwelling of the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38) and the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10-13).

The Father's words were identical to those spoken at Jesus' baptism, with the addition of Listen to him (the Greek present imperative, which means "keep on listening")

or “always listen”). When the Father affirmed Jesus as his Son, the disciples gained a better idea of Jesus’ true identity—the glorious and suffering Messiah. When the Father expressed his love for his Son, the disciples had a more complete idea why Jesus was pleasing to the Father. He had been and would be obedient to the Father, even to death.

Notes:

The command to the disciples was “Listen to him,” elevating the word of Jesus above the words of Moses and Elijah. Indeed, Moses himself commanded God’s people to heed the prophet “like me” who would come (Deut. 18:15). This reminds us of Jesus’ repeated challenge, “He who has ears, let him hear” (11:15; 13:9, 43). The disciples had heard all of Jesus’ teachings, but the “ears” of their hearts were not fully open to the meaning of what had been revealed to them.

17:6-8. The Father’s proclamation was so frightening that the three disciples were unable to stand and face him, so they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. There was a real element of worship in this action, even though it was motivated by fear. This fear of the Lord is much more than some vague form of respect or reverence. It is real fear. The command to fear the Lord (e.g., Prov. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:17) includes the idea of literal fear at the awesome power and holiness of God.

Jesus ministered to his disciples through the ministry of touch. Jesus also calmed the fears of the disciples after they had witnessed his glorious, awesome power (14:27 cf. 9:2, 22). Because the glory of God was something his people could witness without shrinking away, and because the theophany (appearance of God) had ended, Jesus instructed the disciples to Get up. As they raised their faces from the ground and looked around, the scene was restored to normal. The cloud and voice were gone. Moses and Elijah had vanished. Jesus stood alone. The brilliant light from his face and clothes had faded. But the memory would be theirs for life.

17:9. Jesus knew that such a revelation would be misused and misunderstood by others—even among the Twelve. His purpose in the Transfiguration had been to provide a striking testimony to and through Peter, James, and John after his resurrection. But in the wrong hands, this testimony could turn into a show, distracting from Jesus' purpose while the cross still loomed in the future. For this reason Jesus instructed the disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

Notes:

17:10-13. Jesus' command for silence grew out of his realization that the multitudes of Israel had a wrong concept of the Messiah. They wanted a conquering king. They did not anticipate a suffering Messiah. Jesus did not want this magnificent display to encourage the masses to interfere with his suffering. He must go to Jerusalem, and he must die. And he did not want to encourage anyone to follow him for the wrong reason.

When the disciples asked about Elijah, Jesus assured them (17:11) that they had understood the Old Testament promise correctly. The view of the scribes was prompted by Malachi 4:5. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy since his ministry had many similarities to Elijah's. With this, the three disciples' understanding was complete. They had come to realize that the prophecy of Elijah was fulfilled in John, and that it was John whom Jesus referred to in 17:11-12. In spite of Jesus' announcement in 11:14, it had taken them this long to realize more fully John's place in God's plan. Now they knew that God's plan was further along in its fulfillment.

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER 13

20

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

MATTHEW 18:21-35

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Matthew 18:21-35. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: JESUS TOLD THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT TO EMPHASIZE THAT HIS FOLLOWERS SHOULD PLACE NO LIMITS ON THEIR FORGIVENESS.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: BY FORGIVING OTHERS, CHRISTIANS DEMONSTRATE THE FORGIVENESS, GRACE, AND LOVE OF GOD.

GOSPEL CONNECTION: IN CHRIST, GOD HAS FORGIVEN US MORE THAN WE WILL EVER BE ASKED TO FORGIVE OTHERS.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

- 1 What is something you have done to another person that required an apology?
- 2 How long a period of time elapsed between the time of the grievance and the apology? How hard was it to apologize?

Forgiving others is difficult. Any time we seek to forgive someone else, we take a cost upon ourselves. But that's just what God did when He forgave us; He took the cost of forgiveness upon Himself in Jesus Christ. When we understand the extent of how much we've been forgiven, we will be willing and able to extend that forgiveness to others.

Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant helps us take a good look at our relationships and attitudes and, if needed, motivates us to forgive others as He has forgiven us.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:21-27.

- What do you think Peter expected Jesus to say when he asked if someone should forgive a brother seven times?
- What did Jesus' answer reveal about Peter's motives in asking the question?

Perhaps Peter had accepted Jesus' teaching about the shepherd's compassion for the lost sheep (vv. 10-14) and suggested he was ready to generously forgive fellow disciples seven times. The number seven represented completeness and far surpassed the rabbis' teachings to forgive three times an offender and the offense.

Notes:

Clearly, Peter thought he was being generous in offering to forgive more than double the rabbinic instruction. However, Jesus dramatically increased the number of times one should forgive, and indicated a person should not keep track of offenses but should forgive without limits. He didn't mean we should withhold forgiveness starting with the 49th or 491st offense.

- If applicable, share about a time when you were in a situation where you felt that forgiving someone might be the same as enabling them to continue to wrong you. How do you think Jesus would handle that situation?

- Why is it so important that we keep on forgiving?
What happens when we do not forgive?

- How has God's forgiveness in your life motivated you to be more forgiving?

- How would you describe the servant's response to the king's decree?

Swallowing his pride, the distressed man fell facedown before the king and begged for mercy and patience, promising to do the impossible—to pay back the full amount, a promise he almost certainly couldn't keep.

- What would you be feeling if you were the servant?
Has there ever been a time when you felt like that?
Has someone ever greatly forgiven you?

- How did the king answer? What did the king's response reveal about his character?

Notes:

Jesus' account of the king's response must have startled those listening. He blindsided the disciples, including Peter, with His next statement. Having established the servant's action and the king's right to be repaid his money, the master of that slave had compassion on the man, released him, and forgave him the loan. This was certainly not business as usual! The king not only would not sell the servant and his family into slavery; he no longer would require repayment of the debt.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:28-35.

- How did the second servant respond when the first servant came for collection?

- What would you expect the first servant to do? Why?

No doubt those hearing Jesus tell this story recoiled with anger at the insensitive, hard-hearted reaction of this man. How could he be so cruel, so hypocritical? Such action should stir the ire of any logical person. It especially touches believers and reminds us that because God has forgiven us so much, we too must forgive. Any sin against us is small in comparison to our sins against God. The least a person who has received God's mercy can do is to offer mercy to those who ask for mercy. We must never forget that refusing to forgive others offends God as well as the person we won't forgive.

- Why do you think the first servant lacked mercy and forgiveness?

- What do you think leads you to lack mercy and compassion?

Notes:

After being forgiven, the servant went to a second servant who owed him money, 100 denarii, and began to assault him. He owed 100 day's wages. The second servant fell on the ground and pleaded with the same words the first servant had spoken before the king. However, the first servant did not relent; he did not forgive or show mercy. Instead, he had the second servant thrown in jail. The first servant failed to understand the forgiveness he had been given by the king.

- How did the king respond upon hearing the actions of the servant he had recently forgiven?
- How did this parable emphasize Jesus' point about forgiveness?

Jesus' warning was to make sure believers understand that the heavenly Father expects those He has forgiven to forgive. God wants His people to mirror His mercy.

All God's children must be careful not to betray our Father's forgiveness by refusing to forgive others. Jesus made this very clear in the Lord's Prayer when He said we should pray, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 6:12-15.

The Lord's Prayer was Jesus' explanation of how to talk to God. As such, it is almost entirely focused on the character and activity of God. The only portion of the prayer that deals with a human action is the reference to forgiving those who wrong us. It's a necessary response to the character and action of God.

- Why do you think Jesus chose forgiveness as the only subject in the Lord's Prayer where He emphasized people's actions?
- According to Jesus, what is the true motivation for forgiveness? How is that different from most people's motivation to forgive?
- Why is it so important for us to practice forgiveness? Why is it so difficult?

Notes:

Jesus emphasized forgiveness because it, above all else, demonstrates that a person understands what God has done for them. Giving forgiveness is being like Jesus. Our motivation for forgiveness is rooted in what God did, specifically in the death of Christ which forgave us our sins against God.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- When is the last time you felt overwhelmed by the mercy God showed in forgiving you? How can you make that a more frequent part of your life?
- Do you need to forgive anyone right now? What is keeping you from extending forgiveness?
- Do you think forgiveness is easier the first time or the 100th time? Why?
- What is one practical way our group can show God's grace to our community?

PRAY

Ask God to open your eyes to the beauty of His forgiveness and grace yet again. Thank God that at the right time when you were still a sinner, Christ came to bring forgiveness. Pray that God would help your group become like Him as you forgive others.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - What are the obstacles in your life that keep you from forgiving others?
 - How does a lack of forgiveness affect your relationship with God?

- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

- > The challenge to memorize Matthew 18:21-22.

- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Matthew 19:16-30.

MATTHEW 18:21-35

18:21-22. Peter spoke for the Twelve. His question could easily have sprung out of Jesus' teaching on church discipline (18:15-20). Peter may have wondered how long he should forgive his sinning brother before casting him out of the church, especially when the sin was against him personally. According to some Jewish tradition, a brother was forgiven three times for the same offense. The fourth offense, however, need not be forgiven, because it would be evidence that the brother had not repented. Peter thought he was being generous in forgiving up to seven times. There is some debate over whether Jesus' response should read "seventy times seven" (490) or seventy-seven, but the exact number is not important. The numbers involved are presented for emphasis only.

Notes:

18:23. Therefore was Jesus' way of introducing the parable to illustrate the principle he stated in 18:22. He told the disciples first that they were going to learn something about the kingdom of heaven (18:1-4), and he set the scene by introducing the characters (a king and his servants) and explaining the king's desire to settle accounts with his servants—to collect from them what they owed him. The king represents God, and the servants represent fellow believers.

18:24-25. It was not uncommon for servants and indebted free men to be sold as slaves to cover debts they could not pay (Lev. 25:39; 2 Kings. 4:1). In Israel, these slaves were freed every fiftieth year, in the year of Jubilee, in accordance with the Mosaic Law. In some cultures, even their families and possessions were sold if the debtor did not bring enough money to cover the debt. Such was the case with a certain servant of this king. He owed a large amount. No slave, could ever hope to repay this amount in a thousand lifetimes.

18:26. The servant fell on his knees before him (8:2; 9:18; 15:25), displaying humility and desperation and casting himself on the mercy of the master. The servant's plea for patience and his promise to pay back everything

were so unrealistic that they could only be the words of a desperate man. His promise might be compared with a factory worker today pledging to pay off the national debt of the United States by himself. It could not be done. The issue is brother-to-brother forgiveness.

Notes:

18:27. The servant's master felt his heart going out to the man. He took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. The servant was undeserving, but the king acted with mercy (withholding punishment that was deserved) and grace (giving a great gift that was not deserved). So it should be among brothers and sisters in God's family.

18:28. The word but contrasts the first servant and his relationship with a second servant. The two were alike in only one way—the debt each owed gave the creditor power over the debtor's life. But in every other respect, the situations were opposites, highlighting the contrast between the first servant and the king. The servant had not understood family principles. But he was about to learn.

The amount the second servant owed the first was insignificant when compared with the debt the first servant had just been forgiven. One hundred denarii was one hundred days' wages. The first servant had owed more than half a million times as much to the king! Rather than imitating the mercy of the king, the first servant mistreated the second servant (began to choke him) and demanded repayment of the debt.

18:29-30. The actions and words of the second servant were almost identical to those of the first servant in 18:26. This servant also fell to his knees in humility, asking for patience and offering to repay the debt. But the first servant refused to give the second servant a chance to repay the debt. We tend to forget our king's grace, often refusing to forgive even the most trifling of offenses against us.

18:31. The other servants of the household recognized the cruelty of the first servant toward the second. This

grieved them deeply. These servants reported the matter to the king.

18:32-33. The angry king held one more audience with the first servant, this time to bring him to account for failing to follow the merciful king's example. God the Father values his children for different reasons. Like this king, the Father does not want any of his children harmed or taken out of his service through mistreatment by others.

18:34. The king was so angry at the first servant's mistreatment of the second that he rescinded his previous order to release the first servant and forgive his debt. He imprisoned the servant and turned him over to the jailers to be tortured. The king is angry and refuses to tolerate an arrogant lack of forgiveness among his family. But notice there is nothing said here about eternal damnation. These are family issues. Family forgiveness restores what was lost (relational intimacy) and is unrelated to what can never be lost (imputed righteousness and therefore eternal salvation).

18:35. Jesus' closing application was sobering. Each of you brings the focus to the level of individual responsibility. We can imagine Jesus scanning the faces of the disciples as he closed his discourse. We can also imagine him looking out through the words of Matthew into our hearts with his warning lingering in our conscience. Jesus insisted that his servants be characterized by forgiveness.

Notes:

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER 20

20

THE IMPOSSIBLE THAT'S POSSIBLE

MATTHEW 19:16-30

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Matthew 19:16-30. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: AS JESUS JOURNEYED TOWARD JERUSALEM AND THE CROSS, A MAN ASKED A QUESTION ABOUT GAINING ETERNAL LIFE. JESUS' ANSWER DISMAYED THE MAN, AND HE TURNED AWAY. JESUS THEN DIALOGUED WITH HIS DISCIPLES ON THE SUBJECTS OF THE RICH ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM AND THE REWARDS OF FOLLOWING HIM.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: WE ARE CALLED TO BELIEVE BOTH THAT CERTAIN THINGS ARE IMPOSSIBLE FOR US AND THAT NOTHING IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD.

GOSPEL CONNECTION: GOD HAS MADE WHAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US POSSIBLE THROUGH THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

- 1 Share a story about a time when you found yourself in an “impossible” situation that left you completely dependent on God.
- 2 What did you learn through that experience?
- 3 How has that story shaped your relationship with God and the way you have lived since then?

We all find ourselves at times feeling like we can't handle whatever is going on in our lives. God knows we feel this way, and in His Word He teaches us what we should do when we find ourselves with more than we can handle.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 19:16-22.

- Read Luke 18:18 and Mark 10:17 from the parallel accounts of this story. How does this man compare to the rest of the people following Jesus?
- What is your impression of the man who came to Jesus? How would you characterize his attitude?

The parallel Gospel accounts of this story can be found in Luke 18:18-30 and Mark 10:17-31. Luke identified the man further as a ruler, and Mark described his approach to Jesus. In contrast to the often sick, elderly, and poor people who followed Jesus and sought His healing and hope, the man was a rich young ruler.

Notes:

- What made the man's question in verse 16 strange?

The rich young ruler told Jesus that he viewed himself as having been good, moral, and religiously diligent all his life. However, in spite of his best efforts to please God, the man knew that something was missing; he did not have eternal life. He felt so strongly that he humiliated himself in his desperate attempt to find out the answer.

- Look again at verse 21. Why did Jesus make such a difficult demand?
- Do you find Jesus' response uncomfortable? Why? How does Jesus' response compare with your general ideas about salvation?
- In spite of Jesus' demands of the man, could eternal life be gained by selling everything? Why? What good will selling his possessions do?
- Is it possible for us to obey the command Jesus gave the man? What is the lesson for us?

On the surface, Jesus seemed to be saying the man could earn eternal life by keeping the Commandments. Although we know that salvation is received only by grace through faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9), our works are a lot easier for us to measure,

and we all have a tendency to try to impress God. Contrary to how it sounds, Jesus wasn't saying that selling his possessions would earn him favor with God. He knew this young ruler's heart and that what stood between this man and a relationship with Him was the priority of his possessions and his personal identity. He earnestly wanted the man to commit himself to God wholeheartedly.

Notes:

- In Mark 10:21, Mark wrote that Jesus loved the man before He commanded the man to take that drastic step toward following Him. Why is this significant?
- Do you believe Jesus loves you even before you follow Him? Do you ever feel He is judging your performance—that He'll love you more if you do better?
- How does your perspective of good works change when you learn that you already have God's acceptance through Jesus?
- How would you describe people who live consistently in the truth that Jesus' love for them precedes anything they might do for Him?

When we put the love of God after the command, we wind up bitter and frustrated of what we have to give up. But Jesus loves us first, and it makes all the difference. The command to sell everything and follow Jesus is not to merit Jesus' love, but to respond to it. Jesus' command was rooted in His love. In essence He was saying, "You will not experience the full joy of trusting in God until you come to me empty handed, poor in spirit," like the little children in Mark 10:13-16. The command of Christ is for the man to put himself in a situation where he is completely dependent on God.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 19:23-30.

Jesus' voice must have rung with disappointment as He addressed the disciples after the young ruler went away. Always aware of teachable moments, Jesus did not let this opportunity pass without sharing two important principles: 1) God's ability to save; and 2) the sacrifice and reward of following Jesus.

Notes:

- What is the point of the camel illustration Jesus used?

- What was Jesus trying to impress on the disciples when He spoke of the "possible" and "impossible"?

A camel was the largest animal in Palestine, a needle the smallest object. A camel passing through a small opening was a commonly used metaphor for impossible events. While it's true this relates to our salvation as it is only possible by divine miracle, it also paints a picture of the difficulty of experiencing the power of God's kingdom on earth. Still, that power is available to all who place their faith in Jesus.

Jesus used the illustration of something that was impossible from a human perspective—a camel going through the eye of a needle—to emphasize that wealthy people had extreme difficulty in choosing to follow Him. To come to Christ, one must recognize one's personal need and then be willing to trust one's life to Christ.

- How do Jesus' words in 23-26 impact our understanding of "saved by grace"?

The greatest gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, something that is impossible for us to attain apart from God's help. The rich ruler sought this but walked away from it. Such wonderful quality of life begins the moment we accept Christ and will be enjoyed throughout eternity with God.

- What price does every follower of Jesus pay to follow Him (vv. 27-30)? What rewards do they receive in return? In the grand scheme of things, does the reward exceed the costs? Explain.

Notes:

- Your identity is not found in a sum of your “whats” but in a who. What is Jesus asking you to “go, sell” (v. 21)? What are the “whats” distracting you from your true identity in Christ? How can we support you as you strive to be obedient?

Peter asked the question that was likely on each of the disciples' minds. Would their sacrifice in following Jesus be worth it? Jesus made it clear to the disciples, and He makes it clear to us, that whatever we sacrifice for the sake of following Him will absolutely be worth it in the end. Though we may not, and often will not, see the immediate rewards of following Him in this life, He has promised that the first will be last and the last will be first in His kingdom.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- When God unleashes His power of salvation in a person's life, what changes?
- What threatens or discourages your faith in God's ability and desire to bring about change in your life?
- What would you say to people who believe God's grace can't provide forgiveness for their sins? Do you ever feel that way yourself?
- What can you do this week to keep the reality of your spiritual transformation present in your thoughts? How might your week look if you do?

PRAY

Thank God for the simple truths of His gospel message and the confidence we can have in our salvation. Pray that in the midst of your roles that encompass family, work, and social contacts, you will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the good news of the gospel by living in obedience to God and by sharing the gospel with others.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - What can you do this week to be reminded of God's power in your life?
 - How can you encourage someone close to you to trust God to do the impossible in his/her life?

- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

- > The challenge to memorize Matthew 19:26.

- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Matthew 20:17-28.

MATTHEW 19:16-30

The closer Jesus got to the cross, the higher he raised the stakes for those who would follow him. Much as the disciples' question of 18:1 revealed their misunderstanding of "greatness" in the kingdom, so also this man's question (19:16) revealed his misunderstanding of the "goodness" required for entrance into the kingdom.

Notes:

19:16. The man respectfully addressed Jesus as Teacher. It is apparent from the conversation and his response that the man was sincere in his question about the way to get eternal life, but he was mistaken about how this might come about. He expected to earn eternal life by his own righteous acts (what good things must I do?) rather than through God's gracious endowment of righteousness (Rom. 3:9-31).

19:17. Jesus responded by driving the discussion toward the nature of true "goodness." His initial response seemed to bring his own goodness into question. However, by the time he finished the discussion, it was evident that this was one more claim to deity. It was not the goodness of Jesus that was in question here, but the man's assumptions regarding the goodness required for eternal life. Eternal life requires absolute goodness, and there is only One who is good enough to earn it on his own (see Pss. 106:1; 118:1,29; 1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13).

Jesus final statement of 19:17 might be paraphrased like this: "If you insist on pursuing this impossible, self-dependent avenue toward eternal life, I will tell you just how good you must be. To begin, perfect righteousness requires absolute obedience to the Old Testament commandments." Of course, that is impossible. That was Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount (5:20). Even the best of Pharisees did not come close. Jesus contrasted the reality that only God is absolutely good with the man's foolish expectation that he could be good enough for eternal life.

19:18-19. The man's next question revealed his misunderstanding still further. He did not understand that God required absolute perfection. He seemed to presume that God graded on a curve and that his "goodness" was better than many. Jesus let

this man know that anything less than perfection is no “good” at all. A righteous man would have to keep all of the commandments perfectly. The man, grasping for possibilities, assumed that there must be some special set of commandments that made a person particularly righteous.

Notes:

Jesus listed some of the commandments. His listing of the fifth through the ninth of the Ten Commandments, together with love your neighbor as yourself from Leviticus 19:18 (cf. Matt. 22:34-40) was intended not as an exhaustive list of all commandments necessary for eternal life but as a representative sample. The man would need to keep all of the Old Testament commandments. Even this “short list” would be understood as impossible for anyone.

19:20-21. The young man still did not grasp Jesus’ true meaning. He claimed to have kept all the commandments. Yet he knew that such observance was not enough. He asked, What do I still lack? No matter how good a person’s life may be, if he examines his conscience honestly, he will know that there is still something lacking about his own righteousness (Rom. 2:12-15).

Jesus’ answer went straight to this man’s self-righteous god—money. He read him perfectly. He knew where his heart and treasure lay (Matt. 6:21). To make such a sacrifice would be to exchange earthly wealth for treasure in heaven (cf. 6:19-20). But Jesus also knew that this outward action would require first an inward transformation that was humanly impossible. Jesus attempted to drive the man to the point of seeing his real need.

19:22. But the man did not grasp Jesus’ point. He had no sense of sin. And he certainly was not willing to give up his false god. Therefore, because the rich young man was not willing to have his heart transformed, he went away sad. He wanted wealth in both worlds, but Jesus’ statement demanded that he choose between the two. As much as he wanted the wealth of eternal life, he could not give up his great wealth to obtain eternal treasure.

This should not be taken to mean that wealth automatically disqualifies a person from eternal life. Rather, the worship

of wealth over God is the problem. There are rare individuals who are able to possess much wealth while keeping God on the throne of their lives, ready at any time to give it all up for him (e.g., Job). Paul made this same distinction in 1 Timothy 6:10, clarifying that it is the “love of money,” not money itself, that is “a root of all kinds of evil.”

Notes:

19:23-24. After the young man left, Jesus saw a teachable moment for his disciples. He turned to them and made a statement about the lesson they needed to take from this episode.

I tell you the truth grabbed the disciples’ attention and alerted them that Jesus was about to say something of great importance: It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Note that Jesus did not say such a thing is impossible; merely unlikely, because of the lure of earthly wealth. The rich young ruler had bought into a form of what is today called prosperity theology, which teaches that God blesses those who follow him with material riches.

But Jesus pressed home his argument as his restatement heightened to the point of impossibility. Such a thing is even harder than putting a camel (the largest animal of that region) through the eye of a needle.

19:25-26. The disciples were conditioned by their culture to believe that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing on a person’s life (Deut. 28:1-14). Therefore, they were astonished. Matthew used the specialized, superlative Greek adverb sphodra, amplifying the disciples’ astonishment to an extreme. If the wealthy—so blessed by God—can never enter the kingdom, Who then can be saved?

The phrase Jesus looked at them added further emphasis to what he was about to say. The key to the whole dilemma was the One who is the source of righteousness. People in themselves do not have what it takes to enter the kingdom! But with God all things are possible. What a person cannot do to save himself, God does by providing a gracious entrance. Salvation is a supernatural gift.

19:27. Then Peter, once again speaking the minds of the Twelve, said, We have left everything to follow you! Peter was searching for Jesus' seal of approval for the disciples' sacrifice. He was also looking for some reassurance that the sacrifices of the Twelve would be recompensed. And Jesus gave him that reassurance. Indeed, the Twelve had left everything—family, home, possessions—to follow Jesus. Jesus acknowledged as much in his response (19:28-29).

Notes:

What then will there be for us? Some might consider Peter's question to be selfish, but it revealed the reality of human nature that we are driven by incentive. And Jesus acknowledged that. Jesus did not rebuke Peter for his question. On the contrary, he offered an encouraging answer. He granted Peter a glimpse of the reward that awaits all who sacrifice for the sake of the king and his kingdom. His answer must have astonished them: you . . . will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes. Christ's rewards for his faithful followers are incredible, multiplying many times any sacrifices they make. This was a magnificent statement of magnificent reward.

Believers should not feel guilty about anticipating eternal reward. If it were a shameful thing, God would not have promised it so prominently throughout Scripture. The truth is that we need motivation, something to press on toward (Phil. 3:12-14). The eternal perspective, seeking God's prize, is the only mature perspective (Phil. 3:14).

19:28-29. Jesus underscored the faithfulness of the promise he was about to make with his words, I tell you the truth. His additional words, you who have followed me, included all the diligent hardship and sacrifice Jesus had predicted would be the lot of his true followers. We hear in Jesus' words warmth and affirmation for his followers. And that includes everyone who sacrifices for my sake. There is not only eternal life, but enormous rewards (a hundred times as much).

The word renewal is from palingenesia (also Titus 3:5), meaning "rebirth" (palin, "again," plus genao, "to give birth"). Jesus was referring to the future day when he would, after eliminating Satan and his influence, take over this earth and restore it to its original purpose (cf. Dan. 7:13-14; Rev. 3:21; 20:1-6).

Using his title Son of Man in all its messianic fullness, Jesus gave his disciples a glimpse of his future glory as the king on his glorious throne. Aside from his transfiguration before Peter, James, and John, this was the fullest revelation of his future glory that Jesus had given his disciples.

Notes:

Jesus promised that the Twelve would share with him in ruling (this is the present meaning of judging) the twelve tribes of Israel. (This is the clearest statement in Matthew of at least one of Jesus' reasons for choosing twelve disciples.) Part of the faithful disciple's reward is authority in his kingdom (cf. believers' future authority in Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2).

Jesus had already assured his followers that discipleship implies sacrifice. Now he promised that any sacrifice made for my sake would be more than repaid. In between houses and fields Jesus listed even greater sacrifices— members of one's family, even children (cf. 10:21-22,34-37).

But the reward for such sacrifice will be the repayment of a hundred times as much in some form or another. In the church, the Lord gives us a foretaste of this payment. If a person is rejected by his family for being a Christian, he finds many more "fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters" in the family of God.

The true follower (in contrast to the rich young ruler) will inherit eternal life. The use of the term inherit here provides the sense of the new family (after one has been rejected by his old family). An heir is a son of the family from whom he inherits.

19:30. Jesus began to caution the disciples not to use a human yardstick when measuring eternal rewards. God's estimation of worthiness is quite different from ours.

The chapter break here is unfortunate, for the flow of thought is continuous. Many people who seem to be deserving of reward will receive less than is expected (though no less than they deserve). And many whom we might judge as undeserving will prove, in God's economy, to be first, receiving great reward.

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER 27

20

THE GREATEST WILL SERVE

MATTHEW 20:17-28

SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Matthew 20:17-28. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: THE DISCIPLES STILL HAD NOT LEARNED JESUS' LESSONS REGARDING GREATNESS AND HUMILITY IN THE KINGDOM. THE EVENT IN MATTHEW 20:17-28 PROVIDED ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY FOR JESUS TO EXPOUND ON THE NEED FOR HUMILITY AND SACRIFICIAL SERVANTHOOD IN THE KINGDOM.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: JESUS' FOLLOWERS ARE TO SERVE AS HE SERVED.

GOSPEL CONNECTION: JESUS SERVED IN THE GREATEST WAY POSSIBLE BY GOING TO THE CROSS FOR US.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Notes:

- 1 What is the dirtiest job you have ever done? Would you be willing to do it again? Why or why not?
- 2 Describe a time when someone served you in a profound way, doing something for you that you did not want to do yourself. How did that make you feel?

We live in a culture that constantly encourages us to “look out for number one,” to put ourselves first, and to do whatever it takes to get ahead. We value the idea of the self-made person. We like to think that we are self-sufficient, and that we don’t need the service of others. If we are honest before God, however, none of us got to where we are solely by our own efforts, and there have been countless people around us who took on lesser roles to serve us in getting there. Before going to the cross, Jesus did just this. He willingly took on a lesser role and modeled humility for His disciples.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

When two of Jesus’ disciples sought places of personal advantage, He gently denied their requests. He also taught the body of disciples that true greatness in His kingdom is measured by sacrificial service to others.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 20:17-23.

- What was the irony of the request of James and John’s mother following Jesus’ words in verses 17-19?

- What stands out to you about the difference between Jesus' words and the mother's request in these passages? What are some ways we miss the point of Jesus' work in our lives and in the world?

Notes:

The mother of James and John was not likely acting on her own here. James and John seem to have been guilty of maneuvering for status and rank within the kingdom of heaven. Their mother respectfully bowed down to Jesus, preparing to make a formal request, and when He invited her to make it, she asked. Her reference to Jesus' kingdom was to its ultimate, triumphant fulfillment.

- What in the mother's request showed that the disciples' view of the Kingdom was different from that of Jesus?
- Of what was she ignorant? What do you think kept her from seeing this truth?

James and John's vision of the kingdom was different than what Jesus had in mind. The person on a king's right hand was his second in command, and the one to his left was third. The woman and the two disciples were assuming that greatness in God's kingdom was based on status, rank, power, and authority. They also made the mistake Jesus warned against in Matthew 19:30–20:16: They sought to influence God's bestowal of reward.

- To whom did Jesus respond in verse 22?
- Why do you think Jesus spoke to the sons and not the mother?
- How might promoting our personal interests for personal gain cause issues in a church body?

Notes:

Although the woman knelt down before Jesus, her heart was filled with ambition, not submission. No one in this scenario came to Jesus with a selfless attitude, but instead they came seeking their own personal desires. Jesus responded directly to the brothers, not to their mother. In Mark's parallel account of this incident (Mark 10:35-45), the mother's role is omitted altogether. This strongly indicates that the two sons had arranged for their mother to make the appeal on their behalves. Sometimes we hide our ambition and appear to be disinterested by having someone else promote our cause.

- In order to share in Jesus' kingdom, what "cup" must the disciples share with Jesus (see vv. 18-19)?
- What does this teach us about God's expectations for His children?

Jesus confronted the disciples' misunderstanding by alluding to the fact that the path to such authority lay in the same kind of suffering He would undergo. By asking for the positions of greatest authority, the disciples were asking for the most bitter cup of suffering. Jesus alerted them to the connection between great authority and great suffering by asking, "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" The two answered, "We can." These two disciples were prepared to follow Jesus. But it is unlikely that they understood that Jesus was speaking of His death on the cross (20:19). A cup was often associated with judgment (Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17-18).

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 20:24- 28.

- What was the reaction of the other ten disciples when they heard about this request?
- What does this reaction suggest about what was in their hearts?
- How could their attitudes stand in the way of serving one another and others?

Notes:

During this discussion, the other ten disciples had not been present. Apparently, the matter was reported to them when they rejoined the group. They were indignant when they learned about James and John's request. They resented the two brothers and were displeased that James and John had sought special privileges for themselves. Ironically, the reaction of the ten revealed much about their own hearts. Earlier, the disciples as a group had asked Jesus, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1). If they all had not desired the top places for themselves, perhaps the ten would not have been so angry with the brothers. If we have a heart for selfless service, we will be eager to seek the best for others, even if doing so means that we do not obtain any measure of recognition.

- What contrast did Jesus set up between the Gentile kingdom and God's kingdom?
- What did Jesus say about true greatness?
- How does that compare with the way "greatness" is typically defined in our culture today?

In the unbelieving world, it is assumed that power and authority define greatness. The rulers and high officials were examples of worldly greatness. The way they demonstrated their “greatness” was to lord it over others and to exercise authority. Jesus did not criticize authoritative or hierarchical structure, but rather the “strutting.” Such behavior is born out of insecurity and pride. The person who “bosses” others around is likely trying to prove to himself that he is as great as he hopes. However, as Jesus teaches here, the person who is truly great, by heaven’s definition, is the one who chooses an attitude of submission to others in the family of believers.

Notes:

- How did Jesus model this new way?

Jesus could provide no better model for the type of sacrificial service that defines Kingdom living than Himself. Here He used the title “the Son of Man” to avoid the use of the pronoun “I,” which might have been construed by the disciples as boastful. Although Jesus came with every right to be served, His purpose was to serve others. He gave up His rights and took on a responsibility He was not obligated to take. This responsibility would extend ultimately to our eternal souls, purchased by the sacrifice of His life as a ransom for many. We need to redefine greatness according to Jesus’ teaching.

- Jesus’ words in Matthew 20:20-28 are as counter-cultural today as they were in Jesus’ day. What does this say about the condition of the human heart and our natural assumptions about service?

What happens when, for Jesus’ sake, we shift the focus from ourselves to others? Among other things, we do not insist on things being done our way. We are not always demanding our rights. We do not have to be first in line. Instead of criticizing, we try to help. We give of our resources to others.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- Based on today's reading and discussion, what do you conclude it means to thrive in service? Why is this such an important part of learning to thrive, rather than just survive?
- As you are challenged to actively serve as a vital part of First Woodway, how might you keep your motives for serving in check?
- What are some specific gifts God has given you that you may not be currently using to serve God or to serve others, both at First Woodway and in our community? How can we as a group intentionally encourage and pray for one another with this effort?

PRAY

This week, pray specifically for opportunities to serve. Thank God for Christ's ultimate example of service: giving His life for our sake. Pray that we would reflect on the gospel daily and serve others in response to what Christ has done for us. Ask Him to reveal to us our pride and selfish ambitions, that we might lay those things aside for the sake of His glory.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

Notes:

> Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:

- Have you found an opportunity to serve in your home, First Woodway, or within our community this week?

- If so, what selfish ambitions or personal preferences have you had to lay aside in order to do so?

> A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

> The challenge to memorize Matthew 20:28.

> The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Matthew 21:1-17.

MATTHEW 20:17-28

20:17-19. It is no accident that Jesus' third formal prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection followed immediately after the extended explanation of the principle that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (see 19:30-20:16; cf. 16:21; 17:22-23). He told of the humiliation of his betrayal, the mockings and beatings he would endure, and his death. He who was supremely first over all creation would submit to being treated as the lowest of criminals. (This is the first specific mention of crucifixion, which was a punishment of ultimate humiliation, reserved only for the most despised criminals.) But out of the "lastness" of apparent defeat, the king would rise triumphant over death. Philippians 2:5-11 describes this dual paradox in greater detail: The One obedient to "death on a cross" would be the One who has a "name that is above every name."

Notes:

At this point in the journey, Jesus and his companions were about to go up to Jerusalem. The tension between Jesus and the religious establishment, headquartered at Jerusalem, had been building throughout Matthew's Gospel. Before long the conflict would come to its tragic but triumphant end.

The word up alludes to the fact that Jerusalem was situated on a ridge at 2,550 feet above sea level. From any direction, Jerusalem was "up." But especially from the crossing of the Jordan River, near its entrance into the Dead Sea, at about 1,200 feet below sea level, the climb was substantial. This would have made for at least a 3,700-foot elevation gain. Perhaps Jesus and his disciples had just crossed the Jordan, or perhaps they were at Jericho, on the way to Jerusalem (see 20:29).

Jesus was preparing his disciples for what would happen during the next week in Jerusalem. As was his custom when discussing such frank matters, Jesus spoke privately with the Twelve. As in 16:21, Jesus connected his suffering with Jerusalem, but this time their arrival in that

city was imminent. As in 17:22, Jesus used his title the Son of Man, again associating the Messiah with suffering.

In 16:21, Jesus listed “the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law,” but here he mentioned only the chief priests and the teachers of the law, still representing the Sanhedrin. Whereas in 16:21, he said that he “must be killed,” and in 17:23, that “they will kill him,” Jesus expanded on his death in this passage. First, they [the Sanhedrin] will condemn [give judgment against] him to death. This was Jesus’ first mention of his trial, although his mention of the Sanhedrin in 16:21 might have led the disciples to assume a trial. Second, Jesus mentioned for the first time that the Jewish leaders would turn him over to the Gentiles. Because the Jews, under Roman law, had no right to carry out a death sentence (26:66), they would have to rely on the Romans to perform their dirty work.

Notes:

For the first time, Jesus gave the details of his passion. Jesus’ remarks were painful for the disciples, but they pointed out Jesus’ sovereignty in all these things. He was going into a difficult time, but he went as a king and never as a victim. He would be mocked and flogged (using a whip of leather thongs, with jagged bits of metal or bone that would rip the flesh of the victim’s back) and crucified. The disciples would have cringed at all three of these words, but especially at crucifixion. This was a slow, torturous death which usually lasted for days—the most humiliating punishment used by the Roman Empire. It was reserved only for the lowest criminals. And crucifixion was also a sign of God’s curse (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). Jesus finished his comments with the triumph of the Resurrection—a note of hope during their sobering climb toward Jerusalem.

The sovereign king was carrying out his mission to perfect fulfillment. The reality of Jesus’ suffering and the disciples’ share in his suffering would play a prominent part in the next segment of Matthew’s Gospel (20:22-23,28). The disciples’ words and attitudes revealed that they had failed to comprehend the gravity of Jesus’ prediction.

Matthew's inclusion of this event serves at least two purposes. First, it makes a connection between Jesus' suffering (20:17-19) and that of his followers (20:22-23). Second, it shows that the disciples still had not learned Jesus' lessons regarding greatness and humility in the kingdom. The event provided more opportunity for Jesus to expound on the need for humility and sacrificial servanthood in the kingdom (20:25-28). Jesus would then proceed to demonstrate the same kind of humble servanthood in the healing of the two blind men (20:29-34).

Notes:

20:20-21. James and John were the sons of Zebedee (4:21). Their mother was not likely to be acting on her own here; there may have been some complicity with her sons. Perhaps James and John were guilty of maneuvering for status and rank within the kingdom of heaven. The mother respectfully bowed down to Jesus, preparing to make a formal request. When he invited her to make the request, she asked, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. Her reference to Jesus' kingdom was to its ultimate, triumphant fulfillment. This was a different picture than Jesus had in mind. The person on a king's right hand was his second in command, and the one to his left was third.

It is possible that James and John had told their mother about Jesus' promise that the Twelve would rule Israel on twelve thrones (19:28). Only two thrones could sit beside the king's. The woman and the two disciples were assuming that greatness in God's kingdom was based on status, rank, power, and authority. They also made the mistake Jesus warned against in 19:30-20:16: they were seeking to influence God's bestowal of reward.

20:22. Jesus confronted their misunderstanding by alluding to the fact that the path to such authority lay through the same kind of suffering he would undergo. By asking for the positions of greatest authority, they were asking for the most bitter cup of suffering. Of this implication they were ignorant: You don't know what you are asking.

Jesus alerted them to the connection between great authority and great suffering by asking, Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? The two answered, We can. These two disciples were prepared to follow Jesus. But it is unlikely that they understood Jesus was speaking of his death on the cross (20:19). A cup was often associated with judgment (Ps 75:8; Isa. 51:17-18).

Notes:

20:23. Jesus acknowledged their earnest intention, noting that they would indeed suffer: You will indeed drink from my cup. James was eventually martyred (Acts 12:2), and John was exiled (Rev. 1:9). But Jesus corrected yet another misunderstanding. Not only was the bestowal of reward not in the hands of the believers; the distribution of those two thrones was at the discretion of the Father. Jesus implied his own obedient submission to the will of the Father (cf. 26:39,42).

Jesus apparently did not choose this private conversation as the opportunity to correct the Zebedee family about eternal rewards and greatness. Rather, he informed them of the implications of their request and that such decisions belonged to the Father.

20:24. Somehow the other ten disciples heard of the Zebedees' request. They were indignant. There was more than pure anger here; there was wounded pride. If the disciples had learned Jesus' lessons on humility, there would have been no pride to wound. The ten were apparently sorry only that they had not requested the same privilege first. Jesus chose this opportunity to teach further on the true values of the kingdom of heaven, especially since all twelve disciples had exposed their prideful hearts.

20:25. Jesus called his students for another session in his classroom. He first showed them that their attitudes were like the Gentiles. You know drew on their own experience or common knowledge. In the unbelieving world, it is assumed that power and authority define greatness. The rulers and high officials were examples of worldly greatness. The way they demonstrated their "greatness" was to lord it over others and to exercise authority. Jesus was

not criticizing authoritative or hierarchical structure but the “strutting.”

Such behavior is born out of insecurity and pride. The person who “bosses” others around is trying to prove to himself that he is as great as he hopes. It is only an illusion, for such a person is actually fearful and weak.

Notes:

20:26-28. Jesus transitioned into the contrasting truth of kingdom greatness with his words, Not so with you, implying, “You are sons of the Almighty. What are you doing dabbling in these puny efforts at worldly ‘greatness’ when you could be experiencing true greatness.”

In 20:26-27, Jesus phrased his words in a parallel structure, a kind of poetry. The pronoun whoever leaves the door to true greatness open to anyone willing to follow the path Jesus prescribes. Among you brings to mind the family of God. Just as in Matthew 18, Jesus was speaking of relationships within the believing community.

The great and the first bring to mind Jesus’ previous teachings in 18:2-4; 19:30-20:16. Jesus had compared the humility of a true follower to that of a child; here he compared such humility to that of a servant (diakonos) or a slave (doulos). The possessive pronoun your in both cases is plural, implying that the great believer is servant or slave of all fellow believers. This is equivalent to saying, “The first will be last” (19:30; 20:16), but Jesus’ words here were more graphic. The person who is truly great, by heaven’s definition, is the one who chooses an attitude of submission to others in the family of believers.

Not everything another believer might ask of us is for the good of all. We are to serve the genuine good of other believers, not simply do what they want us to do. This means that the truly great believer will sometimes encounter misunderstandings from others and disappoint and even anger others by right choices. Some believers might even begin to take pride in their “humility.” Our hearts are so self-deceptive that we must always remain open to examination by the loving scrutiny of the Lord.

We are accountable to brothers and sisters whose discernment we trust.

All of Jesus' teaching assumes that true humility is based on a healthy self-image. Only the person who is at peace with his true worth in God's eyes is able to act toward others without trying to prove his or her worth. Convinced of one's self-worth, the believer is able to move on in an attempt to demonstrate the worth of others (cf. John 13:1-17).

Notes:

Jesus could provide no better model than himself. Here he used the title the Son of Man to avoid the use of the pronoun "I," which might have been construed by the disciples as boastful. Although the Messiah-King came with every right to be served, his purpose was to serve them. He gave up his rights and took on a responsibility he was not obligated to take. This responsibility would extend ultimately to our eternal souls, purchased by the sacrifice of his life as a ransom [a substitute] for many (see "many" in Isa. 52:13-53:12).