

Study 20: Greater than Moses

The Gospel of Matthew.

The placement of Matthew's Gospel as the first Gospel in the New Testament bears witness to the ancient tradition which regarded Matthew as the earliest of the gospel-writers. With certain qualifications, this ancient tradition could well be correct. The Gospel we know as *Matthew* is considered by most scholars to be a Greek translation, and perhaps even a revised version of an older Gospel written by the Apostle Matthew in Aramaic, Jesus' native language. If this is correct, Matthew's older Aramaic Gospel would quite likely be the earliest of the four Gospels, although its Greek translation and probable revision might be dated sometime after the Gospel of Mark. There are some indications that the Greek translator of the Gospel, who may have been the Apostle himself, used Mark as a source in preparing this Greek edition. It's worth noting here that a few scholars believe the opposite: that Mark was partly influenced by the early Aramaic Matthew. Lacking access to the original Aramaic version of Matthew, we will never know for certain. One thing, though, is certain: that much of the distinctively Jewish flavor of Matthew's Gospel is evident even in its Greek adaptation/translation. This and other considerations – e.g., the human author's emphasis on the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies relating to the Messiah and his great respect for the Law – point to the origin of the Aramaic original in Palestine sometime prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Origins of the Written Gospels.

The gospel, the "Good News" that God is faithful to His promise of salvation for humanity, was fulfilled for the first Christians beyond all expectations. It was fulfilled in Jesus Christ through His conquest of death and by His gift of a new, more abundant life through the Holy Spirit in the Church He founded.

In this most basic meaning of "gospel" there can be only a single "glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" which is not written in books but on the souls of His people by the Spirit of the living God.

But the persecutions experienced by the infant Church, first in Jerusalem and later in Rome under Nero (64-65 A.D.), led the Church to recognize the necessity of preserving the teachings and the key events of the life of our Lord in some more permanent form than the memories of human beings. Many of the eye-witnesses had already suffered martyrdom (according to tradition, both Peter and Paul were martyred during Nero's early persecutions). These factors, as well as the need to provide missionaries and teachers with authentic source books, played a major role in the appearance of our written Gospels.

Background to Matthew's Gospel.

Just as circumstances in Rome influenced Mark to write his Gospel, so too did the situation in Palestine influence the composition of *Matthew's Gospel*. By the time Matthew got around to writing, the early hostility of the authorities in Jerusalem had hardened into an unremitting and determined opposition. Jewish Christians had been "excommunicated" from the Synagogue and were soon to undergo more serious forms of persecution. (Much of this is documented in the early chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles*.) This worsening situation dramatically highlights that, despite a common cultural and religious heritage, the early Jewish Christians in Palestine were soon separated religiously from Judaism. The Jewish leadership's rejection of Jesus, and their continued opposition to His disciples in the early Church, forced the Christians, who considered themselves to be the true Israel, to live separate from the Jews. This became a central theme of *Matthew's Gospel*, and it's evident that Matthew wished to show his readers that the Church was the New Israel.

For good reason Matthew's Gospel has been called by some, "The Gospel of the Church." Indeed, he is the only one of the four gospel writers to use the word, "Church" [Mt 16:18; 18:17]. For the Christian, that which binds one to the Church is greater even than the ties of blood:

Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother. [Mt 12:48-50]

Even though the Church may include false prophets and unworthy members [Mt 7:22; 18:17], it is still empowered by Christ with real authority, an authority exercised by the Apostles and those whom they send out [Mt 10; 16:18; 18:17]. It's also evident from the style and form of *Matthew's Gospel* that it was not intended primarily for private reading, but was written to aid both Christian teachers involved in the instruction of catechumens and neophytes and missionaries engaged in bringing others into the Faith.

The Plan and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew clearly wanted to encourage his readers by proclaiming that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, that the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Old. To make this point he chose the person of Moses, who in the mind of Matthew's Jewish readers represented all that was best in the religion of Israel, and went about showing that Jesus Christ is a second and greater Moses. Matthew then took on the task of showing how Jesus had, in effect, produced a Christian *Torah*.

As we know from our earlier studies, the *Torah* consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, and was considered by the Jews to be the "Law", the very heart of religious life. In imitation of the division of the *Torah*, Matthew divided his own work into five sections. He devoted a significant portion of his Gospel to the proclamation of the "new law" by Jesus Christ, one greater than Moses, on the Mount of the Beatitudes. Of course the parallel with Moses' receiving the first law on Mount Sinai would not be lost on Matthew's readers. Matthew goes on to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to Moses through His conquest of death and the fact that He is the judge, not just of Israel, but of the entire world. Matthew also reminds us that Jesus will be present with His Church until the end of time.

Now open your Bible. Although we will take the time to read and study *Matthew's Gospel* in its entirety, as an introduction to our overall study I suggest that you read the following now:

✠ *Matthew 5-7 – The Charter of the Kingdom of Heaven*

✠ *Matthew 11-13 – The Mystery of the Kingdom*

Behind the Words. Now let's look at these key concepts and passages in Matthew's Gospel.

1. *The Kingdom of Heaven.* Another title often given to *Matthew's Gospel* is "The Gospel of the Kingdom." As we already noted in our study of Mark, the Aramaic word for kingdom encompassed two meanings:

- (1) A community or territory over which rule is exerted; and
- (2) The active exercise of kingly rule itself. For Matthew and the early Christians this effective rule of God was firmly established by Jesus. This rule wasn't a mere extension of the rule of God over the people of Israel in Old Testament, but, rather, was a remarkable, new, decisive, and final work of God.

While certainly not denying that God's Kingdom is everlasting, Matthew emphasizes its newness and expectancy. Although the effective extension of God's kingly rule has long been hindered by man's sinfulness, now, at long last, Jesus has come to establish that rule. Through His death and resurrection Jesus Christ triumphed over sin and established His Church, the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth. In support of this, Matthew proclaims, "The Kingdom has come!"

In Matthew and in the other Gospels, Jesus sometimes speaks of the Kingdom as present and sometimes as in the future. This seeming contradiction is resolved when we realize that the Kingdom has, in effect, two phases:

- (1) The full and definitive rule of God will be accomplished only at the end of time when the Son of Man will come again to establish it. At that time, every evil will be crushed, every man and woman will be judged, and the perfect eternal order will be definitively established.

- (2) Already in the work of Jesus, however, a start has been made and the Kingdom is partially realized in the Church He founded. Victory is already assured through the death and resurrection of Jesus, even though the death throes of the powers of evil will last for a time.

The early Christians, then, were filled with confidence in the ultimate victory of the risen Christ – the Lord of the Church, the Lord of Creation – who has been given all power on heaven and on earth [Mt 28:18], and whose rule is, therefore, present. His power is real and His victory is certain!

Now take a pencil and note the following in the margins of your Bible:

- ❖ *Prologue [Mt 1:1-2:23]. The Birth and Infancy of the Kingly Messiah*
- ❖ *Part 1 [Mt 3:1-7:29]. The Foundation and Inaugural Proclamation of the Kingdom*
 - *Narrative: Mt 3:1-4:25*
 - *Sermon on the Mount: Mt 5:1-7:29*
- ❖ *Part 2 [Mt 8:1-11:1]. The Preaching of the Kingdom by the Apostles*
 - *Narrative: Mt 8:1-9:37*
 - *Instruction to the Twelve: Mt 10:1-11:1*
- ❖ *Part 3 [Mt 11:2-13:53]. The Mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven*
 - *Narrative: 11:2-12:50*
 - *Discourse of Parables: 13:1-53*
- ❖ *Part 4. Mt 13:54-19:1. The Nucleus of the Church – The Kingdom Already Present*
 - *Narrative: 13:54-17:27*
 - *Discourse on the Church: 18:1-19:1*
- ❖ *Part 5. Mt 19:2-25:46. The Crisis which Establishes the Kingdom – Jesus Prophecies*
 - *Narrative: 19:2-23:39*
 - *The end and the Second Coming: 24:1-25:46*
- ❖ *Epilogue. Mt 26:1-28:20. The Passion and Resurrection – The Triumph of the Kingdom*

Note: This division of *Matthew's Gospel* is based not only on the content of the sections themselves, but recognizes Matthew's interest in numeric symbolism. The work consists of five major divisions, corresponding to Matthew's vision of Christianity as the new *Torah*. Five was an important number to the Jews not only because of the five Books of the Law, but also because the Psalter is divided into five books. Additionally, there's a collection of five books in the Old Testament called the "Little Scrolls" consisting of: *The Song of Songs; Ruth; Lamentations; Ecclesiastes; and Esther*. Matthew incorporates the number five in other ways: feeding the 5,000 with five loaves; the five topics discussed with the Pharisees; the five foolish and the five wise virgins; the five talents, etc.

2. The Sermon on the Mount - Background [Mt 5-7].

To grasp its full meaning, it's important to read the Lord's Sermon on the Mount in context. Matthew made sure that his readers would understand that Jesus spoke from authority. He did this by preceding and following the Sermon with descriptions of Jesus' miraculous work among the people. For example, in Mt 4:23, Matthew writes:

He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people.”

And then, immediately following the Sermon, Matthew relates, almost rapid fire, a series of Jesus’ miracles: curing a leper [Mt 8:2-4]; curing the Roman Centurion’s servant [Mt 8:5-13]; and multiple cures among the people:

When it was evening, they brought him many who were possessed by demons, and he drove out the spirits by a word and cured all the sick... [Mt 8:16]

Matthew also describes how Jesus displayed His power over the very forces of nature when, in a boat with the disciples, He calmed the storm [Mt 8:23-27]. Finally, Matthew relates the strange exorcism of the two demoniacs in the territory of the Gadarenes.

And so, Matthew ensures we understand that Jesus’ declaration of this “New Law” is made with something other than and far beyond human authority, that it comes from God Himself. The Sermon on the Mount is not, as some often say, merely the presentation of a loftier spiritual ideal; nor is it simply a collection of updated “laws” to replace the “traditions” of the scribes and Pharisees. Christ had not come to destroy the Law of Moses; on the contrary, He had come to fulfill it. And this fulfillment is the establishment of the Kingdom of God which opens up to us a new dimension of human existence, a new relationship to and with God, and a new power to draw on. With the dawning of the New Age in Christ, this fulfillment has now become possible for humanity.

3. *The Beatitudes [Mt 5:1-12].*

God’s great saving act in the Old Testament was the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The people’s ultimate acceptance of the Law on Mount Sinai was their response to this evidence of divine mercy on their behalf.

The great saving act of the New Testament, the coming of Jesus Christ and all that this involved for humanity, is also linked to an appropriate response on our part. And this Christian response is best depicted by the way of life described by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount.

The section of the Sermon we call “The Beatitudes” is a striking portrait of the ideal citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. These Beatitudes – these blessings, the sources of true happiness – are divided into three groups:

1. Mt 5:3-5 – consisting of three contrasts to the standards of the age.
 2. Mt 5:6-9 – pointing out the positive characteristics of the Christian life.
 3. Mt 5:10-12 – describing the world’s reaction to the presence of “citizens of the kingdom.”
- ✠ The *poor in spirit* refers to those who in the Old Testament are called *anawim* or little ones. They are the humble who have given themselves over to God totally. While the world looks after those whom the world holds in high esteem, it neglects those who care for the things of God. God, however, looks after *His* own.
 - ✠ They who *mourn* describes those oppressed in spirit by the evil that has taken hold of the world. They shall be comforted by God. Isaiah, describing the Messiah to come, wrote:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn... [Is 61:1-2]

Indeed, some of the rabbis referred to the Messiah to come as the “Comforter.”

- ✠ The Beatitude of the *meek* is almost a direct quotation from Psalm 37:11 – *But the poor will possess the land, will delight in great prosperity* – and St. Paul, speaking of his efforts to spread the Gospel furnishes us with a portrait of the truly humble (meek) Christian:

We cause no one to stumble in anything, in order that no fault may be found with our ministry; on the contrary, in everything we commend ourselves as ministers of God, through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, constraints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, fasts; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, in a holy spirit, in unfeigned love, in truthful speech, in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness at the right and at the left; through glory and dishonor, insult and praise. We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things. [2 Cor 6:3-10]

- ✠ They who “*hunger and thirst for righteousness.*” Perhaps “holiness” might be a better translation, for the quality described here is our search for God and for the things of God. It’s the same attitude the psalmist expresses when he sings:

As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My being thirsts for God, the living God. When can I go and see the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, as they ask daily, "Where is your God?" [Ps 42:2-4]

- ✠ The need to be “*merciful*” is reiterated very clearly in the Lord’s Prayer: “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*” [Mt 6:9-13]. We are to mirror God’s mercy in how we relate to others. And, through His parable of the Good Samaritan [Lk10:25-37], Jesus also provides His disciples with an excellent, concrete example of how we are called to extend sympathetic, loving kindness toward those in need.

- ✠ The *clean of heart* (or *pure of heart*) where purity here refers to a single-minded service of God and is thus much broader in meaning than chastity. Chastity, however, as a virtue is a very real part of such single-mindedness. St. James realizes this when he instructs us:

So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds. Begin to lament, to mourn, to weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. [Jas 4:7-9]

- ✠ The *peacemakers*. The Christian is to be a peacemaker in the most sublime sense, not only reconciling people with one another, but also reconciling people with God.

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [2 Cor 5:17-20]

- ✠ They who are *persecuted for the sake of righteousness*. Here Jesus praises the Christian’s fidelity to both God and His plans for humanity. The Christian character, based on faith in God, is the only source, the only foundation, of our true welfare. The great human tragedy is our all too frequent failure to recognize this truth and our consequent striving to suppress it and those who live it.

4. *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God [Mt 11-13]*

This is the third of Jesus' five great discourses found in Matthew's Gospel. It addresses the profound and perennial problem that faces the Church's apostolate: *Why is the Gospel of Salvation, proclaimed in Jesus Christ with such power and wisdom, generally rejected? And why is it even rejected by those who might well be expected to be searching for it?*

The introductory narrative section of this discourse describes the rejection of Jesus by the religious authorities of His own people [Mt 11:2-12:50]. Then, through a series of parables [Mt 13:1-53], Jesus explains the problem of the spread of the Kingdom. Indeed, Jesus depicts very graphically that despite the powerful proclamation of the good news of salvation, men and women are still free to reject it. He explains that the Kingdom is humble in its origins and that its power is often hidden from our eyes. The attainment of this treasure which is the Kingdom is open only to the one who seizes the opportunity, to the one who is willing to take the *risk* of Faith.

The Unity of the Old and New Testaments.

It should be obvious from our previous studies that an understanding of the Old Testament is necessary to appreciate fully the meaning of the New Testament. To take just one example addressed briefly above we can recall the allusion to the words of Isaiah 61 in Jesus' use of "poor in spirit" in the first Beatitude [Mt 5:3]. And it is through this first Beatitude that Jesus announces the inauguration of the Messianic Age. And He casts this proclamation in terms of the "poor in spirit" because throughout the Old Testament we find that it is the *little ones*, the humble ones, those who are considered unimportant in the eyes of the world, who are the true recipients of God's favor.

Matthew and the Liturgy. The Church uses St. Matthew's Gospel throughout the first year (Year A) of its three-year Sunday liturgical cycle. And most fittingly the Beatitudes [Mt 5:1-12] are the Gospel reading on the Solemnity of All Saints [Nov 1].

Be Doers of the Word. Reading Matthew we find ourselves caught up in an atmosphere of crisis and decision. God is calling us to decide. To possess the treasure, we must first release all that we have; we must turn away from our worldliness. There can be no delay, for there is no time. We don't know what the future may hold for us. Tomorrow may be too late to act!

The Christians of Matthew's time could certainly understand this as they faced the early persecutions of the Church. But we, too, live in a time of crisis, a time when decisions must be made. As citizens of a relatively free society, we are privileged to participate in shaping how our nation will address the great issues of the day. If we measure our effectiveness by how closely our laws and our morality reflect Church teaching, then we Catholics have done a rather poor job witnessing to our fellow citizens.

Some final observations on Matthew's Gospel:

- ✠ Matthew assumes that the reader is familiar with the Old Testament, which he quotes some 41 times, usually with the formula, "that it might be fulfilled." Matthew sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. The reason for their existence is to point to Jesus as Messiah, Savior, Son of God, and Emmanuel.
- ✠ The words of the angel to Joseph in Mt 1 provide a fitting introduction to the entire Gospel: Jesus is begotten of the Holy Spirit; He will save His people from their sins; He will be born of a virgin; and He will be called "Emmanuel" or "God with us."
- ✠ Matthew presents Jesus, from the beginning of His public life, as a teacher like Moses; but he is also the Messiah rejected by the religious leaders just as the prophets before Him were rejected.
- ✠ The notion of *fulfillment* is critical to understanding Matthew. Jesus has come not to destroy the Law of Moses, but to fulfill it [Mt 15:17-19]. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew shows Jesus as the Lawgiver of the New Covenant. Throughout Matthew's Gospel parallels between Jesus and

Moses are brought out to support this understanding of Jesus as new Moses who fulfills the Old Testament (calming the sea; feeding the multitude; sending out 70 disciples; the Transfiguration).

- ✚ Because the Jews rejected Jesus, the Kingdom is given to the Gentiles [Mt 21:33-46; 23]. There is no room for Jesus at the inn, but the Gentiles [magi] are among the first worshippers of Jesus [Mt 2:1-12]. Here we see Matthew presenting the truth about Jesus coming to save all mankind. We see this repeated at the very end of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus issues His great missionary command to convert all nations [Mt 28:18-20].
- ✚ Matthew's Gospel is often considered the *Gospel of the Kingdom*, where Kingdom means the reign of God over the heart of man. The members of the Kingdom are those who are humble, obey God, worship Him alone, observe His Law, and believe in Jesus as the Messiah – the fulfillment of all the prophecies. Jesus calls all to enter His Kingdom.
- ✚ Matthew also is explicit in his identification of the Kingdom with the Church [Mt 16:18;18:17]. The Kingdom-Church is a hierarchical society, of which the disciples are the present existing reality and future governing body. This is clear from Jesus' *ecclesial discourse* [Mt 18].

Study Questions:

1. How do you think we are to reflect the Beatitudes in our lives as Christians?

2. In light of what we have read in Matthew about the Kingdom, what does the phrase in the Our Father, "Thy Kingdom come," mean?

3. When we look at our world today, we can come to the conclusion that Christianity has apparently failed. How do the parables of Mt 13 deal with this?

4. What do you think of the Sermon on the Mount? Is the program of life that Jesus lays out for us something we can actually live?