

Bible Studies on

Matthew 13-19

Confronting Jesus

7 studies

Study 1: Ears to Hear? (Matt 13)

Study 2: Removing Fear (Matt 14)

Study 3: Spiritual Cleansing (Matt 15:1-28)

Study 4: Show me a Sign from Heaven (Matt 15:29-16:12)

Study 5: Who do you say I am? (Matt 16:13-17:23)

Study 6: True Greatness, Real Forgiveness (Matt 18:1-35)

Study 7: Jesus on Divorce, Remarriage & Singleness (Matt 19:1-12)

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Introduction

Matthew's gospel gives us the longest exposition of Jesus – the king of the coming Kingdom of Heaven. In this soaring narrative, the reader is brought face to face with Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man and we are challenged to ask 'who is this man?'

Chapters 1-4 introduced us to Jesus and his disciples, before giving us perhaps the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Jesus' pattern for mission and ministry is revealed (chapter 8-9) and then his disciples are sent out to do the mission (Chapter 10). As we set into this middle section of the gospel we are effectively asked: do you think Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Lord, the chosen one, the Son of David, of Man? (Chapter 11-12).

In these Bible studies we look at the chapters 13-19 of Matthew's gospel. In this section, conflict with Jesus escalates, and each of us are forced to answer once again, 'Who do I say he is?', as the lines of who is in (and who is out) of the Kingdom of God get firmer, and opposition intensifies. At the same time, in his teaching, Jesus keeps pressing home the loving authority and power and grace that he, as the King of God's kingdom possesses - and confronting us with his inescapable and loving rule. He calls for our total allegiance, and divides people.

Each study will therefore be challenging and demanding as we are forced to ask whether we accept the Jesus as he is presented in the scriptures, or reject him for a Jesus we make in our image, who - in the end - will neither challenge us, nor save us.

Study 1: Matthew 13 - Ears to hear

Intro: Recalling the parables, and the parable of the soils

The Parable of the Soils

- Pray, asking God to help you listen to his word.
- Read the parable & explanation (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23), asking after each section: What did we miss / what did we get wrong? What is the point? (V9b).
- Go through the different scenarios. What is the particular challenge posed by each soil?
- Path - Do we let Satan snatch the word away by not thinking on it after we've heard it?
- Rocky ground - Will I let persecution stop us listening to the word of God?
- Weeds - Do we let life's worries, and the false promise of wealth stop us listening to the word of God?
- Good soil - Shall I determine throughout my remaining years to both hear and understand God's word, and let it produce a crop of kingdom fruit in my life?
- Who does Jesus explain the parable to? Why not everyone? (v11-17). Ask someone to explain this. Discuss this. What's the point?

The Parable of the Weeds

- Read Matthew 13.24-30.
- What do you think this means?
- Now read the explanation - vv36-43. What does Jesus add that you missed?
- What's the point?
- How does this build on what's already been taught in the Parable of the Sower about hearing?

The Parable of the Mustard Seed & the Yeast

- Read Matthew 13.31-32.
- How small is a mustard seed? How big is a mustard tree?
- What is Jesus saying?
- What is the challenge to us?

- Read Matthew 13.33
- What is Jesus saying? What's the challenge of this parable?

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

- Read Matthew 13.44
- What are we meant to grasp? Do you?

- Read Matthew 13.45-46
- What is the point? Is this the way that you think about the Kingdom of Heaven? What are we meant to see about what we most treasure? Is this true?

The Parable of the Net

- Compare vv. 40-43 with vv. 49-50. What is the essential point to understand?
- What is the challenge?

Reflection

- Review all the parables - go through them one by one, and the challenge that each poses.
- What is the connection between the challenge of the Parable of the Soils, and the challenge posed by the last parable?

- Now read vv. 51-52. The Old Testament contains treasures worth bringing out. Jesus' teaching contains new treasures, also worth bringing out.
- What characterizes the disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven?
- Can you think of a treasure which you have brought out? What treasure was it? Why was it a treasure to you?
- Share this with the person beside you.

Prayer

- Divide into men and women, and go to different rooms to share and pray.
- Share what treasure you saw tonight in Jesus' teaching.
- How were you challenged?
- What did you discover, or rediscover?
- How did God challenge you to change your life?
- Pray for one another, and for our church.

Study 2: Matthew 14 - Removing Fear

Intro: When have you been scared?

Herod, and the beheading of John the Baptist

- Read Matthew 14.1-12 - the story goes back in time to explain verse 2 (i.e. why Herod was saying, 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead').
- Who are the characters? Consider the attitudes towards John:
 - What did Jesus think of John? (Matthew 11.11)
 - What was Herod's attitude towards John?
 - What was Herodias' attitude towards John?
 - What was Herodias' daughter attitude towards John?
- Explain these.
- Who has the power?
- What do you think of Herod?
- Can you think of any contemporary 'Herods' who today foster fear?
- Why, do you think, is this story here?

Jesus, and the feeding of the 5000

- This story is familiar. But Matthew tells it deliberately. We need to slow down and listen to how Matthew tells it, the clues to its meaning lie in its telling.
- Read Matthew 14.22-36 again:
- What wasn't in Matthew's account that you thought would be?
- What was in Matthew's account that surprised you? What stands out?

- What's the point of all the bread that is left over?
- Comparing Herod and Jesus, what conclusions can we draw?
- How might we expect to see Jesus use his power when those he loves are in danger?

Jesus walks on water

- Read verses 22-26.
- Why might Jesus have immediately sent his disciples on ahead of him?
- What do you make of the disciples' initial response on seeing Jesus? Why?
- Read verses 27-30
- How does Jesus use his power?
- What on earth was Peter thinking? (v28)
- What on earth was Jesus thinking (in saying, 'Come')? Have a go at explaining this with reference to Genesis 1:26-28 and 3:17, and how this episode blows apart our expectations.
- Read verses 31-36
- Using verses 30 and 31 give a 3-minute impromptu gospel talk!
- Why is Jesus' question reasonable, given what happens in verse 32?
- The disciples worshiped Jesus. Think on verse 33. Would you have done the same (... really?), if you'd have been there? Why or why not? (c.f. Matthew 28:17; Revelation 19:10, 22:8-9)
- What is the significance of the connection between Jesus (in verse 36), and Peter (in Acts 5.15)?

Conclusion & Prayer

- Break into men's and women's groups for prayer.
- What have you learnt about Jesus and his use of power, and Herod's use of power?
- What difference does this make to you?
- Pray about this, with reference to what causes you fear.

Study 3: Matthew 15:1-28 - Spiritual Cleansing

Intro:

- Are there things about Jesus (or you being Christian) which are offensive to your family and friends? Discuss.
- Honestly, what do you find offensive about Jesus?
- Do you think God finds anything in you offensive?
- Pray: giving thanks that Christ overlooked the repulsion and offence of going to the cross, and that God, through the cross, overlooks what is offensive in us, and washes us clean. Pray we would be offended about what God is offended by.

Jesus offends the Religious Authorities.

- Read Matthew 15.1-11
- What was the intent of the religious authorities travelling all the way north to Galilee to meet Jesus?
- What is the charge? (NB: there is no explicit law per se in the Old Testament law about needing to wash ones hands before eating).
- What is the essence of Jesus' counterattack? (vv. 3-9)
- What is his issue with the religious authorities? (See Matthew 5.17-20, 23:23-28)
- Who, do you think, is Jesus offending here?

Jesus offends his disciples

- What do you think? Are people basically good with a track record of occasionally slipping up? Or are we corrupted at our core? Does this mean we're unable of doing anything good at all?
- What about you? Are you essentially good with occasional slip-ups?, or deeply rotten at heart? What do you think? How would you put it?
- Read Matthew 15.12-20
- After offending the Pharisees, now Jesus offends Peter by calling him 'dull'.
- What is his point?

- Look at the list. Think about each. Are these in your own heart? Yes?, or No?
- What is the honest conclusion about your spiritual condition? Is this an issue for you? When?

Jesus offends a needy foreign woman.

- Read Matthew 15.21-28.
- What is shocking about this?
- What are the 'steps' in Jesus' rudeness?
- V23
- V24
- V26
- What are the woman's 'steps' in meeting her rude obstacles?
- V22
- V25
- V27
- What do you think? Would you respond like this? If not, how would you respond? (Think: what would your essential message be to Jesus about himself, and about yourself?)
- What does this woman grasp about herself (and her daughter), and about Jesus that would enable her to make such steps?
- What does Jesus' rudeness cause us to ask of ourselves?
- Given our own heart uncleanness, if this woman's helplessness, and her daughter's spiritual condition is a mirror on our own spiritual condition, how does she teach us?

Prayer

- Alone or as a group, sit and read Psalm 51. David moves through several needs - mercy (from being punished), transgressions blotted out; iniquity washed away; his depravity (a rotten core – v.5); for God to not see his sins; a new, pure heart, not to be cast away ... deliverance from guilt.
- Now read Matthew 5:3-4 and pray Psalm 51.

Study 4: Matthew 15:29-16:12 - 'Show me a sign from heaven'

Intro

- Have you ever said, or has anyone ever said to you, 'If God wants me to believe in him, he needs to appear in front of me and show me a miracle, and then I'll believe'?
- (If so, what were the circumstances? What was your response? What was the effect - belief, or unbelief?)
- (If not, what might cause you to ask such a question yourself? If someone said it to you, how would you respond?)
- In this passage, this question is asked, and we hear Jesus' response. There are three 'moments' in three locations, but put together, they build on each other.

Jesus feeds the 4000.

- What was the point of Jesus feeding the 5000 back in chapter 14?
- If Jesus has fed 5000 people already, what - do you think - might be the point of repeating the miracle with 4000?

- Read Matthew 15.29-39.
- What stands out?
- Read the feeding of the 5000 (from 14.13-21), while the rest of the group keeps their eyes on the feeding of the 4000.
- What are the similarities and differences.
- Why the two accounts?
- What should be our response?

The Demand for a sign

- Read Matthew 16.1-4
- Is the request for a sign in verse 1 reasonable?
- The Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign from heaven, and he answers them by referring to 'the sign of the times'. What is this 'sign'?
- Explain Jesus' assessment of their generation in verse 4.

- What is the sign of Jonah?
- What 'sign(s)' has Jesus given us? Are these greater, or lesser? Is there then more, or less 'evidence' available to us? What then, are the 'signs of our times' that we must interpret??

Jesus warns his disciples about a faithless response

- Jesus has given a repeated and miraculous sign that he is from heaven, bringing far more blessings to people than even they expected or needed. So when the Pharisees and Sadducees demand a 'sign' that Jesus is from heaven, Jesus rebukes them. What do you think - could you be that wicked, that adulterous?
- Read 16.5-12
- What prompted the disciples' misunderstanding? (v.8)
- What are we meant to understand from Jesus' repeated miracle of feeding the multitudes?
- What is the 'yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees'? (vv.11-12, c.f. 23.16-22)
- Why must we be on our guard against this?
- What does this look like - Positively? - Negatively?

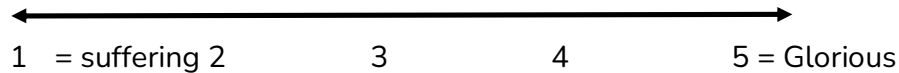
Prayer

- [If applicable] Split into men and women, go to separate rooms for prayer.
- Talk with each other about what challenges you have in faith.
- How can you guard your own heart?
- How can you help each other guard your hearts?
- Pray for one another.

Study 5: Matthew 16:13-17.23 - 'Who do you say I am?'

Intro: Who do you say I am? Christ?!

- Pray
- Imagine a 'suffering -> Glory' scale, rated 1-5,



- Rate Jesus on the scale during his earthly ministry
- Rate Jesus on the scale now
- Rate his disciples on the scale
- Rate his disciples on the scale now
- Where are you on the scale?
- What is your expectation for the rest of your earthly life?

- Read Matthew 16:13-20
- 'Who do you say I am?' Jesus asked. Peter answered.
- Honestly, speaking in your own terms, how would you answer this?
- What did Peter mean?

- How have people explained Jesus' words in verse 18?
- What can we say he meant? Why?

- Forgiveness only comes to anyone through the gospel. Earlier, the disciples were given authority to cast out demons. Now they get a greater authority. (Remember, Jesus was accused of blasphemy for declaring someone forgiven - Matt 9.2-3). So, explain verse 19 (c.f. also 18.18).

Double shock: Suffering, then Glory

- First Shock: Read Matthew 16.21-23
- What was the mismatch in expectation between Peter and Jesus?

- Where does this come out today?

- Second shock: Read Matthew 16.24-28

- Explain the necessary connection between Jesus' suffering & glory, and that of his disciples.
- What do you think - have you gained your life, but forfeited your soul?
- What is our encouragement? (vv. 27-28)

Seeing the Son of Man transfigured in Glory

- Although the transfiguration doesn't fulfil 16.28 entirely, it allows us to glimpse Jesus' glory, and it's astounding. Read Matthew 17:1-8
- Put yourself in Peter, James and John's shoes. What would have astounded you the most?
- What do you think Peter was thinking?
- What is God's point to Peter? ... to us? (v6)
- Where is the gospel?
- Read Matthew 17.9-13
- Jesus moves immediately from the revelation of his glory to another revelation of his coming suffering. What is the connection?
- What should be our response?

Son of Man frustrated at lack of faith

- From the heights of glory on the mountain, Jesus descends to the muck of evil down below.
- Read Matthew 17.14-23
- Who is Jesus frustrated at? (c.f. Matt 10:1) Why are they (and indeed, their generation) 'perverse'?
- Why couldn't they drive the evil spirit out? (.. aren't Jesus' two statements in verse 20 contradictory? ... what's the real issue?)
- What do you think ... is the disciples' grief appropriate? (v.23)

- Given Jesus' statement in verses 24-28, how would faith help?
- For you Does it? (What's your expectation of suffering, and/or glory?)

Prayer

- [If applicable] Split into men and women.
- Share what God has helped you to see.
- What would 'losing your life' look like for you? Talk about this, feel free to discuss this honestly with one another, and to comment on each other.
- Pray for one another, that we would have a connected theology of suffering and glory, and expectations formed by Christ.

Study 6: Matthew 18:1-35 - True Greatness, Real Forgiveness

Intro

- Yes / No Questions for private reflection on the topic of forgiveness:
 - a) In your heart of hearts, do you believe that God has forgiven you completely?
 - b) Is there persistent sin you have not fully repented of?
 - c) Is there someone at church who has sinned against you and is unrepentant? Are they unaware of their sin? Is this something you simply need to forgive, or do they need to be made aware of what they've done so that they can repent?
 - d) Think of the person whom you are most aggrieved by, or angry with. Have you told God your decision to forgive them? When you think of them, do you immediately wish them well? If not, do you ever pray for them, for their good?
- Pray that God would help you understand his heart on sin, repentance and forgiveness.

True Greatness requires becoming like a child

- Read Matthew 17.24-18.5.
- Jesus' question in 18.1 follows on from the discussion about the 'kings of the earth' (17.25). Clearly 'greatness' was a topic on the minds of the disciples.
- What must we each learn from children about entering the kingdom of heaven? (v.3)
- What then, does it mean to be great? Can you think of anyone like this?
- Verse 5 describes children's ministry at church. How? Explain Jesus' endorsement.

Causing to Stumble

- Jesus' close identification with lowly children means a high endorsement of children's ministry conducted well in his name. The flip side is that he takes very seriously when such a position is abused.
- Read Matthew 18.6-9

- From verse 6 - what would cause a child to stumble in their faith? What else? Being drowned with a millstone around your neck was a bloodless form of capital punishment. What is this better than? What is Jesus deadly protective of?
- From verse 7 - 'such things must come'. Why must they?
- Does this mean perpetrators aren't to blame? (v.7)
- To whom is Jesus speaking? In context, what is Jesus talking about (most immediately)? What else?
- What are we to take seriously? (c.f. also 13.41)
- If cutting off your hand doesn't deal with sin's intention (which is a heart & mind issue), what is Jesus advocating?

Show God's heart towards children

- Positively, what is to be our approach towards children?
- Why does Jesus need to teach this? (What might be our otherwise default attitude? Has this been your attitude?)
- What is God's heart towards children?

Dealing with someone who's sinned in the church

- Jesus wants our attitude towards children to be the same as the Father's attitude to them. We assume this is true with a Christian who sins. What is the Father's attitude towards them?
- Read Matthew 18.15-20.
- Jesus advocates increasing the pressure. Why? For whose benefit?
- Is this the recourse for every sin? (c.f. Colossians 3.13, Ephesians 4.2)
- What does it mean to 'treat them as they would a pagan or a tax collector'?
- Verse 18 sounds like 16.19. What does this mean?
- Given the context, is verse 20 there to introduce into church services? If not that, what is meant? (c.f. vv.18-19).

The parable of the unmerciful servant

- Following on from the previous discussion (about what you should do when someone sins, for their repentance), now Peter raises the issue about our attitude towards them if they keep sinning against us (i.e. if they're unrepentant).
- Read 18.21-35
- What do you think? Is the master's anger justified? What is the point?
- What is the application?
- What does it mean to 'forgive your brother or sister from the heart'?
- How would this apply in an abusive situation, where the cycle of sin keeps repeating?
- How is it possible to forgive a repeat offender from the heart? (c.f. Matthew 5.44).

Pray

- In a group, read out again the opening Yes / No Questions for reflection on the topic of forgiveness, and ask people to review their answers:
 - a) In your heart of hearts, do you believe that God has forgiven you completely?
 - b) Is there persistent sin you have not fully repented of?
 - c) Is there someone at church who has sinned against you and is unrepentant? Are they unaware of their sin? Is this something you simply need to forgive, or do they need to be made aware of what they've done so that they can repent?
 - d) Think of the person whom you are most aggrieved by, or angry with. Have you told God your decision to forgive them? When you think of them, do you immediately wish them well? If not, do you ever pray for them, for their good?
- Get people to write out an answer:
 - How has God encouraged you?
 - How has God challenged you?
 - What do you need to do?
 - Can you do it?
- Pray in two's and three's about this.
- Pray also with thanks for the children in church, for the many who lead (up front & behind the scenes); pray for your kids leaders. Pray for all to have servant hearts.

Study 7: Matthew 19:1-12 - Jesus on Divorce, Remarriage & Singleness

Intro

- Pray – asking that we would be ‘strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus as we think and talk about divorce, remarriage, and singleness.
- In churches there may people who are single and not thinking of marriage, people who are single who would love to be married and have never been married, and people who are single because they are divorced. And equally there are people who are married, either on their first, or second marriages. Some have been divorced and remarried. No one who’s been divorced entered into marriage wishing that outcome.
- When talking about relationships we raise some **personal and at times thorny matters**.
- Whatever the background to someone’s situation, we should take our cue from Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well in John 4: She had had five husbands, and was currently sleeping with another man. Yet Jesus spoke to her, when everyone else avoided her. He spoke to her with respect, and pointed her to himself and the eternal life in the Spirit she could have.

These are also **tricky matters to untangle**:

- Singleness. Beyond the pastoral pain of those who are single but who wish to be married, should singleness be chosen, or encouraged, and under what circumstances?
- Divorce. If God’s plan for marriage is for life (‘until we are parted by death’), is it ever appropriate for Christians to divorce? If so, why, and what constitutes ‘valid’ grounds for biblically-sanctioned divorce?
- Remarriage. If Christians divorce, is remarriage ever appropriate within the lifetime of your first spouse?

Getting started in thinking about Divorce, Remarriage, and Singleness

Perhaps using a whiteboard/butchers paper...

1. Ask the group, 'What would you say are the **common views** out there' in our society about divorce, remarriage and singleness?'
2. Ask the group, 'Without looking at the bible, what do you think is Jesus' summary teaching on these?'
3. Ask the group, 'What are your questions?'

Listening to Jesus on Divorce

- Read Matthew 19:1-3
- Do the Pharisees want to learn? Do we?
- What do you think? How might this be a test?

Background:

- There was a well-known background debate behind this question. For around 100 years or so, 'no cause divorce' had been practiced in Judea. Essentially, a husband could divorce his wife for any reason, and send her on her way.
- How was this justified biblically?
- Conservatives (lead by Rabbi Shammai) saw this as an outrageous violation of scripture, which allowed for only two real grounds for divorce: neglect (Exodus 21.10-11), or sexual immorality (Deut 24.1).
- But a more popular liberal interpretation of Deut 24.1 had been adopted by the Pharisees, who said that the phrase 'something indecent in her' (NIV, or literally 'a cause of adultery') could refer to anything: anything theoretically could cause adultery (a cold dinner ... a rude remark ... ugly looks ...), so therefore - according to his liberal view - the Bible sanctioned 'any-cause-divorce'. All a disgruntled partner had to do was say, 'I divorce you', and leave the house, and the marriage was over ... all made proper by a divorce certificate.

- The Pharisees' question was essentially asking Jesus to comment on the 'sexual immorality' grounds for divorce in the Old Testament: was he a liberal (like them), or a conservative? Could a man divorce his wife for any reason, or only for adultery? (and neglect - although because the debate was around Dt 24.1, not Ex 21.10-11, neglect is not touched on here by either party).

God's design for marriage today

- Read Jesus' response in 19.4-6
- How is marriage defined according to Jesus?
- According to Jesus, should this pre-sin model apply in a post-sin world?
- How does this correct the Pharisees?
- How does this correct the prevailing beliefs about marriage in our society today?
- Read verse 7.
- How would you answer?.
- Read verse 8.
- Revise the questions you listed in the introduction of this study. How would Jesus answer?

Listening to Jesus on Remarriage

- Read Matthew 19:9
- 'Marital unfaithfulness' (NIV) is the Greek word porneia, or 'sexual immorality', which is an umbrella term capturing all sexual activity outside of marriage, and which therefore includes adultery.
- Why would remarriage after divorce entail adultery?
- Remind people that Jesus is making a comment here about the debate on 'a cause of adultery' (from Deut 24.1), and is not touching on the other biblical grounds for divorce (neglect, from Ex 21.10-11).

- Is divorce always a sin, or always involves sin leading to divorce? Yes / No.
- If divorce in the Old Testament was a provision for an aggrieved partner whose marriage vows had been broken to be cleared to remarry, when would it be okay to remarry?
- What about abuse?
- This is covered from the principles drawn from the case law in Exodus 21.10-11. Since abuse is a specific form of neglect, and neglect is grounds for divorce, then abused partners may leave.
- How does Jesus' teaching from last week on 'how often should I forgive my brother' feed into this?

Listening to Jesus on singleness

- Read Matthew 19:10-12
- How is the disciples' remark similar to current attitudes about marriage?
- 'This word' refers to the disciples' misguided and cynical view of marriage as a duty and a life-long trap, one not easily exited. The alternative to marriage is not immorality, but a chaste life outside of marriage. Who should accept this 'word'? (v.12)
- What does it mean to 'live like a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven'? How should we think about this?

Reflection:

- Go back to your questions.
- What have you learnt?

Prayer

- What prayer points come out of this study? Pray for these.