

The Gospels

LESSON
TWO

The Gospel According to Matthew Discussion Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson Two: The Gospel According to Matthew

Discussion Forum

With

Dr. Richard Bauckham
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Dr. James Hamilton
Dr. Steve Harper
Dr. Peter Kuzmič

Dr. Wai-ye Ng
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Dr. Glen Scorgie
Dr. James D. Smith III
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Frank Thielman

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Willie Wells
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

Why is it important to understand the historical setting in which Matthew and other gospels were written?

In some ways the book of Matthew may be thought of as the most difficult of the Gospels to interpret, since it assumes so many things that most modern readers don't understand. This is true of all four gospels to some degree. But Matthew in particular assumes a great deal of knowledge about its historical setting in 1st century Palestine. Why is it important to understand the historical setting in which Matthew and the other gospels were written?

Dr. Peter Walker

Well, any biblical book is set in a particular context and it's really helpful to have an opportunity to work out why the author was writing and when he was writing. At the same time, I think we need to be a little bit careful not to overplay that. You know, what's written is the most important thing, and you could spend a lot of time looking behind the scenes to try and work out exactly when it was written and what the purpose of it was. If we can get some idea of the exact location of it or the timing of it, then that can help us to understand the context which he was writing in, and then we can probably then work out what our context is and reapply the same message to our different context.

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think that most of the books of the Bible in one way or the other simply assume a certain amount of historical context. They assume we know something about geography and relevant history and the culture and customs of the time. In other words, they take for granted a lot of things that they don't spell out, and therefore, it's very useful to know something about these things. I mean, an example for the Gospels is that the Gospels keep referring to people of the Pharisees. They don't actually tell us who the Pharisees are, but you know, we have material outside the

Bible that tells us more about the Pharisees and simply filling in things like that. Or think about the way that Matthew's gospel tells us about Herod, and then there's another Herod, and there's another Herod in Acts. We might get very confused as to which kings these are. They're taking for granted that we know it, we know something about the Herods; we can fill in that background information. So there are just lots of ways in which these writers simply assume that their readers know things, that since we are reading them in a much later period of history, we have to supply that knowledge.

Dr. Mark Strauss

When we're talking about the Gospels, for example, we really have two levels of historical context for the Gospels. The first level is the level of Jesus himself and the events of his life. So to understand what Jesus is saying, what he's doing, we have to understand 1st century Palestine. We have to understand that the Jewish state under Roman rule. We have to understand religious groups like Pharisees and Sadducees, and political groups like the Herodians, and why there was a governor like Pontius Pilot in Judea and a king like Herod Antipas in Galilee in the north. So to understand what Jesus says, what Jesus does, how others react to him, we have to enter into the world of the text. So, that's the first level of historical context for the Gospels.

The second is the fact that the Gospels were all written somewhat after the fact — anywhere from thirty to fifty years after the events. And each gospel writer is writing about the events of Jesus, but also writing for the readers of his day. And those readers are going through different struggles and different issues. And so, understanding that historical context, the context of the writers and the readers, as well as the context of Jesus in 1st century context in which he lived, is crucial. One example of this, Mark's gospel for example — Of course, to understand Mark's gospel you have to understand 1st century Israel and Jesus and his interaction with the disciples, his interaction with the religious leaders, but you also have to try to understand what is going on in Mark's community. Most scholars think Mark's gospel is written to a church in Rome, to the church in Rome, the suffering church in Rome, and so Mark's call and Jesus' call in that gospel, to take up your cross and follow him, to be willing to suffer and die for your faith, is a call, not just to the first disciples in Jesus' life, but also to Mark's readers — to be willing to suffer persecution, to follow Christ even to death. So there's that second level of historical context that we need to understand in order to understand the message, the overall message of the Gospels.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

I believe that when we study any of the Gospels, such as the Gospel of Matthew, it's valuable to know its author's historical background. After all, if Jesus' life is a historical fact, then the more information we have about the historical record of his life, the better we'll be able to understand his life itself. Of course, as readers receiving the message of Matthew's gospel, we don't always realize how helpful it is to learn about its author. But learning about a book's author and historical setting really can help us understand its contents.

Question 2:**How confident should we be that the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew?**

One crucial aspect of the historical setting of every book is its author. And the Gospel of Matthew has been attributed to the apostle Matthew since the earliest days. But this attribution is challenged in many scholarly circles. How confident should we be that the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think that we can be fairly confident about one thing, which is that the titles of the gospels, the ascription of the gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, go back to a very early stage. And I think the best argument for this is once you think the gospels were circulating, if you think of the gospels circulating around the churches... once a church has more than one gospel, they've really got to have some way of distinguishing one from another. You know, this is the Gospel of Matthew; this is the Gospel of Luke. And we have no evidence at all that they ever distinguished the Gospels in any other way. And so it's very likely, I think, that even if the titles may not have, as it were, been written at the top of the page — very often in ancient literature they weren't — nevertheless, when the Gospels circulated, the information about the person they were ascribed to would have gone along with them. And then when they put them in their book cupboard, as they would have had a small collection of books belonging to the church, each scroll or codex had to have a sort of name tag so that you'd know what it is before you pulled it off the shelf. And, again, these would have to be labeled, no doubt, "Gospel According to Matthew," and so forth.

Dr. Robert Plummer

Every ancient copy that we have of the gospel of Matthew has the title at the top of it "*Kata Matthaion*," "According to Matthew," consistently across a wide geographic area. And of course for that to take place from the earliest copies of that manuscript, it had to be written on there. Martin Hengel, a famous German scholar, has argued that as soon as that manuscript began to be copied — so from the earliest times — it had to have a title affixed to it according to customs of manuscripts circulating and so on, and also to account for later evidence. So from the earliest time it had the title "*Kata Matthaion*" or "According to Matthew." Also, early church testimony is unanimous that Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, wrote this gospel. There's a number of incidental features in the gospel which are interesting and may support that.

Remember, of course, that Matthew was a tax collector. We read in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 9 where Jesus calls him. He was working at this toll booth, or this revenue booth, and it is interesting if you look at the parallels in Mark 2 and Luke 5, Matthew is the only one who identifies this man as Matthew. The other ones mention him as Levi. Of course it's not unusual at that time for people to go by two or three names as we see with Saul and Paul, or Cephas and Peter and Simon, and so on. But Matthew in his own gospel identifies this disciple, this apostle who is called Matthew. Also it's been noted that Matthew is a tax collector, has in his gospel an interestingly higher percentage of teaching of Jesus that relates to money or parables

that deal with money or revenue. So not only do we have the title of the gospel, and early church testimony, but these incidental details within the gospel themselves seem to substantiate that claim.

Question 3:

What can the structure and content of Matthew's gospel reveal about his purpose for writing?

Knowing that Matthew authored the gospel that bears his name helps us interpret what he wrote. Our knowledge of Matthew informs our reading of his book. But we can also use the text to learn things about the author, such as his purpose for writing. What can the structure and content of Matthew's gospel reveal about his purpose for writing?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

Well first of all, you need to understand when you're talking about the structure of the Gospel of Matthew that it has a very deliberate structure, not an accidental structure. Obviously at the beginning you have birth narratives; at the end you have the passion and resurrection narratives. The real question about structures is how do you structure the stuff in between? And that's precisely the part of the material that we find the most variance between one gospel and another in terms of structure. What Matthew tends to do is give you a block of narrative, then a block of teaching, then a block of narrative, then a block of teaching, then a block of narrative, then a block of teaching. Now this is an artificial structure. What we know for sure is Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Ok, this week I'm just a talking head, next week I'll do fifteen miracles." That's not the way it happened in Jesus' life. So what Matthew has done is grouped together the teaching of Jesus in terms of themes, major themes, or topics. So he's sort of collected Jesus' greatest hits, as you will, on this subject or that subject or the other subject, and we have major blocks of teaching. Now here is the interesting bit. Some people have said, "Well, Jesus is being presented as the new Moses in the Gospel of Matthew." The real focus of Matthew however, is to present how much greater than Moses Jesus is. He is, in fact, the wisdom of God come in the flesh. So he, if you will, is the exegesis, the interpretation of the mind of God, come in the flesh. And so we have these large blocks of teaching material in which Jesus's wisdom, that he has as God and from God, that he will share with his disciples and with the world. And that's one of the major things that structures the Gospel of Matthew and makes it different from, for example, Luke's gospel.

Question 4:

How did Matthew see Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes?

To fulfill his broader purposes toward his predominantly Jewish audience, Matthew pointed out that Jesus fulfilled a number of Old Testament themes and expectations. How did Matthew see Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes?

Dr. James Hamilton

Matthew was focused on presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament because if the Old Testament is not fulfilled, God's word fails — God's word fails, and God's people can rightly doubt a God who doesn't keep his word. And so, Matthew wants to present Jesus as the fulfillment and the culmination of everything that the Old Testament has pointed forward to, to assure God's people that they can trust God's word.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Matthew's gospel is actually a fascinating account of how significant it is that the Old Testament anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ. And the way in which Matthew does this, especially in the first five or six chapters, isn't primarily through proof texting, although he does that — for example, Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" — so, there are these proof textings that can go on within Matthew's gospel, but there's more that goes on; it's more textured than that. So that you see Jesus, who actually embodies Israel, and does what Israel is supposed to do and be, and yet, historical Israel never could do that. So, what you see happening with Jesus is, Jesus comes onto the scene, and he is Israel incarnate. He goes down to Egypt. He is forced out into the wilderness where he's tempted. He goes onto a mountain and he begins to deliver the Law again. All of these images of the new Moses, or Israel incarnate, find their source and their scope back in the Old Testament.

Rev. Mike Glodo

Why did Matthew care that Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies and expectations, and why should we? Well, there were many in Jesus' day that claimed to be the Messiah, and so certainly in Matthew's mind, one important reason is to distinguish Jesus from among those who were falsely claiming to be the Messiah. But the bigger reason for Matthew, and for us, I would say, is not so much that the Old Testament predicted that there would be a certain person and a certain place and a certain time — although the Old Testament does do that to some extent — but what was important from Matthew's point of view, and I would say should be from our point of view, is that in Jesus was the manifestation of the coming kingdom of God that people had been longing for, had been waiting for. And so out of that experience of the power and the teaching and the working of Jesus, the apostles, Matthew included, went back to their Old Testaments to see how Jesus had been anticipated by the Old Testament. And when they read their Old Testaments from the standpoint of experiencing Jesus, they found that the Old Testament Scriptures had in fact witnessed to him and him specifically. And that's how we should approach the question as well. We shouldn't approach the question skeptically as to, "Well, was Jesus really the one?" But we should approach the question simultaneously from whether he was the one, but also seeking an encounter with him to receive the purpose of the gospel, which is to present to us the living Christ who offers himself to us. So as we read the Old Testament, we don't just read it with a jeweler's magnifying glass on our eye, but we read it looking for an encounter with Christ himself who is the chief subject of the Gospels as he comes as the witness and as the embodiment of the kingdom of God.

Question 5:**What does the Transfiguration teach us about Jesus' role as the Christ?**

Matthew didn't just point out explicit ways that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament messianic expectations. He also shaped a number of his narratives to draw attention to this theme. A striking example appears in Matthew 17 in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. What does the Transfiguration teach us about Jesus' role as the Christ?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The transfiguration is this amazing scene where Jesus goes up on the mountain, and his disciples, just three of them go up with him. And they get this display of the glory of Christ. And so, first we get a glimpse of these two natures of Christ, where this man, nevertheless, is transfigured and we get a display of his glory that had always been true of him, but as that Christmas hymn says, was veiled in flesh, but we see the godhead. We get this blinding display of his glorious presence, so glorious that the disciples come down off the mountain and they themselves are glowing. But when we think about the fulfillment of the covenant, that's powerful, because who does he meet with in the Transfiguration? He meets with Elijah and Moses. And so in this we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, and the fulfillment of the prophetic office, fulfilling his messianic identity in these ways. So the old covenant is coming to its fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah, as he meets with the giver of the Law, Moses, and then the fulfillment of the great prophetic office in Elijah, Jesus here comes, meets with them, and establishes his messianic identity in that amazing transfiguration.

Dr. Frank Thielman

The question of what the Transfiguration teaches us about Christ's role is important because the Transfiguration is one of those events in the life of Christ, and its narration in the Gospels — this is one of those events that ties who Jesus is firmly back into the Old Testament. Jesus appears on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and with Moses. Elijah is the great prophet who worked many miracles, just like Jesus also was a great prophet who worked many miracles. And Moses was the great teacher of Israel, the great Law-giver of Israel, and Jesus is presented in the New Testament also as a great teacher. And if you look at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also gives a kind of law. He gives a reinterpretation of the Mosaic law there, his own teaching. And so we can see how Jesus is tied back into the Old Testament, and has to be interpreted by means of the Old Testament, but at the same time the narrative makes very clear that Jesus is greater than either Elijah or Moses, that Jesus can't be explained simply in terms of Elijah and Moses because God himself appears on the scene and says, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased." So the Transfiguration is one of those places in the New Testament where we can see both the continuity — the really critical and important continuity between Old and New Testament — and some of the discontinuity, some of the surprises that Jesus brings to us as someone who comes on the scene fulfilling all that the Old Testament has to say.

Question 6:**What does the Lord's Supper signify in Matthew's gospel?**

In his institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus drew additional connections between himself and the Old Testament. On the night he was arrested, Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples. But he gave the meal new meaning by focusing its symbolism on his messianic mission. And it's that new meaning that the church has observed in the Lord's Supper. What does the Lord's Supper signify in Matthew's gospel?

Dr. James D. Smith III

What the Lord's Supper signifies is rooted in the Old Testament description of the Passover, that meal by which God was expressing a deliverance for his people through the leadership of Moses, but also the obedience of the people to see the open way that God had provided. Jesus commemorates that in the upper room in the Last Supper, and that celebration in which there is the bread, which signifies his body; there is the wine or cup, which signifies his bloodshed.

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the fascinating things in the Gospels is to see how Jesus in the upper room, when he breaks bread with his disciples, is doing it not that far away from another place in Jerusalem which Jesus has visited a few days before, which is the temple. And the temple was the place into which Jesus had gone and had done this cleansing of the temple, signifying that everything the temple stood for was now about to come to an end. And people wondered, how on earth is he doing that and why? And now, if you like, Jesus with his disciples on his own gives the answer: Instead of the temple being the place where sacrifices are going to be made, Jesus is going to open up an alternative new way. And that's what's going in the Last Supper, Jesus opening up an alternative to the temple, an alternative sacrifice. And as he breaks bread and he says, "This is my body," their eyes are opened to the reality that Jesus is about to die and is about to give his life as a sacrifice. He's opening up a new way into God's presence. In contrast to the temple, now this is the way. And he's placing himself right at the center. One of the fascinating things about the story is that we're uncertain whether or not there would have been a Passover lamb on the table. I personally believe that there wasn't, and that Jesus is celebrating this just a fraction ahead of schedule because he's going to be dead the next day. Therefore, there wasn't a Passover lamb on the table. But when Jesus says, "...this is my body broken for you," effectively he's saying, "I am that Passover Lamb. That which you need to eat at this meal is me." So he's making an incredible claim that he is the one who is going to be like the Passover lamb, redeeming people.

Question 7:
How was Jesus a greater prophet than Moses?

Matthew taught that the salvation Jesus' secured for his people is even greater than what God had done through Moses in the Exodus. One way he did this was by portraying Jesus as the prophet that was foretold in Deuteronomy 18, who fulfilled and surpassed what Moses had done for Israel. How was Jesus a greater prophet than Moses?

Dr. Glen Scorgie

It's very interesting that we have in the Scriptures certain parallels drawn, sometimes explicitly, between Moses and the future Jesus. The significance of that, I think, is intriguing. Because at one level, the emphasis of the New Testament as it presents Jesus, is that one greater than Moses is now present. And we could list some of the significant ways that Jesus Christ is greater than Moses. But all of that relative greatness is premised on certain affinities or similarities between Moses and Jesus, always keeping in mind that eventually, if you will, Jesus trumps Moses. But Moses is the quintessential mediator of the Law of God. Moses was the liberator, the one God used to bring a people in bondage into a Promised Land. And in a somewhat more spiritualized and profoundly more important way, Jesus is the new and greater Moses who delivers people from the multifaceted dimensions of bondage into the Promised Land of infinite grace and an eternal future.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

In the Old Testament we have anticipation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in terms of his work, in terms of prophet, priest and king. Deuteronomy 18 is a very, very important passage, which speaks of a prophet in the future to come like a Moses. In the Old Testament context, "like a Moses" was one who, like Moses, met God face to face, who uniquely received God's revelation. In fact, Moses stood as sort of the pinnacle of all the prophets. As you work through the Old Testament, particularly even at the end of Deuteronomy 34, there is the announcement there that no prophet like Moses has yet arisen. And this sets us up for one to come who will be like a Moses, yet greater, who will speak God's word, who will give us God's truth, who will know God face to face, and that really is culminated in our Lord Jesus Christ. John 1 picks this up — Our Lord who knew the Father from all eternity, who discloses him. Acts 3 picks this up, as well, that this is the fulfillment of this, so that Jesus is the one who brings God's kingdom, he brings God's revelation to pass, he is the one who fulfills Moses' role yet in a greater way. And Hebrews 1 particularly emphasizes that that God speaking through the prophets, including Moses, is now culminated in Jesus Christ his son who brings that revelation to pass.

Question 8:**Why did Matthew generally use the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of the term “kingdom of God”?**

Most scholars agree that Jesus is the anticipated Old Testament Christ and that he came to fulfill the Old Testament expectation of establishing the messianic kingdom of God on earth. But in Matthew’s gospel, the term “kingdom of God” is only used a few times. Far more often, Matthew wrote about the “kingdom of heaven.” Why did Matthew generally use the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of the term “kingdom of God”?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

When reading the Gospels together, the theme of the kingdom of God clearly is a major theme that’s in Jesus’ teaching and ministry in every way. But one of the things that stands out when you compare Matthew with the rest, especially Mark and Luke, is that Matthew alone uses this unique phrase, “the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew also, on occasion, does use the phrase “the kingdom of God,” and, in fact, Matthew has a bunch of other language as well. He calls it “my kingdom,” “my Father’s kingdom,” “your kingdom,” “the kingdom,” so it’s not as if he only uses kingdom of heaven. But that phrase, “kingdom of heaven” really stands out because it’s unique to Matthew, and in fact, it’s unique to all literature preceding Matthew. It becomes a very important idea after Matthews’ time, but before that we don’t have any clear reference to the idea of kingdom of heaven. So why does Matthew use this phrase? Well, some have tried to argue in more recent times, or modern times, that there’s actually a difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, this doesn’t really pan out at all. Because, in fact, when you compare what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven with other places where Mark and Luke have the very same passage and call it the kingdom of God, that’s one of the definitive ways to see that they have the same reference, that they refer to the same thing.

But in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven, while it has the same denotation, or the same referent as the kingdom of God, what’s really important and beautiful to see is that it has a very different connotation. That is, although it means the same thing as the kingdom of God, it has more evocations in Matthew’s language to call the kingdom of God the kingdom of heaven. And what is that evocation? Well, when you read Matthew overall you’ll see that there’s a major theme of contrasting God in heaven with humanity on earth. God’s way of doing kingdom, which he calls the kingdom of heaven, and humanity’s way of ruling and reigning and acting and behaving towards each other which we might call the kingdoms of this world.

One of the places you can see this heaven and earth contrast so clearly and so wonderfully is the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus teaches us as Christians to pray, that the Father’s will, the Father’s name and the Father’s kingdom might come to earth even as it is in heaven. This idea is that right now we are experiencing a fallen and broken and imperfect reality in our relationships, in our relationship to each other, to God and

society, but that God has a perfect plan and vision and kingdom and reign and rule that he's going to establish on the earth. And for Matthew to talk about the kingdom of heaven is a very powerful way for him to feel the difference between merely the things of this world, and our Father in heaven who reigns and rules and promises to come again. So, the point of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's language is to let us feel and taste the difference between God's reign that is still yet to come and all the reigns and ruling and behavior of this earth. There's a contrast between those two realities, and Matthew using kingdom of heaven helps us feel and taste and hope in that time coming for God's kingdom of heaven.

Question 9:

Why is it important for Christians to pursue the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of God — or as Matthew usually called it, the kingdom of heaven — will only be fully realized in the future. As a result, it sounds rather intangible to many Christians. Some even wonder if the kingdom has much relevance to life in the present age. Why is it important for Christians to pursue the kingdom of heaven?

Dr. Peter Walker

The kingdom of heaven is the way in which the New Testament refers to also the kingdom of God, and yes, it can sound a little bit as though it doesn't apply to us. I think we think of the phrase, "kingdom of God," that's more helpful, and then remember that that actually means that God is becoming King through his appointed King, who is Jesus Christ. And once we get that sense, then we realize that whenever we're spreading the news of Christ or living for Christ, we are bringing in the kingdom. And so it's actually a very practical thing, it's not all about what happens in the future or in heaven, if you like, it's far more this-worldly. This world is meant to be the place where Christ rules, and wherever we bring that in, that's important for Christians to be doing.

Dr. Simon Vibert

When we speak about the kingdom of God, we often talk about it as having come, but actually we still anticipate the kingdom coming in the future. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray like that — "Your kingdom come now as it is in heaven." And there is a sense in which because the king has come — he's inaugurated and set up his kingdom here on earth but we wait for his return, the second coming of Christ will be the day in which all the full benefits of what Jesus did when he first came will, the implications will, be finally worked out — and there is the sense in which every believer has the job of announcing the king's future coming as they go out into this world with the gospel. So we call people to get ready for the day when Christ will return. But yet, as believers, we do enjoy the privilege of having Christ as our Lord now. So, we live under his reign now but wait for the day when we will fully have that realized, not only for us, but actually for the whole of creation too.

Question 10:
How did Jesus' death atone for sin?

In Matthew, just as in the other gospels, one critical aspect of Jesus' role as messianic king was his atoning death. But for many people, it seems strange to think that the death of the King could somehow benefit his people. So, how did Jesus' death atone for sin?

Dr. J. I. Packer

The death of the Lord Jesus for sin — that's how it's presented all the way through the New Testament — worked, if one can put it this way, because he became our penal substitute. "Substitute" means he took our place, and "penal" points to the fact that he took our place in enduring the judgment, the penalty which all of us had merited by our own transgressions of God's law, the penalty, that is, with which God had threatened us for breaking his law. God's nature is such — I mean this is his holiness in reality — his nature is such that where there has been sin, there has to be retribution. And the wonderful, wise, loving way of salvation that God planned was to divert the penalty from our guilty shoulders, if I can put it that way, onto the innocent flawless shoulders of his incarnate Son, who thus fulfills the pattern of the flawless animal sacrifice that was demanded all through the Old Testament. And it seems to me that if the reality of penal substitution isn't stressed, well, witness to the truth of the atonement is not being adequately borne. I just quote one Scripture for that, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him" — that's the Lord Jesus — "who knew no sin" — he was innocent of all transgression — but "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him." "Made sin" means he was treated as a sinner. "Made righteous" means that we are treated as righteous in the way that he himself is treated by his Father as righteous, even though we're not righteous. But we are forgiven, and the guilt of our sins is blotted out because the Lord Jesus took our place. And, Isaiah 53 says it all, "The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all."

So, that's how I understand the, should I say, the mechanics of atonement, and that's how the New Testament exhibits them again and again. There's an illustration, as a matter of fact, in Colossians 2 which most people read over so quickly that they don't feel the force of it. It says that God took out of the way the penal requirement of the Law, nailing it to his cross. And the picture there is that, well, if we had stood before the cross when Jesus was crucified, we would have seen a notice, a placard, nailed up on the top of the cross above Jesus' head declaring the crime for which Pilate was executing him: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." The Gospels tell us about that, but if now we look back to the cross with the eye of faith, what we see on the placard is the wretched list of our own transgressions. Nailing it to the cross, that's what that little phrase is pointing to as the explanation of what was happening when Jesus died.

Question 11:**Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?**

Jesus died, but he didn't remain in the grave. On the third day, he rose from the dead. In Scripture, the fact of Jesus' resurrection was often included in gospel presentations. And historically, it has been an important part of the church's confession of Christ. Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?

Dr. Peter Walker

The resurrection of Jesus is basic to the gospel because without the resurrection, with a dead Jesus, we have nothing. I mean, what help is there in a dead Jesus? Crucified, failed. So, the resurrection in the New Testament is a sign that Jesus has been vindicated. And if we talk about the forgiveness of sins coming about through his death, well, if Jesus had died and not been raised again, we don't know that we're forgiven. The whole doctrine of salvation falls apart without the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. But it's more than that. I mean, it means that Jesus Christ is alive today. And an essential part of the good news is that here is a living person that we can know and have our lives transformed by. We're not following just a dead hero; we're following a living person. But it's more than that. It's that there's actual new life beyond the grave for those who believe in Christ. So, death is not the end. The resurrection is a sign that there is a new kingdom established and that we have hope beyond the grave. And it is even more than that. It's that God has got a purpose for his whole world. This creation which is subjected to frustration finds through the resurrection that there's a hope of new creation. And so the resurrection turns out to be absolutely key, not just for individuals, but for the whole world.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

So why is the resurrection so important for Christians — so important that they would celebrate their gatherings together on that day rather than on the Sabbath? Well there are many reasons. One is that the life and suffering and death of Jesus would ultimately be meaningless if it were not for the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead it was God's vindicating that Jesus was right. You may remember that many of his enemies accused him of being satanic or foolish or a crazy revolutionary, but instead he spoke truth and wisdom and healed and lived in humility and lived with sinners and was accused being a sinner himself for living with them. Yet, God vindicated by raising him from the dead that he was the true Son of God.

Another reason why Jesus' resurrection is so essential and why his life and death and suffering are not sufficient in and of themselves is because in the resurrection Jesus not only provides an example, but he also conquers death itself. In his rising, death is put to death. Death itself is killed. And so, if we only had his suffering and his death, he would serve a great example, but it would not deal with our sin problem. We would still face our deaths, only with an example of someone who also faced death

with nobility. But the resurrection of Jesus provides an assurance that not only Jesus was truly from God but that death itself is now conquered.

Another reason that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so important — and this is one that I am afraid we often don't speak of, though it's in the Scriptures — and that is that the resurrection of Jesus inaugurates and initiates the new and final age of the world itself. Not only is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins and atonement for our sins, but as important, and maybe even more importantly, the resurrection begins the new and final age of the world. The new creation, as the Scriptures call it, begins at that tomb, that empty tomb. It is the new epicenter, the new focal point, the new hinge of history itself. It is not just another event. It becomes the focal point by which all of history is now understood because all that Adam did and failed to do, and that death reigned from the time of Adam's fall up to Christ. Now life reigns because a new second Adam has come, and the resurrection is this turning point in history. This is why the rest of the New Testament authors regularly look back to the centrality of Jesus being raised from the dead, and speak of us now living in the end times. We are now all living in the end times, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has inaugurated this beginning of the end, and the hope for the Christian is that that beginning will now find its consummation at the second coming of Christ which is called, according to the Scriptures, a new creation itself.

Another reason the resurrection is so important is because it affirms the value of God's created order. It affirms that our bodies as made by God, and all matter, do matter. That it affirms that God cares about creation and that our hope is a resurrection body ourselves in physical bodies even though creation itself is marred, what God has made is good, and the creation itself, the Scriptures say, is longing for its redemption, the adoption of the sons of God. The resurrection not only inaugurates this, but shows that God cares about our physical bodies and the physical world that he has made.

Question 12:

When is Jesus coming back? And what should we be doing in the meantime?

We know that one day Jesus will return and consummate God's kingdom on earth. He will judge all rival powers and authority, and fully establish his earthly reign. And as we look at Scripture, it's evident that Jesus' future return ought to impact the way we live at the present time. But when is Jesus coming back? And what should we be doing in the meantime?

Dr. Willie Wells

When will Jesus come back and what should we be doing in the meantime? Well, right off let me tell you that he is coming back. Just like he left, he's coming back. When he's coming back, we don't know. Anybody that would try to apply a date, a

time to it, would be in error because the Father didn't tell. The Word of God doesn't say when he's coming back, but it does say that he is coming back. So when we think about that, Jesus, after he was resurrected, hung around here for 40 days, and he was revealing himself to the disciples and others to reaffirm them, to give them the reassurance that what he had said about his sacrificial death and his resurrection had come true. Then the cloud took him back, and now he sits on the right hand side of Father God, and the Scripture says that he is interceding for us all now.

So what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to just go to church on Sunday, go to midweek services, have church? Are we just to wait for his return? Are we just to go in and hoard up all the physical things that we can? Are we to get all the moneys and put them in bigger barns? Are we to just wait for him? No, there is a direction that he's given us, some directives, that we are to be witnesses for Christ. We are to be busy about the work of the Lord. Interesting. Jesus said that "I come to do the will of my Father," and so that's our will, to do the will of the Father. And how do we do that? Yes, by maintaining church attendance. Yes, by being on fire for the Lord, witnessing to everyone we come in contact with. Yes, by making disciples of those who have just been new converts who have come in, assimilating them into the church to make them become, in a snowball effect, to be witnesses for Christ. Yes, we are to be doing that. Yes, we are to be busy about growing and maturing in Christ. Yes, we are to be reading our Bibles and praying and having great communication with the Lord. Yes, we are to do all of those things. But more importantly, we are not to sit by idly waiting for him to come back, for the Bible says that he will come like a thief in the night. We know he's coming back. We don't know. It may be today. It could be tomorrow. The problem is for us not to count the days when he will come because we don't know, but it's to work while it's day, for night will come when no man can work.

Question 13:

In the Sermon on the Mount, was Jesus contradicting the Old Testament?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus frequently taught his followers how to think, feel and act as members of God's kingdom. One of his most famous teachings of this type is known as "the Sermon on the Mount." Sadly, some things Jesus said there have often been misunderstood by Christians. In fact, some interpreters actually believe that Jesus was contradicting and perhaps even refuting the Old Testament. So, it's important to ask the question: In the Sermon on the Mount, was Jesus contradicting the Old Testament?

Dr. David Bauer

Many readers of the Gospels have problems with what are called "the antitheses" in Matthew chapter 5. Six times there in Matthew 5:21-48 Jesus says something like, "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you..." This is a good example of interpreting passages in context. That passage should be read in light of the

immediately preceding verses: 5:17-20 where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For I tell you not one jot or one iota shall pass from the Law until all these things are fulfilled. Therefore, whoever teaches, or does these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever loosens these commandments shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you’ll never enter the kingdom of heaven.” So, if you understand 5:21-48 in light of those verses, it’s quite clear that the “You have heard that it was said” statements are specific forms of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees that is inadequate for entrance into the kingdom of heaven, whereas the “but I say to you” statements represent specific forms of the exceeding righteousness that is necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Dr. James Hamilton

When Jesus presents these “You have heard that it was said... but now I tell you...” statements in the Sermon on the Mount, I think that the best way to look at this is that Jesus is getting at the true meaning of the Law. Not that he’s introducing something new, but that he is expositing, in a sense, what God was aiming at all along. So that when the Law says “you shall not commit adultery,” God never intended his people to think that they could get away with looking lustfully at women who are not their wives, or even looking lustfully at their own wives. So Jesus is not introducing a new requirement, he’s making plain what’s already inherent in the Law.

Dr. Dan Doriani

When Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you,” he was not contradicting the Old Testament. He was not saying, “The Old Testament is wrong, and I will set it right.” He was, however, correcting, in the first place, misunderstandings of the Old Testament, which generally tended at the time toward a relatively shallow or legal or, we might say, legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament. And he was also correcting, shall we say, a merely superficial reading. So, you have something like, “You shall not kill.” Jesus says, “You’ve heard that it was said to the ancients long ago, ‘You shall not kill.’ But I say to you...” and then he moves on from there. Well, he certainly doesn’t contradict it. He certainly doesn’t say, “And you’ve heard that it was said long ago that you shall not kill, but by the way, you can kill people.” Now, we may say that in the case of a just war it’s permissible to kill, and so forth, but that’s already in the Old Testament. What Jesus does instead is to say, “Look, you might have been satisfied by refraining from killing someone, but I say to you that we must root out the hatred that leads to murder. You must root out the despising that leads to murder.” Even the belittling statements — don’t call someone “*racca*.” Don’t call someone “*morra*.” Don’t call them stupid. Don’t call them a fool. Don’t say they have an empty head. Don’t say they have an empty heart. Because when you do, you devalue them.

What makes people kill? Well, rage makes them kill. So, don’t be angry. Despising makes people kill. Indifference makes people kill. What’s the most common form of

killing in America and the world today? Surely, it's the taking of the life of the unborn. And why does it happen? Because they're despised. Because someone says, "They are '*racca*.' They are '*morra*.' They are worthless. They are better to me dead than alive. They don't deserve to live." "This world would be a better place — I'd be happier if this person were dead." "I do not care about that life." So, it's not just anger, but belittling. Of course, the thing that Jesus does is move beyond. You know, he just keeps going deeper and deeper in the Law. So, "don't kill," "don't be angry," "don't despise," "don't belittle," "don't call people names." And then at the very end he switches it, and he says, "Oh, by the way, and one more thing, don't let anybody be angry and want to kill you either." If you go to the temple, and you're about to offer a gift on the sacrifice, and you remember that your brother has something against you — not that you have something against them, but they have something against you — go and be reconciled. It's not enough to put off your anger. You have a responsibility, indeed, to put off anger if you possibly can throughout this world, with people who are justly angry, and even with people who are, most irritatingly, unjustly angry at you. Remove murder and all murderous, or pre-murderous, dispositions from yourself and everyone around you.

Dr. Ben Witherington III

One of the interesting things about the Sermon on the Mount is the so-called antitheses — "You've heard it said... but I say to you." Now what's interesting about this is that sometimes Jesus is contrasting his own teaching with the teaching of earlier Jewish teachers. You've heard the elders say "X," I'm saying "Y," and sometimes there really is a correction, if you will. But even more than that, Jesus is actually saying here, "I'm instituting a new covenant. New occasions call for new duties, new commandments. You have heard Moses say, 'If you're going to divorce your wife, give her a bill of divorce,' but you see, Moses gave that commandment due to the hardness of your heart. I'm now saying something to you different. I'm saying you're going to be called to a higher standard of rectitude now in the new covenant. No divorce." Now that's certainly different from Moses. I wouldn't want to call it a contradiction, but I'd say it's different. And the difference is he's intensified the level of demand. I mean, the demand from the beginning was that a man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife and stay with the spouse permanently. That leads you to understand that there are a variety of things in the Old Testament that were given for the hardness of heart of God's Old Testament people, and probably also that the Holy Spirit has not yet been poured out on all flesh as well. Well, Jesus brings the new covenant, and that brings with it some old things, some new things, some things reaffirmed, some things intensified, and some things completely new altogether new.

Question 14:

Was Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience new, or was it already present in the Old Testament?

As Jesus applied the Old Testament to his day, he often drew attention to our hearts and our motives. And some Christians have thought that attention to the heart was

a new teaching — that the Old Testament only ever required external adherence to the Law. Was Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience new, or was it already present in the Old Testament?

Dr. James Hamilton

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience was absolutely present in the Old Testament. If we think, for instance, about the Levitical sacrificial system, these Israelites are required to bring up a very expensive, flawless animal, and they're going to put this thing to death and they're not really going to receive anything from it. So, really, the only people who are going to do this are those who believe that what Moses has prescribed for them actually will make them right with God. And believing that, they then carry this out, which costs them a lot of money. It's going to result in them getting absolutely filthy, they'll be bloody, and the only thing they walk away with is the peace of mind that they have obeyed God and that, as Leviticus says, they've made atonement for their sin and that God, now, is not going to strike them dead.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience is a concept that was already present in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God sent prophets to teach his people that their belief should be earnest and deeply felt. Jesus wasn't introducing a new idea. As God, he has always known our hearts, and he has always wanted us to obey him sincerely.

Question 15:

Why did so many people that witnessed Jesus' miracles still reject him as Messiah or Christ?

Many of Jesus' teachings challenged the Jewish religious leaders of his day and in the days of the early church. So, when Matthew recorded Jesus' teachings in his gospel, he typically recorded miracles, too, in order to confirm that these difficult teachings were supported by divine authority. So, why did so many people that witnessed Jesus' miracles still reject him as Messiah or Christ?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Why did the Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah, despite the fact that they saw his miracles? I think there's two key factors that we have to keep in mind. One is the Jews were really focused on political liberation. They were under the oppressive reign of the Romans, suffering from crushing tax burden, and so they wanted a Messiah who would lead military victory against the Romans, and Jesus showed no signs of doing that. So I think, probably, even though they thronged to him to be healed, to be fed by the loaves and the fishes, they really didn't see him as the Messiah they wanted, which was a conquering Messiah. But there's another major factor and that focuses on the religious leaders themselves. Whether Jesus performed miracles or was purported to perform miracles, for them, Jesus was primarily a threat. He was a threat to their influence among the people. He was a threat to their leadership, especially when he came to Jerusalem and cleared the temple, for example. He was really

claiming that Israel was in apostasy, and they were the leaders over Israel, so they were responsible, if you will, for that disobedience to God and for that apostasy. So Jesus directly claimed their authority as Israel's shepherds, as Israel's caretakers, and so they were going to reject him as a threat to their power; to their influence, no matter what he did, no matter what miracles he performed.

Question 16:

Why should the church be important to Christians?

Sometimes, people are willing to accept that Jesus is the Christ and that he performed many miracles and was a true and authoritative teacher, but they aren't willing to accept the idea that the church Jesus established is important. Why should the church be important to Christians?

Rev. Mike Glodo

Well, we should understand that it's God's purpose to gather us into Jesus' church. There are things God does for us in the church that he doesn't do for us outside the church. We have the Lord's Supper, which Jesus instituted. We have baptism, which marks the entrance into the assembly, or the church of Jesus. We also have to appreciate letting Scripture interpret Scripture, that the church is the apple of Jesus' eye. The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that he loved her and gave himself up for her. And it's Jesus' desire to gather his people into a community. And this is really a present important reality for us, that Jesus himself was the embodiment of the kingdom. But as he gathers us into him, he also gathers us into a fellowship with one another. It's not just an elective or voluntary organization where we can get things done better, but we reflect the unity of Jesus when we unite together in his church and come under his shepherds, because he did leave us, first of all, apostles. He told Peter, "You are the rock on which I will build my church." Jesus is the cornerstone, the apostles are the foundation stones — we're told in places like Ephesians 4. And we're all being built into a spiritual house or a temple for God, as I Peter 2 reminds us. And so, we're not just followers of Jesus individually, but we are the embodiment of this new creation that Jesus has brought in by his resurrection from the dead and by his giving of the Spirit to us as his new temple, so that we are the presence of the kingdom of God in the church where people can find mercy and forgiveness, and they can find provision when they lack, and they can find companionship when they are lonely. So the church really is a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, which will one day be visible throughout the whole creation.

Question 17:

What practical encouragement can we draw from the fact that we're part of God's family?

One way Matthew's gospel draws attention to the importance of the church is by characterizing it as the family of God. What practical encouragement can we draw from the fact that we're part of God's family?

Dr. Steve Harper

When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew, to me, that's as expansive as it can get. I mean, he could have talked about the kingdom of Palestine, or the kingdom of Rome, or the kingdom of Greece, but he talks about the kingdom of heaven. That's almost even more than, you know, the kingdom of earth. That's almost connecting the visible and the invisible, the time-bound and that which is eternal. So it's a huge concept, and it would be easy for us to get lost in that. And what saves us from doing that, I think, is when he talks in the Lord's Prayer and says, "When you pray say, 'Our Father.'" My teaching area is spiritual formation, and one of the things I say about the Lord's Prayer is that we start prayer by the recognition that at any given moment there could be millions of other people who are praying at the same time. One of the reasons we call God "God" is that God can take each one of those prayers and can deal with them as if they were the only one that was, you know, vying for his attention in that moment. But that brings us into a holy fellowship, part of that kingdom of heaven personnel. Then right after that, of course, is the word "Father," so that no matter who I am or where I am in that prayer, I'm moving toward God as "Abba," moving toward God as Father. And if a person in Poland is calling God "Father" and I'm calling God "Father" in the United States, then that means we're brothers and sisters. If we have the same father, then we're members of the same family. So I think Matthew gets at this in a powerful way with the concept of the kingdom of heaven, which he uses over and over again. But it's the life of prayer that draws us into the realization that in the moment that I'm praying, I'm praying with other people who are saying the same thing that I am, but when they're saying what I'm saying, it means we're family.

Question 18:**Why does suffering currently exist in the kingdom of heaven on earth?**

Being part of God's kingdom and family is a source of blessing and encouragement. But God's people aren't yet experiencing all the blessings that Scripture promises. In fact, even though we have an abundant life in Christ, we still experience sorrow and sickness and death. We still suffer. Why does suffering currently exist in the kingdom of heaven on earth?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Life is filled with suffering. Ever since the fall of humanity, God has cursed the world and brought a relentless difficulty to every day. The world has difficulty and pain and suffering woven throughout. And especially if we pay attention, we will find that an undeniable fact. So how, then, do we find peace and joy in the midst of all the trial? Well, it comes through depending on God, the Creator and the one who cursed everything, and his redeeming work, if we're ever going to have hope. The Bible says that when you see things from God's perspective, that, as hard as the suffering is in this life, it's a slight, momentary affliction compared with the surpassing weight of glory that will be revealed. Paul says in Romans 8 that the struggles of this present

time, the suffering of this present time, isn't even worth comparing with the glory that's going to be revealed. So, when we are able to trust God in his sovereign goodness, that he is all powerful, he's all good, as he's working out his plan, and even in the midst of suffering — often mostly in the midst of suffering — God is refining us, and redeeming us and in the process of restoring what was lost in the Fall. That's where we find our hope, in the God, who's working everything out for good, and for his glory. Ultimately, suffering in the fallen world is solved by the cross of Christ. The most horrible thing that's ever happened, the most evil thing that's ever happened is Jesus, the only man who never sinned, being nailed to a cross and bearing the wrath of God in our place. Well, that's the ultimate solution to the problem of evil. Christ comes, and he resolves this deep problem of evil that we have. And so, God solves the problem in Christ. He doesn't leave the problem unsolved. He gets right at the root of the problem and defeats the sin that got us in this trouble in the first place.

Question 19:

Why did Jesus call his followers to the difficult and dangerous task of evangelizing the entire world?

Matthew ended his gospel by quoting Jesus' command that Christians in every age go into the whole world where persecution abounds and make disciples of all nations. Why did Jesus call his followers to the difficult and dangerous task of evangelizing the entire world?

Dr. Wai-ye Ng (translation)

The Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew declares that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and that Jesus has sent us out to make disciples of all nations. With such great authority behind us, why do we still suffer? I believe this is the cost of being disciples. From the very beginning, the Gospel of Matthew gives us descriptions and prophecies concerning the kingdom of heaven. And during this overlap of the ages of the kingdom, we're like wheat among the tares. We can't escape the suffering that's already in the world. That's why we're called to be patient in the midst of suffering while we complete the work of the Great Commission. And in the meantime, there's simply no way to escape suffering.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, the Great Commission as recorded at the end of Matthew's gospel is to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, teaching men and women to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. And there is a thrust out into all nations with the unique message of Jesus Christ, and the challenge to not just make converts but to make faithful disciples and followers of him. And the church continues in that role even now, to make sure that all unreached places have the opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus Christ and thus continue that commission.

Dr. Peter Kuzmič

I think the most crucial question that we have to ask is, how do the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world intersect? Where and why do they collide? Where do they partner? How does the gospel of the kingdom relate to the conditions of humanity in the world in which we live? You know, we evangelical Christians claim to be the “Great Commission” Christians. I hear the Great Commission called it all the time, and I tell my American friends, “Wait a moment. You are not really faithful to the Great Commission when you say, when you call the Great Commission, Matthew 28, and you say, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations.’” Again, I say, that’s not where the Great Commission begins. It doesn’t begin with our going. It begins with his being. And so, it really begins a verse earlier where the risen Lord gathers his disciples and says, “All power,” — depending on the translation. I think New International Version says, “All authority.” The Greek word “*exousia*” is not easy to translate. It could be translated “dominion,” you know, relating to the rule of the kingdom — kingdom of God. “All power,” all *exousia*, “in heaven and on earth is given to me. Therefore,” I will translate, “as you go, make disciples of all nations.” This is a very important linkage.

Now, when Jesus says, “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me,” for somebody out in the world who doesn’t understand biblical language, that sounds scary. Whoever claims all power is dangerous. We’ve known here in Europe, West and East, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. We’ve known in other parts of the world, from Mao Tse Tung to Pol Pot, and so on, history’s full of tyrants and dictators who claim to accumulate all power, and became very destructive, killing millions, if not hundreds of millions, of innocent people. Now, Jesus is the only one who can claim all dominion, all power, with legitimacy. And by the way, his power is not destructive because it is power and love, power motivated by love, power moderated by love. See, if you have love alone, you have a nice sentiment, but maybe you are helpless because you don’t have power to change anything. If you have power alone without love you destroy, you kill, you hate. It’s the divine genius that brings love and power together. “God so loved the world that he sent his Son.”

Now, Jesus, who is the incarnated love, and who claims all power — and remember it’s after his resurrection, that is central to his kingdom. Kingdom is Jesus’ master thought. In the first three gospels alone, 121 times you have the kingdom mentioned. We don’t understand who Jesus was, why he came, what he taught, and what happened on the cross and what happened on the third day. We don’t understand what he means when he says, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” He is the only one that can legitimately claim all power because he is the only one that walked on this planet earth and never sinned, never lied, never deceived. He’s also the only one who, after he was killed, dead, buried, came back. So, he’s the risen Lord. It is the inauguration of a new era of human history. He’s bringing hope to the nations. And so the kingdom of God is at work in very powerful ways, and that’s where world evangelization and discipling the nations then is based on this, what I call, “the Great Foundation.” You don’t have a Great Commission without the Great Foundation. And then he caps it with a great promise, “And I will be with you to the very end of the ages.” So Jesus

the Lord, Jesus the King, is the ruler who has all power, and so we go, we disciple, we teach, we proclaim his rule in his power.

Question 20:

What exactly is repentance, and what does it have to do with God's kingdom?

Christians have been given the monumental task of evangelizing and discipling the whole world. And throughout the world and history, the church has found a variety of ways to do that. Not all believers agree on what a gospel presentation should sound like or what principles should be emphasized in discipleship. But it's clear that when Matthew recorded Jesus' example for us, he often focused on Jesus' teaching that the presence of the kingdom of heaven obligates us to repent. What exactly is repentance, and what does it have to do with the God's kingdom?

Dr. David Bauer

The notion of repentance is very closely related to the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel. This is suggested by the very structure of the passage, which calls persons to repent and announces the kingdom of heaven — Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" So, repentance has its basis in the proclamation of the kingdom; "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This means a number of things. It means for one thing that the possibility of repentance comes by virtue of the presence of God's end-time kingdom in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's because God is at work in Jesus Christ bringing in his end-time kingdom that repentance is possible. This means, then, that repentance is not something that is a human possibility. It's a human impossibility. Humans can do it only as they respond to what God has already done. This is truly gospel then. It has to do with the possibility of our acting in truly redemptive and holistic ways, achieving goodness in life by virtue of what God has already done, what he has offered to us in Jesus Christ.

Beyond that, however, the linking of repentance with the kingdom of heaven, as the Matthean Jesus does there in 4:17, gives specific content to what repentance means. Repentance has often been pointed out, or the word, the verb "to repent" is in the Greek *metanoeo*, which really means "a changing of the mind," or in context perhaps better, "a turning around of the whole of life beginning with one's thinking," a realignment of all of life beginning with thinking. Matthew 4:17, then, suggests that repentance involves a reorientation of the whole of life beginning with the way one thinks around the one ultimate reality that God is bringing in his kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ and is about to bring it to consummation with the second coming of Christ.

Matthew's gospel testifies that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah that the Old Testament promised would bring God's heavenly kingdom to earth. Matthew wanted his readers to be confident that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and that the

blessings of God’s kingdom could be obtained only through faithfulness to Jesus. Matthew also wanted his readers to take up the call Jesus had given to his church, namely, to preach the good news of Christ to the whole world, and to make disciples of the nations. There’s no doubt that Christian life can be difficult, since our Lord hasn’t yet consummated his kingdom on earth. But if we remain loyal to him, Matthew’s gospel assures us that the blessings we’ll receive will be worth any price.

Dr. Richard Bauckham is a New Testament scholar and author and is Professor Emeritus at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Dr. David Bauer is Dean of the School of Biblical Interpretation and the Ralph Waldo Beeson Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Dan Doriani is the senior pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Clayton, Missouri.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat is Associate Professor of Divinity in Old Testament at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Rev. Mike Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Dr. James Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and Preaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Dr. Steve Harper is the founding Vice President of the Florida Dunnam Campus of Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Peter Kuzmič is the Eva B. and Paul E. Toms Distinguished Professor of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the co-founder and director of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

Dr. Wai-ye Ng is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, China.

Dr. J. I. Packer is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and preaches and lectures widely in Great Britain and America.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation and the Director of Research Doctoral Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Robert Plummer is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Dr. Glen Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

Dr. James D. Smith III is Associate Professor of Church History at Bethel Seminary, San Diego Campus, as well an adjunct professor of religion at the University of San Diego.

Dr. Mark Strauss taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

Dr. Frank Thielman is the Presbyterian Professor of Divinity in New Testament at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University, and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

Dr. Simon Vibert is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

Dr. Peter Walker is Tutor in Biblical Theology at Wycliffe Hall and lectures in New Testament studies and Biblical Theology.

Dr. Willie Wells is Pastor at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Fairfield, Alabama and a professor at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stephen Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Ben Witherington III is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.