

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY ONE

The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

Some passages of Scripture are very encouraging, others are shocking. This is one of those. In fact, the scene becomes so evil you'll almost feel like you need a shower after you've read the passage. There are, however, four lessons that I hope you will never forget because they tie in perfectly with our lives—this day, and at this time.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WHO doesn't like a joyous birthday party? Big balloons, fun foods, colorful cakes, and smiles on every face. Then, if it's your own, there's the thrill of ripping off the crinkling paper to find a white box with who-knows-what inside. Perhaps a shiny silver watch or that new book you've been wanting. It's a cheerful time for laughter and rejoicing.

For that reason, we find it shocking that the day of Herod Antipas' birthday party, meant to be a happy celebration of life, quickly turned into a horrific scene of corruption and death. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll join Matthew as he takes us into the palace halls on a day that began with feasting, dancing, and gift-giving, but quickly took a tragic twist.

The twist occurred when Salome gave her stepfather, Antipas, a scandalous dance before all the partygoers, which pleased him so much that he promised to give her anything. Herodias, Salome's mother, then told her to ask for the strangest of all gifts: the head of John the Baptizer on a platter. Of all that Herodias and Salome could have requested, why the death of John?

We'll explore that question and more in this extremely dark but thoroughly instructive story given to us in Matthew 14:1–13.



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The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before we look at this passage, take a moment to ask God to guide you in your study today:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of grace You've given me through Your Son Jesus Christ. Thank You also for the gift of Scripture which helps me know You better. As I read Your Word today, give me ears to listen to what You have to say and eyes to perceive how it applies to my life. I ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

This study marks a new part of our series. The first group of studies, on Matthew 1–7, brought us the arrival of Jesus, the promised King. Next, we carefully studied Matthew 8–13 to gain insights into Jesus' kingdom.

In this section on Matthew 14–20, we'll take a close look at the King's ministry, at the one who "came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Before we dive into today's passage, let's get a bird's-eye view of the whole book by reviewing Pastor Chuck Swindoll's helpful chart on Matthew below.

MATTHEW

	Announcement and Arrival of the King Main Emphasis: His Credentials Birth Baptism Temptation CHAPTERS 1–4	Proclamation and Reception of the King Main Emphasis: His Message Sermon on the Mount Miracles Discourses Parables CHAPTERS 5–15	Opposition and Rejection of the King Main Emphasis: His Suffering and Death Spread of opposition Preparation of disciples Final predictions Crucifixion CHAPTERS 16–27	Resurrection and Triumph of the King Main Emphasis: His Conquest God's power Great Commission CHAPTER 28
The King	His identity: Israel's promised King		His destiny: "Crucify Him!"	
Scope	Teaching the vast multitudes		Teaching the Twelve	
Location	Bethlehem and Nazareth	Ministry in Galilee		Ministry in Judea
People's Reaction	Increased popularity		Increased hostility	
Theme	Jesus is the King, Israel's long-awaited Messiah.			
Key Verses	16:16–19; 28:18–20			
Christ in Matthew	Jesus, the Messiah, fulfills the prophecies, promises, types, and expectations of the Old Testament Scriptures (16:16–19; 28:18–20).			

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The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

By this point in Matthew's gospel, the cost of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is getting clearer and clearer. Previously in Matthew 13:53–58, we witnessed how Jesus faced rejection by His hometown and by some in His own family. Now, we will read about John facing an even more costly rejection. With this context in mind, *let's start making observations!*



Observation: Adultery, Revenge, Murder

Pastor Chuck's approach to studying the Bible in *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* follows four steps: observation, interpretation, correlation, and application.¹ By observing the passage, we answer the question, "What does the passage say?"

Read *Matthew 14:1–13*, and write down some observations that jump out to you. List the key characters and briefly sketch the sequence of events.

While some Bible translations refer to Herod as "the Tetrarch," we know his birth name as Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great who tried to kill Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's gospel (see *Matthew 2:1–9, 16*). As for John the Baptizer, we last learned of his whereabouts in *Matthew 11:1–2*. Where was he at that time?



The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

In Matthew 14:1–13, Matthew used a storytelling technique to reintroduce John the Baptizer. It's found in the temporal connection between verses 1–2 and 3–13. How do those two sections relate to each other? (Hint: check the beginning of 14:3.)

In verses 3–12, we look at the Herod family tree with all its twisted branches. Herod the Great had many sons: Herod Antipas and Philip are the two brothers mentioned in this passage. Another brother had a daughter named Herodias, whom Philip married, and Philip and Herodias had a daughter, whom we met in the introduction, named Salome.

Antipas and Herodias were obsessed with each other, though, so they divorced their spouses and got married. See page 299 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15* to see a visual representation of these convoluted relationships.

According to [Matthew 14:3–5](#), why was John in prison?



The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

Don't forget verse 13, which tells us about the hero of our story. How did Jesus respond when He heard the news about John?

The story is captivating, while also treacherous, as it unfolds the extensive addiction of growing sin. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

These observations help us understand the horror of the events that took place at Antipas' birthday party. But what is the significance of this strange story? Let's answer that question in the next step: interpretation.



Interpretation: Fearful Responses

During interpretation, we use the observations we've made to help us answer the question, "What does this passage mean?"

During Jesus' ministry, people often confused Him with John the Baptizer (see [Matthew 16:13–16](#)). Using your Bible study [resources](#) and Pastor Chuck's commentary, explore why Herod Antipas refused to believe that Jesus was the one performing these miracles.

In verse 6, Matthew wrote that Salome's dance "pleased" Antipas. The Greek word used here often described a gift so pleasing that it demanded reciprocation. This "you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours" mentality was an essential element of this culture.



The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

Antipas knew he had to return a favor to Salome, and if he broke his public vow, he would lose the respect of his guests. Respect was everything to Antipas. Why did killing John create a problem for Antipas?

For fear of what others may say or think, Herod sealed his own fate, not John's.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Who was the mastermind manipulator of our story? What lesson do you think Matthew wants to teach us through this person?

Now that we have a good understanding of the wickedness found deep in the roots of the Herod family tree, let's turn to another book of the Bible to see what else we can learn about Antipas.



The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13



Correlation: Getting into the Mind of Herod Antipas

Mark's gospel tells this same story but from a slightly different perspective. Read [Mark 6:14–29](#), and write down the additional details Mark includes about Herod Antipas (see especially 6:19–20). How do these details clue us in even more deeply into the mind and motivation of Antipas?

So what does this bizarre story, one you'd scarcely expect to find on the pages of God's Word, have to teach us about following God today?



Application: The Awful Effects and Tragic Consequences of Sin

Pastor Chuck carefully and prayerfully crafted four applications based on Matthew 14:1–13.

1. *How dangerous is revenge, how wrong is holding a grudge!* Herodias manipulated Antipas so John would die for confronting her sin.
2. *How powerful is peer pressure!* Antipas would have done anything to maintain the respect of his peers, getting even more tangled in sin's net—all for fear of losing face.
3. *How treacherous is rationalization!* John had done nothing to Salome, but she requested his head because her mother gave seemingly good reasons for otherwise grisly behavior.
4. *How addictive is sin!* The Herods knew the tragic consequences of their actions, but they sinned more and more, falsely hoping they could keep their filthy secrets concealed.



The Strangest of All Gifts: A Beheading

Matthew 14:1–13

How awful are the effects of sin! It's good to let these four points sit with us. Think them over. Let them even induce some healthy fear. Which of the four do you find most pertinent in your life? Is it because you feel your flesh tempted toward that behavior or because you're bearing the brunt of another's sin? Reflect on it. Pray about it. Write your answer below.

And we must remember how addictive sin is. If I cultivate a taste for it, where it becomes to me secretly delicious . . . I'm a goner. I'm finished. Guard against it!
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Each day we face a decision. Will we confront our sin? Or will we try to cover it up with more sinning? Antipas tried to hide his sin, and it only heaped more guilt and more shame and more fear upon his soul. God, however, calls us toward a better path. Our loving Father invites us to confess our sins so we can receive forgiveness and walk daily with Him in newness of life.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, it is easy for me to look down on others because of their sin, but I know that I can just as easily be caught in sin's addictive cycle. Thank You for offering me forgiveness through Jesus Christ. I ask You to reveal the hidden sins in my life so I can turn from them, run to Your loving embrace, and live in victory. I ask these things in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY TWO

Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

God's at work whether you or I realize it. His hand is on us whether or not we feel it. And though we are surrounded by enumerable impossibilities, God has yet to meet His first one. He is the God of impossibilities. By trusting this truth, we're able to think vertically, which is correctly.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

It's *impossible!* This all-too-common thought often hits us when we crawl into bed late at night. We drift into the darkness of doubt wondering if we'll get out of a seemingly hopeless situation—whether it be financial, medical, relational, legal, or some other worry. What do we do? Where should we turn?

In Matthew 14:13–21, the disciples found themselves in a situation that we would consider impossible. Despite having been with Jesus for some time, they still had a limited perspective of Jesus' identity and power. *You want us to feed thousands of people with a snack lunch? . . . HOW RIDICULOUS!*

Then Jesus used the ridiculous to do the miraculous. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll learn about the inadequacy of our horizontal, human-centered solutions to impossible situations, and we'll see how we can shift our perspective by looking upward to the God of impossibilities.



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Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Take a moment to pray and prepare your heart for what God wants to teach you through His Word today. Never forget the privilege and priority of prayer.

My Father in heaven, thank You for all the ways You have provided for me and have carried me through the most difficult times of my life. As I open Your holy Word today, please guide me and reveal to me just how awesome are Your grace, power, and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Before we turn to today's passage, let's quickly review its context. In [Matthew 13:53–58](#), we read how Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, rejected Him. Even His own siblings scoffed at Him. Then, [Matthew 14:1–12](#) showed us the coldblooded murder of John the Baptizer by the corrupt Herod family because of John's boldness to confront their sin.

These parallel rejections reveal the dangers that face the citizens of the kingdom of heaven—especially its messengers. The loss of John and the encroaching threat of those who opposed Jesus' mission led Jesus and the disciples to retreat in solitude.

Even in these solitary moments—when all Jesus wanted was to be still and alone—we can see how He proved to be the great King sent to serve.



Observation: Two Responses to the Crowd

In his book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck wrote, “Observation is carefully reading and thinking about what the Bible actually says.”¹ Let's do that now.

Read [Matthew 14:13–21](#) several times. Compare the difference between Jesus' and the disciples' reaction to the crowd.



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

When Jesus saw the crowd in *verse 14*, He felt compassion for them. The Greek verb used to show this feeling conveys an active idea, and it relates to a term that describes organs like the heart, the lungs, and the stomach. In other words, Jesus felt a desire *in His guts* to meet the people's needs! What two ways did Jesus respond based on that feeling deep-down inside Him?

What excuses did the disciples give for wanting to turn the crowd away?

How laughable for Him to hear the word, impossible, as if He's out of control.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

List the sequence of events in *verse 19*, and note especially the action that stands out to you.

First: _____

Second: _____

Third: _____

Fourth: _____

Fifth: _____



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

Sixth: _____

Seventh: _____

Did you notice how Jesus fed 5,000 *men*? With the inclusion of women and children, scholars estimate that Jesus served up to 20,000 people that day, and all these people ate more than just a few bites. They ate until they were full! The word Matthew used to show how much they ate is the same word the Greeks would use to describe a fattened calf.² ***Talk about a feast!***

These events truly were miraculous, and Jesus truly did the impossible. So, what theological principles can we learn from this awesome account?



Interpretation: Heartfelt versus Fabricated Compassion

Now that we've compiled our observations, let's ask deeper questions about what the passage means to develop an accurate and relevant interpretation.³

Read *Matthew 14:13* in several Bible translations, and note the verb used to describe Jesus' departure. How do these different translations help us understand why Jesus and the disciples likely wanted to leave after hearing about John's execution?

While Jesus showed heartfelt concern for the crowd, the disciples fabricated an illusion of compassion. What *real* motivation do you think the disciples had for wanting to turn the crowd away? (Use your observations from the last section to answer your question.)



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

Read [verses 16](#) and [19](#). Who gave the food to the crowd? What vital lesson do you think Jesus taught here? What significance does that lesson have for us today? For help, read pages 306–308 in Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.

Put yourself in the sandals of someone in the crowd that day. Rivers of sweat flow down your face from the heat of the sun. You hear your empty stomach grumble. Anxiety grows as a chorus of complaints resonates around you. But you don't want to leave and miss your chance to see Jesus.

Suddenly, a stranger passes you a tiny fish. Then, you find some flatbread in your hand. Within moments, you share food and laughter with new friends as you talk about the day's miraculous events. How would you feel walking away that evening? What would it make you think about Jesus?

As the sun set, the disciples left with full bellies and full baskets of provisions that would feed them for days. How do you think the disciples' perspective about God shifted over the course of the day? How is that shift in perspective instructive for us today?



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

As long as you operate your life from the horizontal point of view, the only thing you will see through your life is impossibilities. As long as you exist in the horizontal level, looking only at the human side of things, you will come up against it over and over and over again. And your life will be marked by the negative, by what cannot be done.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

These lessons we learn from Jesus and the disciples teach us challenging lessons about compassion, faith, selflessness, and the power of God. What other biblical passages connect with these themes?



Correlation: The Bread of Life

Through the process of correlation, we can make connections that Matthew's original readers naturally would have noticed. For example, this story echoes the lovely music of [Exodus 16](#), which tells the story of God providing bread for the Israelites every day while He led them through the wilderness.

How does this miracle in Matthew connect with the miracle God performed for Israel in the wilderness (see especially Exodus 16:12)? Reference *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org for some helpful insights.

Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle we find in all four gospels. Of the four accounts, John's telling includes the most detail. Read [John 6:35–40](#). What did Jesus teach us about Himself by using the bread imagery?



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

Most people probably haven't experienced a miraculous event quite like the one Jesus performed that day. Even still, how can we apply to our lives right now these truths we learned from this biblical account?



Application: Facing Today's Impossibilities

How have you attempted to use human-based, horizontal solutions to face impossible situations in the past? What was the outcome of this approach?

Facing an impossible circumstance feels like clambering up a mountain with its summit hidden in the clouds. Take a moment to stop and reflect on your life. What impossible mountain do you see before you today?

What steps can you take to shift to a vertical perspective and to trust that our God of impossibilities wants to help you conquer that mountain?



Eating a Miracle for Dinner

Matthew 14:13–21

Why would there be any question regarding His ability to turn this meal into a feast, in light of what they experienced? Well, the same could be asked of us. How much does God need to do again to remind you of what He's able to do? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

How quickly we forget the power of the God we serve! May we watch in wonder as He makes possible the impossible and turns the ridiculous into the miraculous. Not even filling tens of thousands of empty stomachs posed a challenge to God. That is why He is the God of impossibilities.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, You are the God of impossibilities. I confess I have not always believed this truth, and I repent of those times that I have looked to myself for human solutions. Thank You for the grace You have shown me, and I ask that You would shift my horizontal perspective so that I constantly look up to You to do the impossible in my life. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 71.
2. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1087.
3. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY THREE

What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

None of these tests—the dark night, the huge storms, even those sinking moments when we think we'll drown—are designed to finish us off. They're designed to bring us to our knees in worship.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

As we learned in the previous study, when Jesus miraculously multiplied a snack for one person into a feast for thousands, He taught His disciples to trust Him in impossible situations. In His hands, a little would become a lot. His provision would be more than enough to feed every hungry soul under their care.

But trusting Jesus to *provide* in impossible situations was only the first lesson. Dangerous storms of persecution awaited them, so Jesus also needed to teach His disciples to depend on Him to *protect* when waves of opposition threatened their lives—even if they couldn't imagine how He'd protect them.

What better place to learn about faith in life's storms than the Sea of Galilee? This body of water rests in a deep valley, and a sudden burst of wind can sweep down the cliffs and churn the water into capsizing waves without warning. A quiet sail across a calm sea can escalate into a fight for survival against the surging squall.

The night Jesus sent His disciples across the sea, they encountered such a sudden storm. Would these men who had just witnessed Jesus multiply fish and loaves trust Him to master the wind and waves?

Let's join the disciples in their boat on that fretful night, recounted for us in Matthew 14:22–33. Putting ourselves in their life-and-death situation, we'll experience Jesus' full power and the importance of keeping our eyes fixed on Him.



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What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Perhaps troubles like rough seas have washed over you lately. Like the disciples, you're just struggling to keep from sinking. Before you open the Scriptures today, write down the trials you have been enduring and commit them to the Lord. Ask Him to reveal Himself through His Word and strengthen your faith during your stormy night.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

As we enter the passage, we recall that Jesus originally went to a remote area on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee “to be alone” (Matthew 14:13). However, the crowd had interrupted His time to Himself, and now, after tending the people's needs, He was ready to tend His own need for communion with His Father.

Write down what Jesus did, according to *Matthew 14:22–23*.

The stage was set for the disciples to experience Jesus' power and presence in a way they never imagined. Let's use *our* imagination to enter the scene as if we were in the boat with the men on that dark, stormy night.



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33



Observation: An Unimaginable Miracle

In *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll encourages us to observe a passage by engaging our senses.¹ What expressions do you see on the men's faces? What do you hear? What do you feel? What do you smell? "As we learn to read with all our senses, the passage comes alive in our minds . . . and ultimately in our lives!"²

Struggling On Their Own in the Storm—Matthew 14:24–26

Put yourself in the scene as you read *Matthew 14:24*. In the dark of the night, harsh winds slap your face, the swaying boat makes your full belly turn, seawater floods around your feet. The fierce storm drives the boat far from shore, battering it mercilessly.³ Describe the sensations you feel. Remember, you are without Jesus as you face this violent storm.

Suddenly out of the darkness, you see a mysterious figure emerge that seems unbothered by the wind and the waves. It's coming toward you! Read *14:25–26*. If you were one of the disciples, what thoughts might have been racing through your mind?



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

Responding to Jesus during the Storm—Matthew 14:27–32

Jesus came to the disciples during “the fourth watch of the night” (Matthew 14:25 NASB), which would have been somewhere between three and six o’clock in the morning. The disciples had rowed and rowed all night long. *They were exhausted!*

What reason did Jesus give the disciples not to be afraid, according to [14:27](#)? How did Peter respond to Jesus’ command and claim ([14:28–29](#))?

According to [14:30–31](#), what caused Peter to start to sink?

How easy it is to forget the great things God has done when you’re involved in the storms of today? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

Worshipping the Son of God after the Storms—Matthew 14:33

Review the flow of action in *Matthew 14:22–33*. How did the disciples' attitude change over the course of these events?

When Jesus miraculously walked on the water, the disciples realized He really was the Son of God. What timeless lessons about faith can we learn from this incredible miracle?



Interpretation: Fear and Faltering Faith

In the interpretation phase, we go beyond what the text says in order to understand what it *means*. Jews in the ancient world often feared the sea because they believed evil spirits dwelled there. How does this help us understand the disciples' initial response to Jesus? Considering the context, what is the significance of Jesus walking *on top* of the water?



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

When Jesus told His disciples not to fear, He literally said, “I am.” Matthew’s Jewish readers would have recognized this as a reference to the divine name God revealed to His people Israel (*Exodus 3:13–14*). What additional meaning can we glean from Jesus’ statement based on this background? For help, see page 315 in Pastor Chuck’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.

Jesus never drowns. He always walks on that storm. And He’s never at a loss for words. He knows when to say, “I am,” and “come.” And He never shames us. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What does Peter’s encounter with Jesus on the water teach us about faith? Consult pages 315–316 of Pastor Chuck’s commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.

In a moment of fear, Jesus comforted His friends. In a moment of doubt, Jesus caught Peter as he fell. In a moment when the disciples experienced the unimaginable, they worshiped Jesus as the Son of God. These powerful images of Christ’s power and presence in the storm have encouraged believers for generations.



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33



Correlation: Perfect Love Despite Imperfect Trust

The disciples had a previous miraculous encounter with Jesus on the sea (*Matthew 8:23–27*). How does the disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity change from *Matthew 8:26–27* to *14:31–33*?

Read *Hebrews 11:1*. According to this verse, how should we define faith? How do we see the disciples learning this kind of faith in our story?

Read *Romans 8:35–39*. Why do those who follow Jesus have no reason to fear?

We can experience both encouragement and challenge through these powerful truths. Let's now look at some applications of these truths!



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

Application: Weathering the Storms with Jesus

Pastor Chuck provides us with four ways we can apply this passage to our lives.

1. *There are dark nights when we feel all alone, but we're not.* Jesus Himself said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).
2. *There are huge storms that seem to last too long, but they won't.* God acts in mysterious ways. Even when storms rage around us, He still has control.
3. *There are flashes of faith we believe will last, but they don't.* Sometimes we feel ready to hop over the side of the boat and walk with Jesus on the water, but . . .
4. *There are dreadful moments where we think we'll sink and drown, but we don't.* When our faith inevitably falters, Jesus will always catch us before we drown.

Remembering God's past faithfulness to us can remind us of His goodness and can help us grow closer to Him. Write about a time when Jesus caught you as you felt the rising waters start to drown you.

Think back on the trial you mentioned in the beginning of our study: a dark night, a huge storm, or a dreadful moment that you now face. Even if you can't make complete sense of your present struggle, write down how it compares to what the disciples experienced in their storm.



What Brings Us to Our Knees?

Matthew 14:22–33

What might you do today to live above your circumstances and keep your eyes of faith fixed on Jesus?

As the disciples boarded their boat that evening, they had no idea what awaited them on the sea. Watching Jesus walk on water was unimaginable for them, but the real miracle was seeing how He would catch them despite their great fears and wavering faith. And Jesus is still here to help us weather even the harshest of life's storms. *Imagine that!*



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, You are a light in the darkest nights, a refuge in the hugest storms, and a comfort for my greatest fears. I confess that I have had small faith and a small imagination—that I have not believed You could rescue me from the most dreadful moments of my life. Thank You for rescuing me. Help me trust in the power of Jesus, the Son of God. In His name I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 94.
3. The Greek word for "battered" (Matthew 14:24 NASB) is *basanizō*, which means to "torment, harass."



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY FOUR

Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

All people are spiritually blind from birth. Those who are spiritually blind may have excellent physical eyesight but be in complete darkness spiritually. They're perishing. Their minds are darkened because they don't believe in the gospel. The Holy Spirit must make spiritual light dawn in people's lives to bring them to believe in Christ.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WHAT kind of tradition gets the fiercest devotion? You guessed it . . . *the religious kind*. People across the world and across time have accused, fought, split, and died—all to uphold their sacred habits and practices. It comes as no surprise then that Jesus' fiercest opponents were those who sensed Him challenging their deeply held religious traditions.

The Pharisees obsessed over their traditions every minute of every day. *Even their rules had rules!* The foundation of their laws originated with Moses. But they had buried the law of Moses under a mountain of their own codes, which they abused to show themselves spiritually superior. Their fellow Jews could hardly stand under this impossible load of “pious” expectations.

While the Pharisees *seemed* closest to God, Jesus warned that they were the farthest from Him. Why? Because they put God on their face but not in their heart. In this study, we will join the crowd and witness one of the most intense disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees—one where He uncovered their shameful hypocrisy and taught the supreme value of inward purity.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you begin searching the Scriptures, take some time to peer into your own heart and ask God to use His Word to lead you on His perfect path. Use the words of *Psalm 139:23–24*:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Pharisees were one of many Jewish sects in Jesus' day. Believe it or not, they actually garnered a large following. They concerned themselves with an all-consuming question: *How should we Jews respond to the Roman occupation of our land Judea?* Their answer?

FOLLOW GOD'S LAW

Most faithful Jews would have agreed and seen this as a solid answer. For example, look at what God told Moses in *Deuteronomy 28:25–26, 36–37, and 43* as a warning against Israel's disobedience. Summarize the warning below.

A pious Pharisee would think: *If I follow the law more closely, God will remove the curse of Rome!*

Because people like to dance as close as possible to lawbreaking, Jewish legal experts created additional rules to safeguard against actual lawbreaking. The Pharisees called these rules a "fence." Even if the pious broke these traditions, God's law would still be upheld and Israel kept safe.



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

This solution, however, quickly became a problem when the Pharisees began thinking their human-made laws stood *equal* with God's. Jesus knew this history and saw the error of the Pharisees' spiritual blindness. Let's now turn to Matthew 14:34–15:20 to see how Jesus responded when they accused His disciples of breaking their sacred traditions.



Observation: God's Command over Human Tradition

According to Pastor Chuck, the first step we take in the journey of understanding and applying a passage of Scripture is carefully and slowly observing the text.¹

Observe *Matthew 14:34–15:20* in the following ways: read it silently, read it aloud, listen to it. As you do, take note of the three different groups Jesus addressed and the tone He used with each of them. Think over the text. Jot down additional observations that intrigue you.

In *Matthew 14:13–36*, Jesus performed the following miracles:

- Healed the sick in a remote area off the shore of Galilee
- Multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed thousands of people
- Walked on water
- Calmed the storm
- Healed the sick in Gennesaret



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

With all these miracles occurring in quick succession, word about Jesus quickly flooded the region. The top Pharisees heard the news and came to Galilee from Jerusalem to visit Him (*Matthew 15:1*). Check your Bible *atlas* and write below how far they travelled just to confront Jesus.

Distance: _____

What accusation did the Pharisees make against Jesus' disciples?

Some of God's laws prohibited eating unclean food (*Leviticus 11*), while other laws required handwashing before certain ceremonies (*Exodus 30:17–21*), but there is no law from Moses demanding handwashing before every meal. The run-of-the-mill listener simply wouldn't have noticed these distinctions, innocently believing this human law came from God.

What word did the Pharisees use to describe their law (*Matthew 15:2*)? _____

What word did Jesus use to describe God's law (*15:3*)? _____

In *verses 3–6*, Jesus discussed a common practice among Jews as an example of how following the Pharisees' tradition can break God's law. A person who pledged a certain amount of money to God would have an excuse not to provide financially for his or her parents in their old age. This provision would've violated an *essential* way of showing parents honor and obeying God.

These people had rules on top of rules on top of rules, and they were so binding.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

According to the Pharisees, what was the source of impurity?

According to the Jesus, what was the source of impurity?

Jesus' scathing remarks against the Pharisees make clear that He rejected the traditions they placed over God's commandments. Many of these traditions may feel foreign to us. But . . . could we have some of our own?



Interpretation: A Pure Heart over Impure Motives

Let's now consider how we can mine what the passage says in order to uncover what it means.

In *Matthew 15:3–6*, Jesus summarized the Pharisaic practice of devoting money to God while withholding support from parents. What underlying motivations have might led someone to follow this tradition? How is Jesus' rebuke relevant for us today? See *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org for some guidance.



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

In an attempt to condemn Jesus, the Pharisees only exposed their own sinfulness. What were the Pharisees guilty of according to Jesus? See Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15* for help.²

The Greeks used the term translated “hypocrite” to describe an actor who would wear masks to represent different characters throughout a play. In what ways did the Pharisees put on these masks and act as pretenders in this passage? In what ways does hypocrisy sneak into the church today?

The disciples stood there that day both impressed and perplexed—amazed by Jesus' boldness to reveal the Pharisees' blind spots, while unsure of the actual meaning of His message. In *Matthew 15:15*, Peter asked Jesus to explain the parable. In your own words summarize Jesus' answer in *verses 17–20*. What lesson did Jesus teach His disciples and how is that lesson true for us today?

The filth of the sewer is not as great as the defilement of the human heart not yet cleaned by the blood of Christ. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

Our religious performance doesn't entertain Jesus or edify others. But thankfully He came to forgive hypocritical religiosity and burn away our impurities. Pure hearts will always gladden the heart of God as they brim over with thanksgiving and adoration along with loving words and kind deeds.



Correlation: Understanding Spiritual Blindness

Scripture has a lot to say about spiritual blind spots! Let's look at two passages that are especially pertinent.

When Jesus exposed the Pharisees as hypocrites, He illustrated His point by quoting *Isaiah 29:13*. In this context, the prophet pronounced judgment against ancient Israel because of its unfaithfulness to God. Read *Isaiah 29:22–24*. How does God provide hope for His people despite their sin?

Read *2 Corinthians 4:1–6*. According to the apostle Paul, what does it mean to experience spiritual blindness? How did he express our only hope?

You are not able to discuss the gospel and the person of Christ in much depth with an individual who is without the Savior until the Holy Spirit is at work and begins to massage to life that which has been darkened that person's entire life. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20



Application: Identifying Spiritual Blind Spots

Pastor Chuck crafted three applications about spiritual blind spots to help us guard against them and perhaps even grow out of them. Reflect upon these applications below:

1. *The spiritually blind ask the wrong questions.* The Pharisees showed more interest in trying to trap Jesus than seeking to understand the source of His power.
2. *The spiritually blind trust in unscriptural traditions.* When our human traditions usurp God's commandments, we blur the beauty of God's truth for others . . . and ourselves.
3. *The spiritually blind fail to realize that defilement is a matter of the heart.* "People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

What kinds of human traditions do you have today in your spiritual sphere of life? How do they supplement, or perhaps supplant, God's commandments?

Based on what you learned from God's Word in this study and your own prayerful self-reflection, do you sense the Spirit's nudge toward a purer way marked by faithfulness and freedom? If so, what would that purer way look like in your routine?



Spiritual Blind Spots

Matthew 14:34–15:20

Of all the people living in Judea, the highly religious Pharisees should have *gotten* it. But they didn't. They should've given God glory for Jesus' life. But they refused. Their obsession with tradition blinded them from the true light—just as many are blinded today. But for those who receive Him, who believe in His name, He gives the right to be the children of God.



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You are a gracious God, and Your law is not a burden. Thank You for giving me these challenging words. I ask You to keep working in me, to keep cleansing me, to keep leading me so that my actions and my heart would be pure and pleasing in Your sight. I ask these things in the worthy name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 323–24.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY FIVE

Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28

Great faith is not an illusion. It is not presumption. It is not wishful thinking. It is an absolute trust in the Lord God to do what we cannot possibly do ourselves. Faith is trusting God to do for me—for His glory and in His time—what I cannot do for myself.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

SOME acts look like great faith, but they aren't faith at all. Skipping preparation for a job interview *isn't* great faith. Refusing the best available treatment for an ailment *isn't* great faith. Neglecting to listen to what God has already revealed in His Word *isn't* great faith, and naming and claiming all your desires *CERTAINLY isn't* great faith.

So what is great faith exactly?

Faith begins with knowing the one true God through Jesus Christ. That relationship's foundation is a deep trust in who He is and how He works. That trust then expresses itself as complete dependence and active obedience. Yes, true faith is active. Not passive.

Now, what does great faith look like?

To answer that question, we have a perfect picture in the most unlikely of persons. We don't even know her name. But Matthew preserved her story for us. Jesus Himself marveled at her. Let's take a close look with Pastor Chuck Swindoll at this account to see what great faith looks like and how we today can live with the same faith she did.



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Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Engaging God through His Word requires faith . . . faith that He inspired it, gave it for your good, and still speaks through it today. Faith that its promises are yours to receive. Warnings, yours to heed. Commands, yours to obey. Truths, yours to believe. With those convictions, ask the Holy Spirit to increase your understanding and faith through this remarkable passage.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Gentile woman in *Matthew 15:21–28* stands in contrast with the Pharisees who had just rejected Jesus and His messianic message. In the eyes of the Jews, a woman from a Gentile region would have been the last person to understand the importance of the Messiah. But . . . unlike the Pharisees . . . *she got it!*

So let's see what she did to gain Jesus' applause and a place in the gospel story.



Observation: Food for Children and Dogs

In Pastor Chuck's book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, he explains the first step in his approach to studying the Bible: “Through observation, we discover what the Bible says. This part of the process is absolutely foundational.”¹ Let's set the foundation with our observations now!

Read *Matthew 15:21–28* a few times. As you do, note the speakers in the passage and the flow of their tone.



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28

What titles did the Gentile woman use when she addressed Jesus?

Verse 22: _____

Verse 22: _____

Verse 25: _____

Verse 27: _____

Why did Jesus turn away the woman at first (*Matthew 15:24*)?

In *verses 26* and *27*, what four concrete images did Jesus and the woman use in their exchange?

Image one: _____

Image two: _____

Image three: _____

Image four: _____



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28

What reason did Jesus give for finally granting the woman's request (*Matthew 15:28*)?

This strange conversation had miraculous results! Jesus didn't even move from His location. All He had to do was speak the word and her daughter was healed. *Distance poses no problem for deity!*



Interpretation: The Promises of God for All

When we interpret a passage, we ask broader questions about the text that help us make sense of its deeper meaning in order to learn key theological principles.

Look at your Bible *atlas*. The twin cities of Tyre and Sidon were in a region known as Canaan—where many of Israel's historic enemies dwelled. Jesus' choice to travel there may seem odd, but the Greek verb in *Matthew 15:21* shows Him leaving Galilee to avoid danger from the Pharisees.

What do the four images in the metaphor represent in Jesus' exchange with the woman in *Matthew 15:26–27*? For some guidance, see pages 332–334 in Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.²

Children: _____

Dogs: _____

Bread/Crumbs: _____

Master: _____

Wait . . . did Jesus really just call her a dog? If someone addressed us this way, we'd be insulted! As we already have seen, though, Jesus used a complex metaphor and spoke with nuance we can easily miss. Here's how . . .



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28

The Greeks had two separate words for “dog.” A *kyōn* was a wild dog with vicious behavior and an unclean nature. A *kynarion*, however, was a more pleasant dog kept as a house pet. This conversation reflected how a family would feed its *kynarion*. Parents would feed their children first. Then, they would give the leftovers to the dog at the end of the meal.

Jesus did not intend to insult the Gentile woman at all! Rather, He used a common image to show how His ministry focused on the Jews first. The woman, however, understood that Gentiles had a share in His promises too. Based on your study, why do you think Jesus handled the situation this way? Feel free to use your *Bible study tools* to help you.²

How did the woman demonstrate great faith that amazed Jesus? Also, what did she believe specifically about Him that is instructive for us today?

She overlooked all those cultural barriers, all the norms that she was raised to observe. The reason is, she had a need that was impossible. . . . And she found Him because she knew what she was unable to do, He was able to handle. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

No one understood Jesus and trusted in Him quite like this Gentile woman. Not the religious leaders who were constantly steeped in the law. Not even the disciples who lived with Jesus and witnessed Him perform miracle after miracle. Having only *heard* about Jesus, she still *believed* that He had the power to heal her tormented daughter. What a woman! What a mother! **What faith!**



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28



Correlation: The Gentile Woman Compared to the Disciples

We see very little of the disciples in this passage even though Matthew focused on them so closely in the preceding sections. Comparing the disciples' reaction with the woman's responses clues us into Matthew's teaching on faith.

Review the account of Jesus walking on the water in [Matthew 14:25–31](#). How did Matthew contrast the disciples' faith with the woman's faith to teach the meaning of faith (see especially [Matthew 14:31](#) and [15:28](#))?

When you see yourself before God as you truly are, you come bowing, waiting for Him, knowing you don't deserve His attention. When you're broken and contrite, you have no expectations. You make no demands. You expect no favors. You bear no grudges. You have no blame. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Living with Great Faith

This account of the Gentile woman reveals four elements of exercising great faith in Jesus:

1. *Persistence*: Even though Jesus did not respond to her request immediately, the woman asked again and again and again until He answered her.
2. *Humility*: No pride, no entitlement, no arrogance. Such vices would have stopped the woman from recognizing that only Jesus had the power to meet her need.
3. *Focus*: This troubled mother set her mind on a singular objective: finding healing for her daughter.
4. *Confidence*: When Jesus said, “Your request is granted,” she walked away *knowing* that she would return home to find her daughter liberated from her demonic tormentor.



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28

The cords of these four elements weave together to create a rope of great faith. Which of these threads needs to be strengthened in your life right now? What can you do to strengthen that thread?

What prayer request has burdened your heart lately? How can you offer this prayer to God with more persistence, humility, focus, and confidence?

For faith to be great, you must persist in it. Persist in the request. Ask it over and over and don't back down. The Lord loved the persistence of the Gentile woman.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What an incredible example of great faith! The Gentile woman had heard of Jesus and knew of His power and decided to stop at nothing until He healed her daughter. If the *least* likely person in Jesus' culture could demonstrate such powerful faith, what's stopping us?



Feeding Scraps to a “Dog”

Matthew 15:21–28



A FINAL PRAYER

As you conclude your study, offer to God this prayer from Pastor Chuck:

Help me, Father, not to give up so quickly but to persist. Guard me from the slimy ooze of indefiniteness. Enable me to focus on the need and to keep it before You. May I do so with humility and with confidence. May I not waver, so that I might be known as one with great faith. I bring this to You, to provide the healing, the hope, the recovery, the relief, the answer. I leave it with You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 80.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY SIX

Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

Compassion for others begins with a love for others. Compassion reminds you you're not alone in this journey from earth to heaven and that someone cares enough to demonstrate the love of Christ.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE great Christian thinker A. W. Tozer once said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ What ideas fill *your* mind when you hear God’s name? His holiness? His sovereignty? His love? His grace?

If we could ask Jesus’ disciple Matthew this question, he likely would say *compassion*. Matthew’s gospel shows us example after example of Jesus’ caring heart moving Him to meet the needs of others.

He gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He freed those oppressed by demons and dined with social outcasts. He gave ample opportunities to those who rejected Him as well as to those who misunderstood Him.

Indeed, we find no better portrait of compassion in the gallery of human history than Jesus Christ. He alleviated countless needs wherever He went, and each miracle gives a fresh glimpse of the very character of God. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we’ll explore the overflowing bounty of God’s kingdom amid our world’s tooth-and-claw selfishness and scarcity.



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Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you open God’s Word, offer Him your thanksgiving for the ways He’s met your physical needs and make your requests known to Him—especially that He would nourish your soul at this time.

Heavenly Father, thank You for all those times You’ve shown me compassion, even when I deserved none. Thank You for sending Your Spirit and giving me new life in Christ. Please, teach me today. Give me a fresh understanding of Your compassion that I may savor it and reflect it to others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Wait . . . didn’t Jesus already miraculously feed thousands? **Yes!** In [Matthew 14:13–21](#), during a moment of solitude, Jesus faced a massive crowd seeking His help. Now, in [Matthew 15:29–39](#), an almost identical situation confronted Jesus. In both instances, He had *compassion* on the crowd, healing their ailments and multiplying a small meal to fill everyone.

You may recall from our study of the first feeding the significance of the Greek word translated “compassion.” It comes from a word used to describe organs: stomach, heart, lungs, liver. When Jesus felt compassion, He suffered with that person in need. *He felt it in His guts!*

But the account of the second feeding miracle is not just a retelling of the first—as though Matthew had a memory mishap. Take a look at some of the differences in the chart below. For a more comprehensive list of differences, check out [Constable’s Notes](#) at netbible.org.

	First Miraculous Feeding Matthew 14:13–21	Second Miraculous Feeding Matthew 15:32–39
Location	By the water	On a hill
Days with Jesus	1	3
Loaves Multiplied	5	7
Fish Multiplied	2	A few
Leftovers	12 baskets (Greek: <i>kophinos</i>)	7 baskets (Greek: <i>spuris</i>)
Number Fed	5,000 men	4,000 men



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

Jesus clearly had reason to perform this miracle twice . . . and Matthew clearly had reason to preserve both accounts for us. Let's turn to the second feeding to see what new lessons Jesus wants to teach us.



Observation: Self-Sacrificial Compassion

This story may feel familiar, but Pastor Chuck encourages us to try to observe every passage by starting with a blank slate. In *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, he writes, “Focus on one word at a time and read it as if for the first time.”² Let's do this as we make our observations.

Observe [Matthew 15:29–39](#) in Pastor Chuck's two favorite Bible translations, the New American Standard Bible and the New Living Translation. Even peruse it using a few others if you have time. While you read, stand in the sandals of the disciples. Describe the crowd. Describe Jesus. Describe the relationship each had with the other.

Matthew used a vivid Greek verb in [verse 30](#) to describe the crowd's attitude. They didn't simply lay sick people at Jesus' feet. They *threw* them in haste! The crowd unloaded these ill people onto Jesus to relieve themselves of the “burden” of care. It's as if they said, “I've tried everything, and *nothing* has worked. I'm at my wits' end. They're *your* problem now, Jesus.”

They didn't care. But Jesus did.

Note the two ways the crowd responded in [verse 31](#) when they saw Jesus heal all the ailments:

1. _____
2. _____



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

In *Matthew 15:32*, Jesus said He spent *three days* with this crowd—meeting the people, healing the ill, showing them His love. Why did Jesus say He spent so much time with them?

He loved them all. He had compassion for them all. Though they may have never met Him, they were worthy of His time, as He saw them through the eyes of the Father's love.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Did you notice that the disciples spoke only once in this passage? Summarize in your own words what they said in *verse 33*. What does this statement reveal about their attitude?

The crowd wanted to abandon their sick while the disciples couldn't fathom how to feed so many people. Jesus, however, had compassion and the power to enter their suffering, walk with them through it, and bring them out of it—doing all in the physical realm to point to His spiritual purpose . . . rescuing souls.



Interpretation: A Lesson for the Disciples

We're beginning to see the unique emphasis Matthew placed on this telling of the second miraculous feeding. But what theological truths can we learn through this account?



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

Mark 7:31–8:10 tells of this same miracle with additional details. For example, *Mark 7:31* notes that this miracle occurred in the Decapolis—a collection of ten Gentile cities. If the first feeding occurred in Galilee, why would Jesus want to perform a second feeding miracle here? (Hint: remember the previous passage in which Jesus marveled at the faith of a Gentile woman.)

What lessons was Jesus trying to teach the disciples through this miracle? How are these lessons helpful for us today? For some guidance, see pages 335–336 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.

Had the disciples forgotten *everything* they had watched Jesus do over the past few weeks? The healings. The exorcisms. The feeding of 5,000. The disciples were so familiar with Jesus' power that they had become jaded toward the needy. They likely thought, *Here we go again!* when Jesus pointed them to the hungry masses.

The hearts of the disciples might have been hardened, but luckily for us, the heart of Jesus breaks for those in need.



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39



Correlation: Compassion and Love

In *Exodus 34:6*, God described Himself to His people Israel using a few characteristics—one being compassion. Read *Exodus 34:7* and summarize how these characteristics shape His actions.

Read *1 John 3:17*. According to John, how do we show compassion? Why is compassion a vital element of the Christian life?

Compassion is so essential for Christ's followers because it reflects the essence of Christ's person. Now let's turn to application where we see this heavenly truth put into action on earth.



Application: The Dangers of Familiarity

Pastor Chuck developed four keen insights to guide our application of the feeding of the 4,000:

1. *There is no need too great for God to hear.* Because of God's compassion, He cares and listens. Express your needs to Him repeatedly, passionately, boldly.
2. *There is no reason for us ever to forget when God heard us.* Thanking God for His past graces reminds us He is powerful enough to do the unthinkable again.



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

3. *There is no limit to what God can provide.* “God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches” (Philippians 4:19).
4. *There is no danger more subtle than familiarity.* The disciples had witnessed Jesus perform dozens of miracles, and they lost the wonder of it all.

What trials or challenges have you faced in the past few years of your life? How did you feel during the struggle? How did God show you compassion and help you stand?

What steps can you take today to suffer together with those in need around you and show them Christlike compassion?

In what ways do you feel the foe of familiarity creeping into your life today? How can you move toward seeing the majestic wonder of Jesus Christ again?



Touches of Compassion on Tons of Needs

Matthew 15:29–39

How great it is to live with a huge heart of compassion! How powerful that action is! You might think it's strange that I call compassion an action, but it's not truly compassion until it becomes action. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus cares. These past few chapters of Matthew's gospel have made this truth undeniably clear. His compassion pushed Him to care not only for the physical needs of others but also for their desperate spiritual need . . . their need for a deliverer to liberate them from the shackles of sin, death, and Satan. And God offers this same extravagant compassion to each of us today.



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You are a compassionate God. Thank You for meeting my needs. Thank You especially for the sacrifice of Your Son Jesus Christ and for the freedom You've given me in Him. I ask that the Holy Spirit would work in my life to show those in need the kind of compassion that characterized Jesus' life. It's in His gracious name I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 84.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY SEVEN

Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

The Pharisees and Sadducees were always looking for another argument, especially when dealing with Jesus. But Jesus knew they would not believe, regardless. He knew them better than they knew themselves.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

DURING Jesus' earthly ministry, He attracted unique kinds of people just like He does today. Back then, there were the critics, whose flinty tongues sparked aflame one argument after another. No matter what Jesus said, they wouldn't listen. No matter what miracle He performed, they wouldn't believe. Nothing would make them open their hard hearts to the love of Christ.

Then there were the disciples, who had open hearts but often dull minds. They didn't attack Jesus . . . they simply misunderstood Him. Their preoccupation with life's pressing concerns drew their attention away from perceiving Jesus' profound spiritual teachings.

As we will see in this study, Jesus dealt differently with both groups. He rebuked and walked away from the testy critics who wouldn't listen to Him. But He patiently walked with His disciples, who were eager to believe but slow to understand. Let's see how Jesus responds to each in Matthew 16:1–12.



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Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Unlike the disciples prior to Pentecost, we have the Holy Spirit to “guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13). As you open God’s Word, invite the Spirit to give you spiritual insight into the meaning of Christ’s teaching. Write your prayer below:



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

According to Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s chart of Matthew, chapter 16 launches the next section in the gospel, *Opposition and Rejections of the King* (Matthew 16:1–25:46). Take a moment to review where we are in our journey through Matthew:

MATTHEW

	Announcement and Arrival of the King Main Emphasis: His Credentials Birth Baptism Temptation CHAPTERS 1–4	Proclamation and Reception of the King Main Emphasis: His Message Sermon on the Mount Miracles Discourses Parables CHAPTERS 5–15	Opposition and Rejection of the King Main Emphasis: His Suffering and Death Spread of opposition Preparation of disciples Final predictions Crucifixion CHAPTERS 16–27	Resurrection and Triumph of the King Main Emphasis: His Conquest God’s power Great Commission CHAPTER 28
The King	His identity: Israel’s promised King		His destiny: “Crucify Him!”	
Scope	Teaching the vast multitudes		Teaching the Twelve	
Location	Bethlehem and Nazareth	Ministry in Galilee	Ministry in Judea	
People’s Reaction	Increased popularity		Increased hostility	
Theme	Jesus is the King, Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.			
Key Verses	16:16–19; 28:18–20			
Christ in Matthew	Jesus, the Messiah, fulfills the prophecies, promises, types, and expectations of the Old Testament Scriptures (16:16–19; 28:18–20).			

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Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

In this new section, Jesus' enemies hound Jesus as they drag Him to the cross, where He offers Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of everyone—even for the very enemies who kill Him. Although constantly attacked, Jesus continues to meet the needs of the masses, to teach vital lessons on discipleship, and to prepare His followers to continue the kingdom ministry He started.

Jesus' chief enemies included: the Herodians—such as Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptizer for confronting his corruption, the Pharisees—who hated Jesus for critiquing their traditions and denouncing their hypocrisy, the Sadducees—a priestly class with political influence whose wealth had multiplied due to their corrupt temple trade.

Let's now turn to Matthew 16:1–12 to see how Jesus handled the offense of the newly teamed-up Pharisees and Sadducees.



Observation: Rebuke for Critics, Warning for Disciples

In the observation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we examine the passage as a detective might look for clues to solve a mystery.¹ By linking the Sadducees with the Pharisees, Matthew dropped an important clue regarding the *extent* of opposition. Read [Matthew 16:1–12](#), paying special attention to the actions of these two groups and Jesus' response to them.

According to [Matthew 16:1](#), what brought together these two groups? How did their alliance create a formidable power block against Jesus?



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

The Jewish leaders demanded a sign from heaven, implying that all those miracles Jesus had performed were *not* from heaven. *How insulting!* By referring to signs in the sky, Jesus responded with a twist of irony. What rebuke did He make against them in *Matthew 16:2–4*?

Jonah—a walking miracle—was sign enough for the wicked Ninevites to turn to God. Similarly, Jesus was a living “sign.” The Father sent Him to earth to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven, and He revealed His royal authority through His miracles. What more proof did the Pharisees and Sadducees need? Giving them no more signs, Jesus “left them and went away” (Matthew 16:4).

Jesus was saying, “I’m the sign that you must believe in, but you miss the truth altogether because you will not believe.” Let’s face it, for some people, we can never give enough evidence. Jesus could have brought all kinds of evidence, but He walked away.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What did the disciples argue about on their journey, according to *16:5–7*?



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

According to Jesus in *16:8–10*, why was the lack of food the least of the disciples' problems? What was the more insidious threat to the disciples and their fellow Jews (*Matthew 16:6, 11–12*)?

Why do you think the disciples couldn't get past the missing bread to comprehend Jesus' point?

It wasn't that the disciples wouldn't believe; it was that they were so preoccupied with the everyday stuff of life. Jesus finally had to spell it out for them. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Fitting the Response to the Audience

Jesus' different responses to the testy critics and dull-minded disciples give us insight into the meaning of the passage.

The joining of the Pharisees and Sadducees would have startled the Jews more than we may realize. Usually, these two factions came into conflict over their different responses to Roman rule over Judea. The Pharisees sought God's blessing through strict observance of the law, while the Sadducees hoped to garner favor with the Romans by cozying up with local political leaders.



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

Look at their differences in the following chart.²

The Pharisees	The Sadducees
Were traditional and religious separatists	Were cultural and political compromisers
Taught God’s sovereignty and predestination	Taught free will
Believed in angels	Denied the existence of angels
Affirmed life after death and a resurrection	Renounced life after death and a resurrection
Equated oral tradition with Scripture	Rejected oral tradition
Saw all 39 Old Testament writings as inspired	Saw only the five books of Moses as inspired
Emphasized rewards in the afterlife	Emphasized prosperity in this life

Despite such drastic differences, their seething hatred of Jesus brought them together and blinded their spiritual eyes.

Jesus pointed out that His critics refused to interpret the “signs of the times” to perceive God’s doings (Matthew 16:3). To what “signs of the times” was Jesus referring? Why did they neglect to accept these signs? For help with the answer, read page 15 of Pastor Chuck’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, or for an online resource, consult *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org.



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

What reasons might Jesus have had for referring to Jonah as the *only* sign He would give? Look at His explanation of the “sign of the prophet Jonah” in *Matthew 12:38–41* for a broader perspective on His meaning.

Refusing to submit to His critics’ demands, Jesus simply walked away. What principle can you draw from His actions about dealing with hard-hearted critics? Why is this principle still relevant for citizens of the kingdom of heaven today?

The disciples’ hearts weren’t hard—just distracted by the growling sound in their empty stomachs! Why was their fear about going hungry a sign of weak faith? Also, how did their argument cause them to miss a bigger issue (*Matthew 16:5–12*)?



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

Jesus' reminders helped the disciples to focus on His words and to refocus their faith. What principle can you conclude from His actions about dealing with argumentative or distracted believers?

Jesus patiently worked with the Twelve. It was worth the effort since a day would come when they would have to carry on without Him. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Yeast of Legalism

The “deceptive teaching” of the Pharisees and Sadducees posed a serious threat. Like yeast in dough, their legalism had permeated the good teaching of God’s Word, and if not removed, it would spoil the disciples’ pure faith in Jesus.

Paul warned the Galatians about the “yeast” that false teachers were kneading into the doctrines of the early church. They were telling new Gentile believers that faith in Christ was not enough and that they must submit to Jewish rituals like circumcision to be right with God!

What did Paul say about the dangers of legalism, and what we should do about it, according to [Galatians 5:1–10](#)? See especially verses 3–6.



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

New forms of legalism live on today in many churches, causing some to stray from the freedom we have in Christ. As Jesus warned His disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6).

Pharisees and Sadducees are gone, but false teaching proliferates. Spiritual deception is at hand. Turn to Christ. Open His Word. Go deeper in your walk with God.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Crucial Questions

As we look into the mirror of this passage, do we see any aspect of ourselves in the types of people around Jesus? Do we at times get testy like the critics, stuck in a skeptical mind-set and seeking more proof before we can trust Christ? Or, like the disciples, have everyday worries and fears kept our faith dull and caused bickering with one another?

Have you fallen into any pits recently on your journey of faith? If so, which one(s)?

Imagine yourself with the disciples—wrapped up in worry and quarreling over unimportant things. What patient reminders from Scripture might Jesus offer you to help you see His truth and grow your faith?

In time, the Holy Spirit would come at Pentecost to indwell the disciples and remind them of those things they so easily forgot while Jesus was with them. Today, walk in the power of the Spirit, who will lead you to treasures of truth that will deepen your faith in Christ.



Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, in a world of critics who continually attack Your Son, guard me from the pitfall of skepticism. Remind me of what's truly important when I get distracted by lesser things so that my faith remains sharp. Keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, and help me see beyond the deception of false teachers. Guide me in Your path of truth. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 16–28*, vol. 1B (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 7, 13–14.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY EIGHT

Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

Jesus knew His time was getting short, so He cut to the chase and asked His disciples a crucial question: “Do you really know who I am?”

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE disciples watched their master-teacher with wide eyes. Jesus had healed the sick, exorcised demons, calmed storms, multiplied food to feed multitudes, and much more. Through these demonstrations, Jesus taught His students complex truths about the kingdom of heaven.

Finally, the day came for the professor to hand His students their final exam—one crucial question that encompassed all they had learned. Jesus asked them, “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

A sense of urgency accompanied the words framing Jesus' question. With each passing day, His enemies moved ever closer, the cross loomed ever larger, His time grew ever shorter. Had His closest followers put together the pieces? Could they comprehend their king's identity from all they had heard and seen? Their future depended entirely on them answering correctly.

In fact, our answer to Jesus' question also determines our future. Not only our tomorrow . . . but also our forever. For that reason, *it's life's ultimate question.*



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Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Ask the Lord to reveal deep truths through His Word with the following prayer:

Father, help me see Jesus through the eyes of His disciples. Take me back to the time and place He posed this most important question. Stir my heart to feel the question's significance as well as the privilege of knowing the truth. May I boldly declare what I know without reservation. In Christ's name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

As you read *Matthew 16:13–20*, take a look at the photos of *Caesarea Philippi* at bibleplaces.com. For centuries, pagans flooded this naturally beautiful site at the headwaters of the Jordan River to worship their idols:

- **Canaanites** from the time of Joshua when it was called “Baal-gad” or “Baal-hermon” (*Joshua 13:5; Judges 3:3*)
- **Greeks** from the time of Alexander the Great, who considered the large cave with its deep pool the birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature
- **Romans** from the time of Herod the Great, who built a gleaming white marble temple to worship Caesar Augustus at the mouth of the great cave

Commentator William Barclay summed up the sensation of entering this place, “Here was an area where *the breath of ancient religion was in the very atmosphere*.”¹ People from all nations paid homage to their gods and kings at Caesarea Philippi.²

It was no accident, then, that Jesus brought His followers into this very place to proclaim *His supremacy* as the one true God and King and to announce *His church* as the light-bearer to a dark world.



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



Observation: Question, Confession, and Announcement

In the observation phase, we'll notice the flow of the dialogue. First, Jesus asks a general question, and the disciples respond (Matthew 16:13–14). Second, Jesus narrows His question to the personal level, and Simon gives the supreme confession (16:15–16). Third, Jesus completes the interchange with His surprise announcement of the church (16:17–20).³

General Question—Matthew 16:13–14

How did Jesus begin His conversation with the disciples, according to *Matthew 16:13–14*, and how did the disciples answer?

Jesus didn't fit the expected idea of the Messiah as a warrior-king, so the Jews cast Him in a forerunner role—in the mold of the likes of John the Baptizer, Elijah, or Jeremiah. A prophet, yes, but not the conqueror who would liberate the Jews.

Personal Question—Matthew 16:15–16

Jesus turned from discussing public opinion to probing the disciples' personal belief: "But who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Read aloud Peter's confession in *16:16*. Imagine nearby pagan worshipers offering goat sacrifices to Pan and praising Caesar as son of god. How does each word of Peter's confession highlight Jesus' supreme authority and divine identity?



Answering Life’s Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

Simon was saying that Jesus was not like the gods. No, no, no. Jesus was the ONE TRUE GOD. He was the Anointed One, the promised Messiah. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus’ Response—Matthew 16:17–20

Simon’s confession was a key that unlocked Jesus’ revelation of His church. Fill in the blanks in the following chart as you observe each part of *Matthew 16:17–20*.

Revelation	Declarations
A Blessing (16:17)	
A Name (16:18a)	
First Promise (16:18b)	
Second Promise (16:19)	
A Warning (16:20)	

In this first mention of the church in the Bible, Jesus introduced the coming of a new chapter in the pages of history, the transition to a new stage in God’s plan. How fitting that this mystery was revealed by Jesus, “the head of the church, which is his body” (Colossians 1:18)!

Simon’s confession came as a revelation from heaven, not from flesh and blood but from the living God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Rock, the Building, and the Keys

To interpret the meaning of Jesus’ words, let’s focus on each of His metaphors: *rock*, *building*, and *keys*.

The Identity of the Rock

Jesus promised to build His church “upon this rock” (Matthew 16:18) right after renaming Simon, *Petros*, meaning “rock.”⁴ Some say Jesus identified Peter as the foundation of the church. However, “upon this rock” uses a different Greek form for “rock,” *petra*, so Jesus was likely referring to something different than Peter.



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

If not Peter, to what did the “rock” refer? Consult pages 26–27 in Pastor Chuck’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, and write down what you discover.

What does “rock” mean? I suggest that Jesus was saying, “This rock-like declaration, this rock-like revelation, this profession of faith will be the foundation of My church.”
—Pastor Church Swindoll

The Nature of the Building

Now what will Jesus do with the rock? Explain the theological significance of each word in Jesus’ statement “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

The Greek word translated “church,” *ekklesia*, describes the assembly of the body of Christ. The church was born when the Holy Spirit baptized Christ’s followers for the first time at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Although Satan may threaten Christ’s building project, Jesus promised, “All the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18).⁵



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

The Meaning of the Keys

Jesus issued His second promise: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The keys refer to the authority to “open up membership in physical, visible, earthly community that would become known as the church.”⁶

Peter exercises this authority by “binding” and “loosing” heavenly matters on earth (see Matthew 16:19 NASB). The clue to deciphering this verse is the passive voice of the verbs. Whatever has already been pronounced true in heaven (such as forgiveness of sins and security in Christ), we can pronounce true on earth. On what basis do we draw our authority? *The Word of God*.

One can speak authoritatively of what is forbidden or permitted based on what the Scriptures teach. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Jesus, The Lord of All

Now let's take a few minutes to see Jesus' declaration unfold into reality. Read about Peter and Cornelius in [Acts 10](#) and note the ways in which this remarkable account correlates with the truths above. Look for the revelatory rock. Note how the building expands. Find the authoritative keys.

“And we apostles are witnesses of all [Jesus] did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. . . . And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.” (Acts 10:39–40, 42–43)



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



Application: What Is Your Answer?

Some people say that Jesus was a good man who brought a message of peace. Others claim that He was a daring revolutionary who got caught in the crossfire of politics and religion. Popular world religions often herald Him as a great prophet or teacher but nothing more. None of these views, however, paints the true portrait of Jesus. Pastor Chuck elaborates:

Jesus was and is the God-man—the eternal Son of God who became human, lived a sinless life, died as a perfect substitute for our sins, rose miraculously and victoriously from the dead, ascended into heaven to intercede for us as our High Priest, and will come again as our Judge and King.⁷

Who is Jesus to you? How has this passage affected your belief? Has it revealed a new aspect of His nature? Who in your life can you pray for now—that he or she might discover the true answer to life's ultimate question? Write your reflections below.

Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God. Matthew's question to us is the same as Jesus' to His disciples. *So, who do you say Jesus is?*



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your time in a personal prayer, sharing with the Father your devotion to His Son as your Savior and the hope of the world.

ENDNOTES

1. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 134, emphasis added.
2. To honor Pan, the Greeks named this site Pania, called “Banias” today. When Herod the Great’s son, Philip, became tetrarch, he built his capital there and named it in honor of Caesar Augustus. To distinguish it from his father’s Caesarea by the sea, he called it Caesarea Philippi.
3. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, “[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#).”
4. When Jesus first met Simon, Jesus foretold, “You will be called Cephas’ (which means ‘Peter’)” (John 1:42, emphasis added). That day came when Simon pronounced Jesus “Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Simon’s confession prompted his name change to Peter. Jesus may have been making a pun from Simon’s new name, saying in so many words: *Through the man whose name means rock, God has just revealed the rock on which I will build My church.*
5. Jesus may have made this declaration within sight of the Grotto of Pan where the Greeks thought the great cave was the gateway to Hades and the underworld.
6. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 16–28*, vol. 1B (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 28.
7. Swindoll, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, 32.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY NINE

Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26

If we are going to live as we should, then we must think as God thinks. That's why we need a Bible. This Book is full of God's thoughts, God's counsel. It contains the truth to live by.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

YOU are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Through a flash of divine illumination, God had revealed a dazzling truth to Simon. Perhaps for the first time ever, he could see clearly. He was thinking God's thoughts, not human thoughts—thinking vertically, not horizontally.

So rock-solid was the truth of Simon's confession that Jesus consecrated the moment by giving Simon a new name, Peter—the “rock.” However, it didn't take long for this rock to show signs of cracking.

As we'll see in Matthew 16:21–26, Peter's thoughts reverted to flesh-and-blood thinking when he brazenly tried to reprimand Jesus. What flipped Peter's mental switch from vertical to horizontal? Let's glean from Peter's errors *three nevers we must never forget*.



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Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26



PREPARE YOUR HEART

The Holy Spirit alone knows God's thoughts. But, thankfully, "we have received God's Spirit . . . so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). In prayer, invite the Lord to reveal His mind to you through His Spirit as you study His Word. Write your prayer below.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

After confessing Jesus as Messiah and hearing Jesus' praise, Peter must have felt confident and courageous, ready to wave the banner and lead the King's troops into battle. But then Jesus "sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah" (Matthew 16:20).

Why restrain His messengers? Jesus was on a mission—to redeem the world, not to conquer it. To overthrow death, not Rome. To liberate captives from bondage to sin, not Caesar. To swing open the gates of God's blessing to all people, not just the Jews.

Of course, Peter and the others didn't understand any of these purposes because they were thinking only about earthly kingdoms. Read [Matthew 16:21–26](#) and write down the statements that would have most shocked Peter and the disciples from their earthbound perspective.



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26



Observation: Jesus' Prediction, Rebuke, and Requirement

Use your observation skills, based on Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study method, to examine Jesus' teaching, which comprises three parts.¹

Jesus' Prediction—Matthew 16:21

What does the phrase “From then on” in [Matthew 16:21](#) indicate? How does the word “plainly” contrast with Jesus' previous teaching (see [Matthew 12:40](#))?

Specifically, what did Jesus predict? Watch for those verbs. Who would be His antagonists? Be sure to keep these key characters in mind as we continue our study of Matthew.²

Jesus' prediction of His death was so unexpected, the rest was a blur. Ever had that happen to you? All of a sudden, the world stops. You reel and try to stay on your feet as you deal with something you never dreamed would happen. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26

Jesus’ Rebuke—Matthew 16:22–23

Use the charts below to contrast Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:16 with his reprimand of Jesus in *Matthew 16:22*. Then contrast Jesus’ commendation of Peter in *16:17* with His rebuke in *16:23*.

Peter Confesses Jesus <i>16:16</i>	Peter Reprimands Jesus <i>16:22</i>

Jesus Commends Peter <i>16:17</i>	Jesus Rebukes Peter <i>16:23</i>

How did Peter the “rock” so quickly become Peter the “stumbling block” (NIV)? Based on the *verses* in the charts above, what clue sheds light on the cause of this shift?



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26

Peter's rebuke eerily echoes Satan's temptation in *Matthew 4:1–11*, especially when the devil offered to Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matthew 4:8). Like Satan, Peter wanted Jesus to grab the glory now and avoid the cross. Just as He resisted the devil's temptation, Jesus resisted Peter's.

"Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." (Matthew 16:23)

Jesus' final line says it all, doesn't it? How often we see life through earthly eyes and not God's divine perspective. The disciples were barely beginning to understand the paradox: *the Messiah must die to save the world.*

According to horizontal thinking, the Messiah can't die. Messiah conquers. The Messiah shouldn't submit. Messiah rules. When we operate from a human viewpoint and things happen that we don't expect, we resist. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus' Requirement—Matthew 16:24–26

In a short span, the disciples must learn how to follow a shameful, murdered Messiah. *But how?* Jesus gave the answer in *Matthew 16:24–26*. What did Jesus tell them they must be willing to do? What rationale did Jesus provide for this seemingly insane exhortation?

*Living for Christ is really explained in one word, dying. The best servants are those who have died to themselves. The fight is over. The resistance is finished.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

By bringing the disciples to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had led them to a crossroad. Would they follow their Master to Jerusalem now that they knew what came next? What did Jesus mean by "take up your cross" anyway? Let's take a deeper look.



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26



Interpretation: The Threefold Requirement

In the interpretation phase, we seek to understand the meaning of Jesus' threefold requirement for His disciples:

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

What does it mean to “give up your own way” (16:24)? Other Bible versions offer insight in their translations of the phrase: “deny himself” (16:24 NASB); “set aside selfish interests” (16:24 AMP); “forget about yourself” (16:24 CEV); “let me lead” (16:24 MSG). Based on your study so far, explain the phrase in your own words.

In Jesus' day, the Romans often forced condemned criminals to carry the very planks upon which they would be hung to their own crucifixion site. If Jesus must walk the way of humiliation and death, His disciples must be willing to take up their own crosses too.

What does it mean to “take up your cross” (16:24)? What does it *not* mean? For help with the answer, consult page 37 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*. For an online resource, consult [Constable's Notes](http://netbible.org) at netbible.org.



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26

What does it mean to “follow me” (Matthew 16:24)? The Greek verb is a present imperative, which describes a command to an ongoing action. This verb contrasts “give up” and “take up,” which emphasize complete action.

*Turning from our selfish ways, we take up our cross and follow Him. We never lead Him.
We listen closely, come to terms with what He is saying, then we adapt accordingly.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



Correlation: Lesson Learned and Taught

That day, when Jesus rebuked Peter for his devilish reprimand, Peter learned a vital lesson about thinking God's thoughts and submitting to Christ's authority. The way of Christ includes setting aside our self-interests and being willing to suffer—even to die—for the sake of Jesus.

Later in his life, Peter taught this lesson to other believers. Read *1 Peter 2:21–25; 3:14–17; 4:1–2, 12–14; 5:10*. Then write your reflections on one of Peter's principles that really stood out to you.

The world offers immediate gain but eternal loss. The way of Christ's cross brings immediate loss, suffering, humiliation, and even death. But with it comes eternal gain. *How much better is following Christ!*



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26



Application: Three Nevers We Must Never, Ever Forget

Out of the granite of Jesus' teaching, we can carve three foundational principles on which to build our lives.

First, Jesus' unexpected revelation about His eventual death teaches:

We must never think that just because something is unexpected that it is unacceptable.

Has life thrown you any curves lately? Perhaps an unanticipated medical diagnosis, a change in a relationship, a job relocation? In the space below, write a prayer letting go of your resistance to God's unexpected way as the first step to opening your mind to His perspective.

Second, Peter's reprimand of Jesus illustrates:

We must never think that the Lord should alter His plan to fit our preferences.

Jesus deferred Peter's dream of an immediate realization of God's kingdom. He was telling Peter in so many words, first comes the cross, then the crown. Have you ever tried to tell God what He can or cannot do? What preferences may Christ be asking you to set aside to follow Him?



Three Nevers We Must Never Forget

Matthew 16:21–26

Third, Jesus' requirements for discipleship reveal:

We must never think that being a close follower of Jesus can happen without self-denial.

Are you willing to give up your agenda, take up your cross, and follow Jesus? What specific step can you take to embrace His way . . . which is always the better way?

At Caesarea Philippi, the disciples had come to a decision point. Would they turn their backs on the kingdom of the world to follow Jesus to the cross? The same question applies to us all today. Jesus beckons you to let go of all that you are to gain all you can imagine . . . *and more!*



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, so often I look at life backward, grasping onto the things of this world to keep me safe. Turn my thinking around and help me find refuge in letting go of everything—even my own life—for the sake of Christ. Help me see what matters for eternity over the things that concern me only in the present. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. The "elders and chief priests and scribes" (Matthew 16:21 NASB) plotted Jesus' arrest and adjudicated His trials. They obtained false witness, spat in Jesus' face, beat Him, brought Him to Pilate, incited the crowd, and demanded Jesus' crucifixion. Afterward, they ordered soldiers to guard the tomb and bribed them to lie about the resurrection. They were against Jesus each step of His way.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY TEN

A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13

It is easy to forget when focused on only the humanity of Jesus that He is both undiminished deity and true humanity. Two natures that do not mix but remain in one person forever. That's why He's known as the God-man—undiminished deity and true humanity in one person.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

HOW easy it is to miss a moment of beauty! Hurry and worry aim to draw us away from these simple, everyday delights. Competition wants to shove aside laughter as complaining tries to kick out gratitude. Blue light from a screen often captures more facetime than a splendid sunset. Life-giving conversations get left behind because of ever-growing, always-screaming to-do lists.

If anyone could have benefitted from slowing down to embrace the moment, it was Jesus' disciples. Every single day, God-in-the-flesh had walked in their midst. They soaked up some of the wisest words ever spoken. With divine deeds, Jesus over and over again leaped over human hurdles, exceeding the disciples' small expectations.

But the disciples rarely seemed to understand just how *awesome* was the One they followed. Familiarity often dulled their spiritual senses. Then, on occasion, God would pull back the curtain in astonishing ways, which really let His majesty shine through.

Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 16:27–17:13 proved to be one of those pivotal moments. How would the disciples react when they beheld Jesus in His divine array? In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll explore how God relayed truth in that moment that wasn't just for the moment but for life . . . truth not just for them in their time but for us in our time as well!



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A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Offer this prayer to God before you open His Word today:

Father, You are the God of glory, goodness, and grace. Help me never to forget that. Daily, I want to remember how great a gift You've given me in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for my sins. I pray I would read Your Word today with the same excitement I had when I picked it up the very first time. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In the past few passages of Matthew's gospel, the disciples' perspective on Jesus has moved like waves upon the sea—occasionally rising to great heights of insight and then plummeting back down to confusion and misunderstanding.

In Matthew 16:13–20, the waves soared with Peter's declaration of Jesus' messianic identity. Immediately following this declaration, however, the waves crashed back down. Take a moment to review what happened in [Matthew 16:21–26](#) and then read Jesus' concluding statements on discipleship in verses 27 and 28.

Now, we'll do a little interpretation on the front end of our study.¹ Notice the “for” in 16:27. How do verses 27 and 28 relate to 16:21–26, and how do these final two verses reaffirm Jesus' messianic identity? Feel free to use your Bible study [tools](#). You'll find helpful remarks from Pastor Chuck Swindoll on pages 38 of his [Insights on Matthew 16–28 commentary](#).²

Now get ready for the ebb and flow of the disciples' understanding to surge to new heights!



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13



Observation: The Glory of Jesus

Carefully read [Matthew 16:28–17:13](#). Imagine the location. Imagine the people. Imagine the unfolding events. First, describe the thematic connection between 16:28 and 17:1–13. Then note the seven people who were present.

A Glorious Moment—Matthew 17:1–8

How did Peter respond to Jesus' transfiguration in [Matthew 17:4](#)? Luke's account adds more color and explanation to the scene. What did he say about Peter in this moment in [Luke 9:33](#)?

You might recall from an earlier study that this isn't the first time in Matthew we've heard a booming voice from the sky. Compare [Matthew 3:17](#) and [17:5](#). Summarize the elements that are similar and those that differ.



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13

A Glorious Insight—Matthew 17:9–13

As Jesus and the disciples discuss the coming of the prophet Elijah, a foundational Old Testament prophecy grounds their conversation. Read it in *Malachi 4:5–6*, and describe what this prophecy said Elijah would do.

The Jewish leaders—and consequently the disciples—assumed this prophecy meant that Elijah would come back to life to prepare for the Messiah. According to *Matthew 17:11–13*, who did this prophecy actually describe (see also *Matthew 3:1–3*)?

If Elijah the forerunner has already come, then who does that make Jesus? It would take more than prophetic insight to help the disciples understand the true nature of Jesus. It took a moment of glory! He isn't merely from God, like Moses and Elijah . . . ***He is God . . . so, listen to Him!***



Interpretation: Responding to Glory

Let's place ourselves in the sandals of these three disciples to gain a fuller understanding of the meaning of these events. Trek up the jagged terrain and stand on the mountain peak. Though tired, you still look forward to a moment of peace and quiet with a few close friends.



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13

Suddenly, a brilliant light strikes your eyes. When you lift your hand to shield your face, you realize the radiance is not from the sun above. *It's coming from the Son of Man, our Rabbi!* Then you see His well-worn cloak transform into a spotless white robe, like that of only the wealthiest of kings.

This is the greatest, most evident confirmation of Jesus' deity thus far in His earthly life.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What are you thinking at this moment? What aspect of this event stands out to you?

While Peter's response in [Matthew 17:4](#) may seem odd considering the spectacle before him, his desire to build shelters wasn't random. Dig around in your [Bible study tools](#) and explain why Peter might have responded this way.³ Why do you think Jesus didn't indulge Peter's urging? What do we learn from Peter's impulsivity?

What theological truths do we learn about Jesus in this passage?



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13

“Listen!” Even in the silence, Jesus is speaking. His change of countenance is a message. And this an awesome interruption as God enters the scene as Peter is speaking and says, “Listen to the one I sent.” —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Eyewitnesses

At the end of his life, the apostle Peter wrote of the supreme value of the kingdom of heaven, which included a reflection of his experience on the mountain that day. Read [2 Peter 1:16–21](#) and explain how his eyewitness testimony relates to the transfiguration, Scripture, and our faith.

From this short passage, we easily see how Peter learned true lifelong lessons from that mountaintop moment. Even still, Peter has so much more to teach us.



Application: Slow Down, Be Quiet, Take Time

Pastor Chuck provides us three practical applications we learn from the three privileged disciples who witnessed Jesus' transfiguration:

1. *Slow down.* If we move too fast, we will never wade out of shallow waters. God wants us to think more deeply and go deeper in our relationship with Him.
2. *Be quiet.* As one wag once put it, “Never miss an opportunity to shut-up.” Sit still before God and listen. Listen to Him. Listen to others.
3. *Take time.* God doesn't hurry to catch up with us, so we must slow down to walk with Him.



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13

How has speaking less and listening more benefited your relationships with others and with God? Is there an opportunity to be quiet that is presenting itself to you right now? If so, where? What benefit do you stand to gain from doing so?

When was the last time you simply stopped to soak in everything going on around you? How might practicing slowing down, being quiet, and taking time strengthen your relationship with God?

*When will we ever learn—in this narcissistic, self-centered world—that it is not about us?
It is all about Him. Regardless what you are going through, it is all about Him.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

The transfiguration of Jesus reveals to us the resplendence, the magnificence, the majestic beauty of the savior King we serve. May we never forget this and so become dull to His *awesome* nature. Savor every word in Scripture. Enjoy every moment you have with Him because they truly are glorious gifts.



A Terrifying Glimpse of Glory

Matthew 16:27–17:13



A FINAL PRAYER

Offer your own prayer to God today. As you pray, slow down, be quiet, and take time to see what God wants you to take away from this study.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Here, we see a picture of an *inaugurated* kingdom. In one sense, the kingdom of heaven has *already* arrived in the person, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the King along with certain promises like the Holy Spirit indwelling God's people. The kingdom, however, has *not yet* reached its consummation which will occur when Jesus returns to execute His judgment, to defeat Satan and sin and death, and to establish His reign throughout the earth.
3. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at [BibleGateway.com](#), and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at [netbible.org](#).



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY ELEVEN

Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

So, you're facing a mountainous obstacle . . . learn where to point. Your need is not an enormous amount of faith. That's nonsense. All you need is enough faith to point to the One who can handle the situation and to leave it with Him.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WHEN was your last *mountaintop moment*? The kind of moment when the weight of God's glory and character knocks you over like wind from a screaming monsoon. You see His nature in a fresh way or feel His embrace so strongly that you have no doubt you're *His* child. These brief moments create a ripple effect of joy and faith that often lasts a lifetime . . . just as they're meant to.

You see, no matter how badly we want to stay on that high spiritual peak to savor the surreal experience, God takes us back down into the valleys. He does so because He designs these mountaintop moments to change our *perception*, not our address.

For example, Peter, James, and John had one of the greatest mountaintop moments with Jesus, as recounted in Matthew 17:1–13. They hiked up the mountain with their humble teacher but witnessed Him at the summit as the God of glory. Peter wanted the experience to last. God, however, gave them that moment, not to keep them in the moment but to keep the moment in them.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll explore just how vital it is to keep these moments at the forefront of our thinking, locked within our minds, to draw upon them as we make our way through life's valleys.



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Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you mine the riches of God's Word today, thank Him for the ways He's powerfully made Himself known to you in the past, and ask that He would do so again through this passage. Write your prayer below.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Mountaintop moments provide significant spiritual benefits because life's valleys often present mountain-sized obstacles. Without an elevated perspective from God, we operate with a perspective limited to seed-sized solutions.

Our elevated perspective, however, doesn't require special ingenuity to conjure up better solutions. The elevated perspective depends, rather, upon faith—and all it takes is seed-sized faith to tackle mountain-sized obstacles. Peter, James, and John would discover this truth almost immediately after they had their own mountaintop moment.

Now get ready for the ebb and flow of the disciples' understanding to surge to new heights!



Observation: Two Questions, Two Responses

In *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck likens Bible study to constructing a building. First, we must set the foundation: "Observation is like excavation, which involves digging into the text to form the foundation of thought."¹



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

Read *Matthew 17:14–20* a few times. Summarize the two requests presented to Jesus and His two subsequent replies. What do you find surprising in this passage?

As Jesus descended the mountain, He faced a familiar scene: a crowd desperate for His attention. This time, He noticed something different. Several feet ahead of the masses stooped a man on his hands and knees begging Jesus for mercy.² For this man had a son who was possessed and oppressed by a vicious demon wanting nothing more than to see the boy suffer and die.

According to *verse 16*, how did this father seek to solve the problem of his demon-possessed son *before* coming to Jesus? What were the results of this attempt?

How did Jesus respond to the request of the man in *verses 17 and 18*? Pay special attention to His tone. Also, note the contrast between His words and His actions.



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

According to Jesus in *verse 20*, why couldn't the disciples free the boy from his demonic tormentor?

Once again, Jesus exposed the little faith of the disciples (see *Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20*). Jesus even portrayed their faith to be littler than the mustard seed, which they considered the smallest seed in the world!

This passage places heavy emphasis on the final saying from Jesus. Restate in your own words Jesus' proclamation in *verse 20*?

"Nothing will be impossible." *What powerful words!* But what did Jesus really mean when He claimed the disciples could do *anything* if they had enough faith? Let's move on to determine what this passage meant for them back then as well as for those who follow Jesus today.



Interpretation: Nothing Will Be Impossible

Now that we've completed our excavation during observation, we can build the foundation of interpretation. *What is the meaning of Jesus' exorcism and proclamation?*



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

You may remember that Jesus previously gave the disciples “authority to cast out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and illness” (*Matthew 10:1*). In *Matthew 17:14–21*, they couldn’t perform these miraculous deeds because of their lack of faith. Explain how the disciples specifically showed their lack of faith in Jesus? Use your *Bible study tools* for help.³

They’re still trying to do things on their own . . . in their own strength. Sound familiar? In spite of all we have heard over the years, things happen, and we still mess it up by getting in the middle of it, thinking we need to fix it. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

The disciples may have had “little faith” (*oligopistia*; *17:20*), but the crowd, the generation of Jesus’ day, was completely “faithless” (*apistos*; *17:17*). This difference may seem small, but for Jesus, it was huge. It was the difference between life and death.

Based on this description, how should we define *generation* in the passage? Why is this definition relevant today? You might want to look at Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s comments on page 56 of *Insights on Matthew 16–28* for some guidance.



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

Based on your interpretation of this passage, what did Jesus mean when He said, “Nothing will be impossible” (Matthew 17:20 NASB)? Why is this theological truth significant for Christians today?

For Jesus’ disciples, the notion of continuing His kingdom ministry without Him felt like trying to move a mountain, and we often feel the same way too. Thankfully, all that’s needed is a kernel of faith, and *it’s that kernel of faith that Jesus uses to do the impossible!*



Correlation: A Father’s Faith and the Son’s Power

Mark 9:14–29 records this same account, but Mark zooms out to give us broader perspective to show us more of the picture. Let’s look at this account and put the finishing touches on what we’ve been building.

Read [Mark 9:21–24](#). How did the father show faith in Jesus? What can we learn from the father’s example?



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

What does this passage teach us about the spiritual relationship between Jesus and demons? See *Mark 9:20, 25–26*. How should this truth have affected the way the disciples handled this situation?



Application: Facing Mountainous Obstacles

Now that we've done our Bible study groundwork by observing and interpreting the passage, let's develop a blueprint to help us build our lives on this solid foundation of divine truth. Pastor Chuck provides us three helpful steps for doing so:

1. *Never forget what God taught you in the mountaintop moment.* These moments are special. Write down what you learned. Memorize it. Engrave it onto your heart.
2. *Never allow earthly obstacles to eclipse divine truth.* “But you belong to God . . . the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world” (1 John 4:4).
3. *Never think previous failures mean, “It can't be done.”* Satan wants to push us over and pin us down. But Jesus always comes to pick us up, no matter how many times we fall.

Take a few minutes to reflect on a mountaintop moment from your life. You may not remember all the feelings you experienced or the truths you learned, but do your best to recall what you believe God wanted to teach you at that time. How can that lesson help enhance your perspective and strengthen your faith today?



Micro-Faith and Mountainous Obstacles

Matthew 17:14–20

What impossibly tall mountain rests on the horizon of your life right now? How is God calling you to place your trust in Him as you prepare to climb that slope?

Think of something you have considered impossible—maybe recently, maybe for quite a while—and remember, with our God, nothing falls in that category.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

May the lessons you've learned from your mountaintop moments increase your faith and prepare you to face the even larger mountains of life that await you in the future. Remember Jesus' vital promise: *nothing will be impossible for those who place their trust in Him.*



A FINAL PRAYER

Offer to God this prayer from Pastor Chuck as you finish your study today:

Thank You, Father, for the truth that You are able and I am not. Help me find peace in that truth, so I might relax and leave it with You. I point to Your Son, whom I love and adore, to handle the needs I bring before You today. In His name I pray, and for His glory. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 118.
2. The Greek verb translated “knelt” (*gonypeteo*) describes someone kneeling to someone in authority to present some sort of petition.
3. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY TWELVE

Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

We who know Christ are possessors of dual citizenship. First and foremost, we are citizens of heaven. We are obligated to obey Him. We are expected to hold up His reputation and magnify His name. But we must never forget, we are also citizens of this planet . . . of this country. We are to honor that citizenship and not give offense by not obeying those rules and laws.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

Is Jesus your King? This question drives the narrative of Matthew's gospel. But Matthew doesn't shy away from the reality that, although the cost of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven can be extreme (Matthew 16:24)—even costing us our lives—the supreme and abundant blessings of belonging to His kingdom endure eternally.

This challenging question provides us with a paradox: How can I be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven while still a citizen of my own earthly nation?

While traveling with Jesus, the disciples were often forced to wrestle with the reality of this dual citizenship. In one instance, they faced a particularly touchy topic . . .

TAXES

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we will head straight into that stormy subject—not merely to discuss first century politics and economics but to see how Jesus helped His followers navigate the choppy waters of their dual citizenship. In doing so, we'll discover what it means to live as earthbound citizens who are on a heaven-bound journey.



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Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you dive into the waters of God's Word today, offer the prayer that Jesus provided the citizens of His kingdom in Matthew 6:9–13 (NASB):

*“Our Father, who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Since leaving the region of Galilee, Jesus and the disciples' journey entailed action and excitement at every turn. The trek began at Caesarea Philippi, where Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Shortly thereafter, Peter, James, and John witnessed their King undergo a transfiguration to reveal the reality of His divine glory.

In the midst of all the amazement, however, Jesus made a bleak prediction in [Matthew 16:21](#). Despite the disciples' best efforts to persuade Him otherwise, Jesus had made up His mind. The King would soon offer His own life as a sacrifice to establish His own eternal kingdom.

But Jesus wasn't afraid. He declared His resolve when He once again stated that He would die. Let's turn to Matthew 17:22–27 to see what lessons Jesus wanted to teach His disciples as His death loomed on the horizon.



Observation: Inevitable Realities

The first step of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's Bible study method is observation. He writes, “First, we read what the verse says and observe the context.”¹ Now that we've reviewed the context, read [Matthew 17:22–27](#) using a few different Bible translations.



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

The Reality of Death—Matthew 17:22–23

Jesus predicted His seemingly grim fate with a dash of hope. What were the elements of His prediction?

In a twist of irony, Jesus revealed that the Son of *Man* would die at the hands of *men*. According to [Matthew 17:23](#), how did the disciples respond to this prediction? Based on this response, which of the two elements of His prediction did they seem to ignore?

He came on mission from heaven to earth to die. He was ordained to die. The purpose of His coming was that He might live a perfect life—free from sin—that He might die the perfect sacrifice. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

The Inevitability of Taxes—Matthew 17:24–27

To make sense of [Matthew 17:24–27](#), we need a lesson in first century Judean economics. The temple was an expensive operation to run. The priests had no means of generating revenue, so they relied on taxes to maintain the temple practices. Most of this money went toward covering the costs of temple maintenance along with some daily sacrifices.



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

The roots of this convention were planted in the Old Testament immediately following Israel's exodus from Egypt. Read [Exodus 30:13–15](#). Who was required to pay the temple tax, and what was the cost?

One shekel was worth about four drachmas, and one drachma had the value of a full day's work. The temple tax, then, cost each adult male roughly two days' wages per year.

Pay careful attention to the metaphor Jesus and Peter used in [Matthew 17:25–26](#). Following this imagery, from whom do kings collect taxes? Who are exempt from paying taxes?

What reason did Jesus provide in [verse 27](#) for choosing to pay the tax?

We might wish Jesus had just told us we could cash in on a kingdom-of-heaven tax exemption, but He had a different idea. Why then should we stay bound to earthly customs if we belong to *His* heavenly kingdom?



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27



Interpretation: Not Creating a Scandal

Now that we've taken a close look at the context and the text itself, we can begin asking questions about what Jesus meant with these challenging statements.

Why do you think the disciples focused on the reality of Jesus' death over the hope of His resurrection? Why is it important for Jesus' followers today not to lose sight of His resurrection?

Depending on which Bible versions you've been using, you may have noticed that some translations present the metaphor in *Matthew 17:25* in different ways. For now, let's use the NASB, as that translation follows the Greek of this passage very closely: "From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?"

Jesus often used earthly pictures to describe heavenly realities. What does each image in the metaphor represent? Check *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org for some guidance.²

1. Kings: _____

2. Sons: _____

3. Strangers: _____

With this understanding in mind, what did Jesus teach Peter about the kingdom of heaven through this discussion about taxes?



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

Being a master-teacher, Jesus' lessons often have multiple layers of meaning. In *Matthew 17:27*, Jesus said He chose to pay the temple tax because He didn't want to offend His fellow Jews. What would have been scandalous about Jesus not paying the tax? How is this truth instructive for us today? See page 64 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

What's Jesus saying? He's saying that we are to fulfill our obligation regardless of the lack of character among those who take our taxes, who spend those tax monies. Regardless, we are required to pay taxes. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Earthly and Heavenly Authority

Jesus' disciples weren't the only ones wrestling with questions about how to live out their dual citizenship. Let's look at some other passages in the New Testament that address this topic.

Read *Romans 13:1–6*. According to the apostle Paul, why should Christians submit to earthly authorities?



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

How should we respond when the laws of earthly authorities contradict the commands of our heavenly Father? Read [Acts 4:18–20](#), and explain how this passage addresses that question.



Application: Good Dual Citizenship

Pastor Chuck asks four challenging but important questions based on this passage:

1. *Are you a good citizen of your country?* Do you take secret delight in breaking some of its rules? Doing so may offend others and damage Christ's witness.
2. *Do you willingly and appropriately pay your taxes?* Paying taxes is an essential part of the law. And Jesus even encouraged the disciples to pay their taxes.
3. *What is your understanding of freedom?* True freedom isn't license to do as we will but liberty to do as we should—to experience the full joy of following Christ.
4. *Is Christ the Lord only of your public life?* Do your private thoughts, words, and actions reflect your public profession of faith in Christ?

Take a moment to reflect on these four questions. Is there some area of your public or private life that you sense God is leading you to better reflect your relationship with Him?



Death and Taxes

Matthew 17:22–27

I don't want to cause any offense if it's at all possible on the pathway that will lead them from their unconverted state to conversion to Christ. My love for their souls is greater than my love for my own freedom. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Death and taxes . . . both are inevitable! As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we each have an opportunity to reflect a Christlike perspective when we encounter these realities. We have the hope of resurrection, as we move ever closer to death. Yet, while we remain here as citizens of earth, we can honor our King by living with heaven-bound focus.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for welcoming me into relationship with Christ so that I, too, can belong to Your heavenly kingdom. Help me never to forget that I belong to You first and foremost. I ask that You would give me the strength to be a good citizen of my earthly nation so that I might reflect You well in all that I do. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 193.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY THIRTEEN

Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

Jesus said, “Are you interested in the kingdom life as I have been teaching? Are you interested in what heaven is all about? Are you interested in connecting with the world I’m trying to introduce you to? Start with a child.”

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

DO you remember how it felt to be a child? When the world was filled with mystery and excitement? When you depended upon mom or dad to buy your clothes and cook your food? When every person you met was an opportunity for genuine friendship? For some of us, such blissful childhood memories might feel distant. Sadly, for others, such memories might be nonexistent. But the joy of childlike innocence and simplicity isn't out of reach for those who're willing to embrace the mind-set of a child in their relationship to their heavenly Father.

While the world encourages us to rush past such innocence and simplicity toward “greater” things, Jesus taught a completely different attitude. In Matthew 18:1–14, the focus of this *Searching the Scriptures* study, Jesus displayed the value of children in God's heart as well as the example of children for God's people.



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Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Write your own prayer to God, your heavenly Father. Thank Him for welcoming you as His child and ask Him to instruct you from His Word during this time.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Matthew's gospel focuses on five major discourses, each of which is a dense forest of theological truth with every leafy branch offering fresh insight into heaven's King and kingdom.

Matthew 18 contains the fourth discourse. It invites us into a way of community life vastly different from the kingdoms of this world. What question did the disciples ask in *Matthew 18:1* that sparked the fire of this discourse?

Deep down, each disciple's real question was, "Is my picture at the top of the kingdom of heaven's wall of fame?" As was often the case, Jesus responded to their question with a surprising, perplexing, challenging answer.



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14



Observation: Children and the Kingdom

As we observe the biblical text, we often look for repetition. Repetition is important because it conveys emphasis. Read *Matthew 18:1–14* and take note of all the times Jesus repeats “children” or “little ones.”

The Greatest—Matthew 18:1–5

According to Jesus in *Matthew 18:4*, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

What key characteristic do children have that Jesus valued?



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

Because children cannot contribute to society as a mature adult can, many within the Roman Empire, including some Jews, considered children a burden, insignificant, and even subhuman. Others viewed them as nothing more than property owned by their parents. This led to a great deal of mistreatment and abuse of children.

With that background in mind, consider Jesus' radical words in this account. He used one of the lowliest members of society to highlight the vast difference between worldly significance and godly significance.¹

How We Handle Children—Matthew 18:6–9

In *Matthew 18:6*, who are “these little ones”? What is the consequence for causing a little one to sin?

What drastic measures does Jesus encourage His disciples to take regarding their sin? Why? See verses 8–9.



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

The Parable of the Lost Sheep—Matthew 18:10–14

In *Matthew 18:10–14*, how does the shepherd respond to the loss of his sheep, and how does he react when he finds the sheep?

From the subjects of greatness to children, from millstones to shepherds—what a whirlwind of teaching! So how do all these subjects fit together, and how do they relate to us who belong to the community of the great King today. To answer those questions, we'll need to move into interpretation.



Interpretation: What Can We Learn from Children?

Using your *Bible study tools*, describe what Jesus meant by the word *humility*. You can also reference pages 71–72 in Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.² Why does Jesus place such high value on this attribute?

That's the whole point of this. Stop being concerned about who is number one among you. Life isn't about that. Let's learn from this child. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

Regrettably, the world tends to see children from the Roman Empire's perspective rather than from Jesus' point of view. What principles do we see in this passage about the harsh ways people treat children compared to how God calls us to treat them? See pages 73–74 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28* for some guidance.

All three sections of Matthew 18:1–14 (1–5, 6–9, 10–14) logically and thematically connect to convey transcendent truths. Jesus intended to reveal these multifaceted truths when He taught, even if the disciples didn't realize it. Briefly express the key truth of each section and describe how they logically and thematically connect with one another.

How brutally the world treats children! And how viciously we can act toward our brothers and sisters in Christ! Our Lord leads us toward a higher and better standard: *humility*. It truly is otherworldly.



Correlation: The Shema

God has always highly valued children, and He has placed special emphasis on teaching them about who He is, what He's done for His people, and how to follow Him. He even wrote His care for children into Israel's law during the time of their exodus from Egypt. Children represent the next generation of God's people, so it is imperative that they know Him from a young age.



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

The Jews had a tradition of daily reciting a passage from Deuteronomy called “the Shema,” which functioned to remind them of their essential identity as the people of God.³ The Shema’s direct exhortations revealed the importance of children belonging to God’s community.

Read aloud the Shema, as the Jews would have done (*Deuteronomy 6:4–9*). What does the Shema say about children? What lessons can Christians learn from these principles today?

From the very establishment of God’s people, He has displayed the tender heart of a loving Father toward children—and so should we.

Application: Loving Children and Practicing Humility

How we treat children matters, and Jesus calls us to transcend the norms of our world. Instead of devaluing children, let us delight in them. Instead of neglecting them, let us cherish them. Instead of offending them, let us offer them praise.

Think about the children God has placed in your life. What steps can you take to show them the heart of Jesus and help them grow to walk in loving relationship with Him?



Life Lessons We Learn from Children

Matthew 18:1–14

We're all sinners, desperately in need of Jesus the Savior. Thankfully, though, we're all equally important to God, and the gift of redemption is available to everyone. To confess, "I am a sinner. I cannot save myself. I need grace. I need Jesus," requires great, childlike humility—which paves the only way to God.

In what areas of your faith do you sense God encouraging you to put on the attitude of a child, show humility, and trust Him? Write your reflections below.

Let's let humility run its course, keep Christ first, and let the rest of the things that happen, happen. Let's keep our ego out of it and keep our will on hold, out of the way. Here's a little child who can teach us this. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Thank You, Father, that You are my Father and that I am Your child. Help me to remember this truth every day so that I can show the childlike innocence and humility that You desire from me. I confess that I have not always treated the little ones around me with the love that You have shown me my whole life. Remind me of this love today. I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. The Greek verb meaning "to humble" (*tapeinoo*) primarily is a term of space, and it often describes the act of lowering something. When this literal sense is presented figuratively, it describes humility—someone lowering his or her own social status consequently to elevate the status of others.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.
3. The word *shema* comes from the Hebrew verb meaning "to hear" or "to listen." The Shema gets its name from the recitation's pointed first word: "Listen, Israel!"



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY FOURTEEN

Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20

If there's one place where people are to be protected, it's the church. If there's one place that's to stand for purity, it's the church. If there's one place where people are to be respected, it's the church. We are to be a body that represents Christ to a world that's always watching and always expecting us to handle things the wrong way. We should surprise them by handling things the correct way, even if it's not the easy way.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WHAT do you do when a Christian *ticks you off*? Conventional “wisdom” often says to point fingers in blame while our immediate feelings might compel us to get even and hold a grudge. But Jesus’ teaching doesn’t send us adrift through the currents of conventional wisdom, and it leaves no room for feelings to push His purposes out of the captain’s seat.

Jesus offered a new solution to this pervasive problem. Initially, Jesus’ new way may feel counterintuitive and even risky—because it often is. Yet, the way of the kingdom proves to be as beneficial as it is difficult as it calls us to address and overcome the lingering effects of sin’s power in our relationships.

How?

Thankfully, Jesus addressed that very question. In this *Searching the Scripture* study, we’ll explore how Jesus taught us to step out of the waters of vengeance and step into His streams, flowing with peace and mercy.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you pray, reflect on this exhortation from Pastor Chuck Swindoll:

Think about someone who has wronged you but whom you've not yet forgiven. Right now, you're holding a grudge. When you think of this person, wrong things get into your mind, so the bridge of a relationship is broken down. Ask the Lord to open your heart to what might be a better way to handle it than you may have done.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Matthew 18 contains a single discourse of Jesus' teaching. Even though this study examines just one piece of His sermon, all the pieces of the chapter fit together to convey a unified idea. The question the disciples asked in Matthew 18:1 grounds this whole discourse like a cornerstone:

“Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

Now, the disciples weren't showing genuine curiosity about Jesus' rule . . . they were only trying to climb the kingdom's social ladder. Jesus, however, couldn't have answered in a more surprising way. Summarize His answer from [verses 3 and 4](#).

The rest of this discourse builds upon this answer:

- Welcoming the humble Christ-follower, regardless of worldly greatness, equates to welcoming the great King Himself (Matthew 18:5)
- Woe to those who tempt the humble Christ-follower away from true kingdom greatness (18:6–7)



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20

- The humble Christ-follower must avoid at all cost the temptation of false greatness because its judgment will be so dreadful (Matthew 18:8–9)
- Every humble Christ-follower, regardless of worldly greatness, is of the greatest value to the Father and worthy to be sought back if temptation draws him or her away (18:10–14)

In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus then moves to the role that we as kingdom citizens play in seeking after the wandering sheep and bringing him or her back to our good Shepherd.



Observation: Caring Confrontation

Read *Matthew 18:15–20* a few times as though you've never read it before.¹ Briefly outline Jesus' approach to restoring back into the fold the wandering brother or sister in Christ.

Bringing another person's sin to the light in an open, public setting would have caused immense shame. Jesus wanted His disciples to respect the offender by first speaking with him or her in private—which usually isn't the initial impulse of the offended.²

When we come to Christ, we discover there's a whole new set of directions for us to follow. And the difficulty in following them is we must unlearn so many habits.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

In *verse 17*, how did Jesus tell His disciples to respond to those who don't listen to the church's admonishments?



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20

How to deal with sin in three easy steps! Well, maybe not “easy.” Jesus communicated this approach in just a few verses. But following these steps often proves to be complex, exhausting, and costly. Jesus’ rationale, however, offers us strength and hope by revealing His own involvement in the process, which, as we’ll see, ultimately assuages our inner turmoil.



Interpretation: Reproof and Reconciliation

The Greek verb used in *Matthew 18:15* to describe the winning of the sinning believer back to the community was an economic term that typically referred to financial gain made through investment. How does this background illuminate the personal cost and payoff of confronting sin among our fellow believers?

The second step of the confrontation process finds its origin in the legal customs of ancient Israel. Read *Deuteronomy 19:15* and explain why Jesus required the presence of one or two others. Check *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org for some additional insights.

The word *church* pops up in only two verses in this gospel: *Matthew 16:18 and 18:17*. Matthew didn’t think of the church as most do today: a mere building filled with pews and pianos, pastors and parishioners. Rather, for Matthew, the church consisted of a local assembly of believers who confessed Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20

What timeless truth do we learn from this picture of confrontation within a local assembly of believers?

What would it have meant for one of Jesus' disciples to treat an offender as a pagan or a tax collector (*Matthew 18:17*)? What would it look like for a Christian to do this today?

Explain Jesus' ideal outcome of this confrontation process and how this goal is instructive for His followers today?



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20

What does [Matthew 18:18–20](#) teach about Jesus' own activity in the confrontation process? How does this truth offer strength and hope—and even relieve some of the self-imposed pressure—for following His steps to restore the wanderer? See pages 83–84 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28* for further helpful information.

The goal is to help the person back on the right path. This is called the ministry of restoration. The goal is never discipline. That's the means to the end. The goal is restoration: assisting an individual to deal with the sin that is taking its toll in his or her life and to reach full recovery. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Helping Someone Back onto the Right Path

Jesus was not the only one who talked about this topic of handling sin in the community of faith. The apostle Paul had plenty to say as well. Read [Galatians 6:1–5](#) and summarize how Paul's teaching complements Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15–20.



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20



Application: Maintaining Essential Balance

Pastor Chuck provides us with three guidelines based on this passage:

First, *we are to model Jesus' teaching*. If someone has sinned against you, go directly to him or her. Don't gossip about it or let resentment simmer until it boils into a full grudge. If someone comes to you about an offense, receive the correction with humility and grace.

Second, *guard against extremes*. Swing the pendulum too far one way, and a community will show only legalistic demands and severe discipline. Swing it the other way, and holiness is diminished as grace becomes mere license to sin.

Third, *remember the ultimate objectives*. Jesus did not offer this lesson with the intention of kicking people *out*. Quite the opposite! The goal is to keep them *in*. Seek unity not alienation in your relationships with all your Christian brothers and sisters.

Putting these truths into practice is challenging. Accepting a rebuke and confronting our own sin requires an enormous amount of humility. And sometimes it's easier to cling to bitterness than to offer openhanded forgiveness. How do you sense God leading you to apply this passage of Scripture? Write your reflections below.

What a novel approach to handling interpersonal disputes! How different from the way of the world! Jesus' way uses caring confrontation to bring healing to broken relationships. You may be thinking that Jesus left out one key part of reconciliation, but He instantly turned to meet it head on in the next passage, ending His whole discourse on the vital subject of *forgiveness*.



Caring Enough to Confront

Matthew 18:15–20



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of reconciliation. I know that, through the sacrifice of Jesus, my relationship with You has been restored. Thank You for giving me a way to mend my cracking relationships with my fellow believers. Give me the faith, the strength, and the humility to listen to Jesus and to obey His commands. It's in His mighty name I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. This idea comes from the dynamic meaning of the Greek verb translated "point out" (*elencho*). This term often was used in a literal sense to describe bringing something out of the darkness and into the light, but it had a figurative nuance of exposing something hidden or unknown. In this instance, it refers to one's disapproval of another's actions and a subsequent correction of the behavior.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY FIFTEEN

How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

My concern today is for you who are living your life in a prison—your own self-made prison where the walls are high, where the bars are thick and foreboding and intimidating, where the torturing is known only to you for it is done in the secret chambers of your own life. The prison is named unforgiveness.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

A shadowy character stalks many of us, just awaiting our call—to be a guiding “light” in relational darkness. When a friend slights us, a family member snubs us, or a sharp memory stabs us, this stalker’s whisper grows to a shout, and its counsel becomes ever more persuasive.

This dark fiend is named *Unforgiveness*, and it assures us that it offers the satisfaction we long for. The harm done to us could be a flippant insult or a malicious attack. No matter the occasion, though, *Unforgiveness* pledges its services. Those who enlist *Unforgiveness*, however, will find it to be a deceiver of the highest degree.

In fact, *Unforgiveness* is so dangerous, Jesus used some of His strongest language to warn us against it. We find such language in the parable Jesus gave in Matthew 18:21–35—the focus of this *Searching the Scriptures* study. Thankfully, Jesus followed His warning with a solution. While this solution might seem unattractive at first, its company proves far more satisfying.



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How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before we examine Jesus' story, thank God for the mercy He's shown you throughout your life:

Heavenly Father, You are the God of love and compassion, of mercy and grace. I don't know where I would be if You hadn't offered me forgiveness through Your Son Jesus Christ. As I read Your Word today, remind me of the high price He paid to cancel the enormous debt of my sin. It's in His merciful name I pray. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

"Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This question posed by the disciples paved the way for one of Jesus' greatest discourses about the community of God. On the disciples' quest for the treasure of greatness, however, Jesus guided them to a prize far more valuable: godly humility.

In Matthew 18:1–20, Jesus pictured what humility looks like for His followers: caring for the little children, welcoming every Jesus-follower regardless of worldly status, and seeking after the brother or sister who's wandered from the community of faith.

Then Jesus concluded His sermon by telling an unforgettable story about the most radical, the most apparent, the most difficult, and perhaps the most important way to express such godly humility.



Observation: A Story of Forgiveness

Our passage contains a *parable*, a seemingly simple tale Jesus told to reveal complex truths about the kingdom of heaven. Before determining what each element of this parable might represent, it's imperative first to understand precisely what Jesus said.¹

Read [Matthew 18:21–35](#) and imagine yourself there in that king's presence. Stand in the servant's sandals. See the prison walls.



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

What did Peter think was the appropriate number of times to forgive? Jesus told Peter that we should extend forgiveness how many times? See [Matthew 18:21](#) and [18:22](#).

Verse 24 says the servant owed his king “ten thousand talents” (NASB). This servant would have needed to save every tiny coin he earned every single day for at least fifteen years to possess *a single talent!* So this impossible debt cost more than he could have made *in a thousand lifetimes!*

How did the king respond in [verse 27](#) when the servant begged for mercy? What was the king's attitude?

The second servant owed the first servant about a hundred days' worth of work. What request did the second servant make of the first in [verse 29](#)? Note the similarity of the requests of these two servants (see [verse 26](#)).



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

How did the first servant respond when he heard the familiar cry for mercy in *Matthew 18:30*? What kind of attitude did the first servant have?

Unforgiveness doesn't get better; it gets worse. When Peter asked a question in the middle of an otherwise rather simple chapter of Scripture, I think the answer Jesus gave him caught him completely off guard. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Torment of Unforgiveness

With this parable's sequence of events in mind, let's pull back the curtain to learn what this story means for Jesus-followers today.

The rabbis of Jesus' day followed a practice similar to the three-step confrontation process Jesus laid out in *Matthew 18:15–20*. While Jesus taught restoration to keep people in, the rabbis practiced alienation to keep people out. Including people, however, comes at a far greater personal cost than excluding them.

The number seven holds significant meaning throughout the Bible. What did Jesus mean when He told Peter to forgive “seventy times seven” (*Matthew 18:22*)? How did this posture of forgiveness contrast with the harsh attitude of the rabbis? For help, check pages 87–88 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

Who do the different people in Jesus' parable represent? Use your *Bible study tools* for some guidance.²

King: _____

First servant: _____

Second servant: _____

What does this parable teach about the cost of sin and forgiveness?

Here is our God when we—broken people, sinful to the core, falling, failing, repeatedly in the wrong—come before Him pleading that we be forgiven. The king in this parable notices that this servant is contrite and broken, is filled with pity, and forgives him the debt. The man is totally forgiven and free. It's a wonderful, magnificent moment.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

According to Jesus, what consequence did the unforgiving servant face in *Matthew 18:32–34*? How is Jesus' warning relevant to us today?



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

Explain the meaning and significance of *Matthew 18:35*. How does Jesus' conclusion give us the solution to unforgiveness? Summarize how this final point ties back to the discourse's thesis in *verses 3* and *4* to bring the whole block of teaching to its logical end.

There are few examples of humility greater than forgiveness. To say to an offender, “You’ve wronged me, but you owe me *nothing*—no debt, no repayment, no obligation,” requires a great deal of selflessness and care for the sinner. Astonishingly, God has expressed this kind of care and made forgiveness available to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.



Correlation: Unbounded Forgiveness

Our ability to forgive finds its basis on the firm foundation of the lavish mercy God has shown through the sacrifice of Jesus.

According to *1 John 1:8–10*, who is guilty of sin in God's eyes, and how does someone obtain forgiveness?



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

Read *Psalms 103:8–12*. What does this passage teach about the connection between God's character and the extent of His forgiveness?

How amazing is the grace we've received through our savior Jesus Christ! We have been forgiven *much*, so why would we withhold such forgiveness from others?

Application: Why Should We Forgive?

Peter believed that, after a certain point, we should refuse to forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus taught that forgiveness should have no limit. Pastor Chuck offers us two applicational principles about refusing to forgive:

First, to refuse to forgive is hypocritical.

Many have been wronged in deeply hurtful and personal ways—so much so that forgiveness may seem unthinkable. But those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ have received an *infinite* amount of forgiveness, and He empowers His people to extend to others just a *fraction* of that level of forgiveness. Reflect on how you've experienced God's forgiveness in your life.



How Often Should We Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35

Second, to refuse to forgive inflicts inner torment.

The unforgiving servant was handed over to his torturers and consequently experienced terrible pain. Similarly, holding in the toxins of unforgiveness poisons a soul with blame, resentment, bitterness, and grudge-bearing. How has freely extending Christlike forgiveness in the past freed you from these torturous feelings? Is there someone you need to forgive today?

How do we show humility that's characteristic of the kingdom of heaven? Forgiveness. Such humility stands in stark contrast to the pride of the kingdoms of this world, offering far more satisfaction than the lies of that creature named *Unforgiveness*. What a greater way! What a greater kingdom! *What a great King!*



A FINAL PRAYER

As you offer a final prayer, use Pastor Chuck's challenging words to guide your time with God:

For the next few moments, will you think about someone you've not yet forgiven? Though the question is a general one, it means something very personal to each one of us. As we pray, let's ask the Lord to open our hearts, so that we're not defensive and unwilling to hear what Jesus taught and what it means to us personally.

ENDNOTES

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at [BibleGateway.com](#), and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at [netbible.org](#).



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY SIXTEEN

E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12

The reality of an unhappy marriage goes all the way back to the beginning of life. Adam and Eve had known nothing but beauty and harmony and closeness and intimacy. They lived in innocence until sin landed hard and changed everything. And from that moment, all the way to this very day, the presence of sin has done its best to ruin every marriage if it could.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

GETTING married and living happily ever after aren't necessarily synonymous. For many, getting married was the best choice they could've ever made. Their spouse is their best friend, their closest confidante, their life partner. Their marriage goes through valleys, yes. But they climb out hand-in-hand and stand on the mountaintop even stronger than before.

Sadly, for many others, marriage isn't so happy. They're trapped in a deep, dark valley that resonates with fighting, lying, infidelity, or abuse. They look at their spouse and wonder how the beloved person they married transformed into the ugly monster living with them. They're wondering if they're able to—or even want to—hang on.

No matter the marriage, times will come when the valley seems like it'll never end. So what can a couple do to hold fast? When—if ever—is it best to let go? In this *Searching the Scriptures* study on Matthew 19:1–12, we will tackle this hard question and see what Jesus has to say about the hot topics of marriage and divorce.



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E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Offer this prayer to your God, the only immovable Rock, before you dig in to His word today:

Father, You and You alone are the foundation of my life, my immovable Rock, in whom I will never be shaken. Thank You for strengthening me to be like You in love and courage, mercy and grace. Be with me as I study Your Word today. In Jesus' strong name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Before discussing the difficult topic of divorce, it's helpful to look at the broader biblical story to discern God's beautiful blueprint for marriage.

Genesis 1 is an overture of creation. As God created the earth and filled it with life, the crescendo rises to one climactic moment: the creation of humankind.

*So God created human beings in his own image.
In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

Genesis 2:15–25 takes the melody of this moment and adds a harmony. God placed the man in Eden to work the garden, but he needed a companion. When God decided that no animal could match His prized image-bearer, He created the woman to work alongside the man. How does *Genesis 2:24* help us understand God's design for a man and woman in marriage?



E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12

Thousands of years later, the apostle Paul would riff on these very words to a newly formed community of Christians to show them how their faith in Jesus should affect their marriages. Read [Ephesians 5:21–33](#) and summarize Paul's key ideas about marriage. According to [5:31–32](#), what did God ultimately intend marriage to represent?

A strong Christian marriage heralds God's glory over His creation and Christ's love for His church. *What a lovely sound!* But wrong notes often punctuate the music, causing a husband and wife to fall out of rhythm. So then what?



Observation: A Test on Divorce

In *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll lays out the approach he follows when he studies the Bible. The first step is observation. Read [Matthew 19:1–12](#) and pay careful attention only to what the text explicitly says.¹

According to [verse 3](#), what was the Pharisees' motive for asking Jesus about divorce? Then, summarize Jesus' response to this interrogation in [Matthew 19:4–6](#).

To begin with, there is the joining, the bonding, the cementing of a relationship. God sees them as one flesh, and you can't divide "one." They are drawn together by God in that permanent bond and one-flesh existence. The announcement commanded whom God joins together, let no one split apart or separate. Period. End of answer. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12

In *Matthew 19:7*, the Pharisees weren't lying about Moses allowing divorce in some circumstances. They rightly based this claim on *Deuteronomy 24:1–4*. According to Jesus in *Matthew 19:8*, why did God include this concession in the law?

According to Jesus in *verse 9*, what reason legitimizes divorce?

This back-and-forth between Jesus and the Pharisees feels fast-paced and hard to follow. No wonder the disciples were so confused in *verse 10*! Now that we've made some observations, we need to dig deeper to understand the meaning of these profound words from Jesus.



Interpretation: The Meaning of Marriage

In Jesus' day, two prominent schools of Jewish thought strongly opposed each other on divorce. The school of Shammai nearly always disapproved of divorce, while the school of Hillel freely permitted it. To trap Jesus, the Pharisees carefully crafted a question based on this cultural backdrop. But Jesus didn't plainly answer yes or no to keep from aligning with either tradition.



E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12

So, how did Jesus' reply demonstrate the superiority of God's blueprint for marriage over human tradition in *Matthew 19:1–9*? Using your *Bible study tools*, explain Jesus' key ideas about marriage and divorce in His reply.²

Reread the brief discussion between Jesus and His disciples in *19:10–12*. To what did Jesus refer with the “eunuch” imagery? What does this metaphor teach about the different marital paths Christians can take today? See pages 105–106 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–18* for some guidance.

Look again at the last line. There's a lot of grace in that line. Jesus isn't poking His index finger into your sternum saying, "Accept this and believe it and go with it!" He says, "Let anyone accept this who can." Keep that in mind. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Paul's Understanding of Divorce

Did you know that *Matthew 19:1–12* isn't the only passage that discusses divorce? The apostle Paul addressed this difficult topic in his letter to the church at Corinth. Read *1 Corinthians 7:8–16*, and summarize what Paul said about divorce and how it complements what Jesus taught?



E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12

Now that we've looked at God's blueprint for marriage and His thoughts on divorce, let's look at practical ways for how Christians should handle this touchy topic.

Application: A Divine Ideal and a Miserable Reality

Over Pastor Chuck's decades of ministry, he's wrestled with these passages while ministering to those with struggling marriages. Here are four of his wise applications:

1. *Ideally, marriage should be an indissoluble union between one man and one woman.* Marriage is based on mutual commitment, love, and faithfulness that results in harmony and fulfillment and ends only by death.
2. *Yet, life is not—and never can be—tidy, orderly, or perfect.* Because of everyone's sinfulness, the unexpected and unpredictable can enter into every marriage.
3. *We who aren't a part of a marital breakdown can't fully or correctly evaluate the depth of their misery.* We do not know enough to judge them.
4. *To expect two people who find themselves in such incurable misery to remain forever bound in a lifetime of unhealthy disharmony and in quite possibly dangerous consequences surely is not what God requires of them.*

Take a few moments to consider your own marital status—single, married, separated, divorced, widowed. How does this study speak into your current circumstances? What do you believe God wants you to know or trust, do or avoid—not only in your own life but also perhaps in another's?

God's plan for marriage is truly remarkable, but sin has corrupted the good things God prepared for His creation. A strong marriage is a gift, something to be celebrated, cultivated, and honored. Yet, those without a joyful marriage still have access to what God designed earthly marriage to point to: *the church—the very bride of Christ Himself, and He is our greatest gift of all!*



E-Harmony vs. Disharmony

Matthew 19:1–12



A FINAL PRAYER

Conclude your study by offering God a thoughtful prayer based on what He taught in this passage of Scripture.

ENDNOTES

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional Web page, “*How to Study the Bible for Yourself*.” This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck’s book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck’s favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY SEVENTEEN

Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

I speak to you who are building your collection of toys. I urge you to stop. You'll never have enough to satisfy you, and you'll never find enough to stop the throes of death. Only Jesus can give you the kind of peace you need.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE world constantly screams, “*Get more stuff . . . AND GET IT NOW!*” Many assume that wealth reflects greatness. Badges of vintage jewelry, new technology, sleek cars, and sprawling homes “show” that someone has made it. Sadly, some even think the accumulation of fancy stuff proves that someone has earned God’s favor.

A mountain of cash, however, can’t buy everything. It can buy a bed but not a good night’s sleep. A luxurious house but not a home. Comfortable clothes but not comfort for the soul. Global fame but not a genuine friend. Plus, everyone eventually faces the same fate through the great equalizer: death. And whoever dies with the most toys . . . *still dies!*

So when we inevitably meet our end, what will our possessions mean to God? Should we use our belongings to assess what Jesus thinks about us and how He will receive us into His kingdom?

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we will stand beside a rich man who posed a similar question to Jesus: “What good deed must I do to have eternal life” (Matthew 19:16)? Jesus’ answer upset the man. It might even trouble us too. But it gives a necessary challenge to the world’s shouts and our impulses, to teach us the way to true blessing and greatness.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Right now during this study, get rid of any distractions your possessions might cause. Open God's Word and cling to Him in prayer, like Jacob (Genesis 32:22–30), and don't let go until He blesses you. Ask for that blessing now, and ask Him to prepare your heart to receive what He has to say on this vital topic.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The news of the arrival of Jesus' kingdom had hit Judea hard. Yes, this was *good* news. Jesus healed many people's diseases, demon-possession, and sinfulness. But it also was *challenging* news. The gospel of the kingdom called people to a radically new way of life in which "those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).

In Matthew 19:13–22, we see this upside-down kingdom in the back-to-back encounters during Jesus' interactions with small children and a rich man. Society would have shooed away the little ones while fawning over the wealthy . . . but not so with Jesus.



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22



Observation: A Test on Divorce

In his book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll guides us in the excavation of life-giving truth from the quarry of God's Word. Extracting that spiritual gold begins with observing what the text says.¹ Read [Matthew 19:13–22](#) and summarize your most important observations.

Jesus and the Children—Matthew 19:13–15

How did the disciples react to the parents bringing their children to Jesus in [Matthew 19:13](#)? How did Jesus' response in [verses 14 and 15](#) differ from theirs?

Jesus and the Rich Man—Matthew 19:16–22

What did Jesus initially say in [Matthew 19:17–18](#) the rich man needed to do to receive eternal life?



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

According to Jesus in *Matthew 19:21*, what three additional commands did this rich man need to follow to be “perfect,” and why? What kind of reward would he receive if he did these things?

How did the rich man respond in *verse 22* to Jesus’ answer? What reason did Matthew give for the rich man’s response?

What an interesting thing to say. Why does being rich mean sadness? It doesn't have to mean that. But of course, he doesn't have things; things have him. He doesn't own toys; toys own him. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

By selling his earthly treasures, this man would’ve seen just how fleeting worldly wealth truly is and learned to set his heart on something far more valuable and lasting: the kingdom of heaven. Yet, giving up all the possessions he had spent his life accumulating was *unthinkable*, so his heart couldn’t let go of his wealth when Jesus gave Him the opportunity.



Interpretation: A Rich Man with a Hidden Agenda

Now, we’ll dig a little deeper into Jesus’ words to see more of what He intended to teach this rich man and what He wants all His followers to know as well.



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

By including Jesus' interaction with the children prior to His conversation with the rich man, Matthew contrasted a person society would have greatly valued with children whom many considered essentially worthless. What did the rich man lack that Jesus valued so highly in the children? (Hint: Jesus discussed children and the kingdom back in [Matthew 18:1–4](#)).

What did the rich man mean in [Matthew 19:16](#) when he asked what “good deed” he needed to do to receive eternal life? What did Jesus suggest in [verse 17](#) when He said, “There is only One who is good”? See pages 112–114 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*. Also, you can check out [Constable's Notes](#) at [netbible.org](#) for some helpful insights.²

How did the rich man's response at the end of this conversation reflect the true attitude of his heart? What can Christians today learn from his example?



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

That's why this man is walking away sad. It isn't that he doesn't understand. It's that he doesn't want to put first things first. What a tragic addiction! That path is strewn with a litter of people who have nothing but their toys. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Heart of Giving

Jesus didn't merely tell the rich man to sell his possessions so he would have less stuff. Jesus wanted him to cut all the excess so he would give to those in need. This picture of generosity reveals God's heart, and many portions of Scripture discuss the importance of generosity.

Read [2 Corinthians 8:1–15](#). Were the Macedonian Christians rich or poor? What did they do, despite their circumstances, to receive Paul's commendation? See [8:1–5](#).

According to the apostle Paul in [8:8](#), what does our generosity reflect about our hearts? What truth in [8:9](#) should motivate our generosity?



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

What other timeless truths does this passage teach about wealth and generosity?

Jesus' teaching on this topic of wealth is both profound and incredibly convicting. How can we take these challenging teachings and apply them to our lives today?



Application: What's Our Agenda?

To guide us through the application of this passage, Pastor Chuck helps us understand certain realities about how we view our possessions. To do so, he compares the perspective of a child with the perspective of an adult.

Growing up, life was simple and uncomplicated. We didn't compare ourselves with others or have an insatiable desire for more things. *We loved people, but we simply used our possessions.* By the time we were grown, we had allowed the stuff we've acquired to become more important than others' needs. *We'd discovered how easy it is to love things and to use people.*

Does this comparison resonate with you in any way? If so, how? In what ways do you sense God leading you to forsake the self-imposed worries and societal pressures of adulthood for a childlike posture of humble faith?



Who Has the Most Toys?

Matthew 19:13–22

How quickly we get caught up in the competition for acquiring the most stuff! But Jesus has shown us that our material possessions will not help us possess the greatest gift: eternal life. We can't take our toys with us when we die, but we can begin investing today in heavenly treasures that endure eternally.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for all the gifts You have given me. I ask You to give me the strength to hold onto my possessions loosely—to keep them from owning me as I remember that You have given me everything I have and that I belong to You. Help me to use my resources to help those around me for Your glory. I pray in Jesus' gracious name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.
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THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY EIGHTEEN

Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

The whole message of Christ is designed to teach us the importance of leaning. It is easy in life to become so self-sustaining that we look upon leaning on anyone or anything else as a mark of weakness when, in fact, it is the secret of eternal life.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE kingdom of heaven is an *upside-down* kingdom. What the kingdoms of this world celebrate, Jesus detests, because they ultimately lead us away from God. Jesus' way, however, leads toward a right relationship with God and abundant life, and we find no better picture of Jesus' radical kingdom values than the Sermon on the Mount. Just look at Jesus' opening line Matthew 5:3.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

How shocking! The kingdoms of the world say, "Blessed are the *rich*," but no amount of material wealth can purchase citizenship in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus cares less about what fills our hands and more about what stirs our hearts and leads us to action. This is why He told people to give up *everything* to follow Him.

But who has enough faith to do that?

Jesus' disciples asked this very question and wondered whether *anyone* could enter Jesus' kingdom. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll join the disciples as Jesus patiently answers these difficult questions and teaches us eternal truth about wealth, salvation, and the power of God.



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Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare to dive into the depths of Scripture, pray that God would illuminate your mind to understand what He says and to soften your heart to apply His Word to your life:

My Father in heaven, thank You for all the earthly blessings You've given me. Before me today sits one of the greatest gifts You've ever given: Your written Word. Guide me as I study it and help me receive what You want to teach me. In Jesus' gracious name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

“Who in the world can be saved?” (Matthew 19:25). Jesus’ disciples stood exasperated after witnessing a tense conversation between Jesus and a very rich man. This young guy wanted to know what deed he needed to do to receive eternal life. But he didn’t like Jesus’ answer, so he left the conversation dejected. What three things did Jesus tell this man to do in [Matthew 19:21](#)?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Such a tall task . . . no wonder the disciples instantly piped in! They needed clarity, and in Matthew 19:23–30 they probed Jesus to explain the meaning of His challenging words.



Observation: Who Can Be Saved?

In his book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck explains how to study a passage of Scripture. A key element of observation—the first step—is examining the passage’s surrounding context. He says, “We understand a verse of Scripture better when we grasp its context—when we acquaint ourselves with the surrounding verses.”¹



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

So take a few minutes to carefully read *Matthew 19:16–30* as a whole. How does 19:23–30 logically follow 19:16–22, and what shocking statements did Jesus make in 19:23–24?

The rich young ruler packed in his life the riches of this world thinking that somehow his possessions would be enough to carry him through the narrow entrance to the kingdom. He was unwilling to relinquish what he had been clinging to all his adult life.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Human Impossibilities—Matthew 19:23–26

How did the disciples emotionally and theologically respond in *Matthew 19:25*?

According to Jesus in *19:26*, is there anything a person can do to earn salvation?



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

The Disciples' Reward—Matthew 19:27–30

According to [Matthew 19:27](#), how did the disciples' response to Jesus' call differ from the rich man's response? Cross-reference [4:18–22](#).

What did Jesus promise in [19:29](#) to those who make sacrifices for Him in *this* life?

How hard is it for us to try to earn a spot in Jesus' kingdom by our own human efforts! But *nothing* is impossible for God. Only by His grace does anyone have a place in His kingdom.



Interpretation: Divine Possibilities

Now that we've examined Jesus' words in their context, let's ask deeper questions to see what His teaching means for His followers today.



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

Imagine trying to squeeze a thousand-pound animal through a hole the size of a grain of sand! What did Jesus mean by comparing a rich person's ability to enter the kingdom to this ridiculous image? What does this truth teach us about the dangers of addiction to riches? For help, see pages 115–116 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

What He assaults is the addiction to wealth—loving the things wealth buys, forgetting the meaning of the word enough, overlooking the importance of generosity and sharing.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What did Jesus teach in *Matthew 19:25–26* about trying to earn salvation by human efforts? Now really think over Jesus' teaching and jot down a few theological implications.

What timeless principles did Jesus teach in *19:28–30* about rewards for those who follow Jesus? Use your *Bible study tools* to guide your thoughts.²



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

Jesus puts the whole value system of this earth on its head. Many who are the greatest now will be least important then. And those who seem least important now will be the greatest then. By saying yes to the Savior, you are entering a world that will be marked by eternal rewards. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Wisdom on Wealth

The temptation to earn favor with God the same way someone earns favor with people lurks around every corner. Proverbs, the Bible's book of wisdom, contains countless intangible treasures that provide deep insights into the hard topic of money.

Read *Proverbs 30:7–9*. What request did this author make of God? What is the danger of accumulating too much wealth? How do these principles correlate with what Jesus taught in Matthew 19:23–30.

All the rich man's shiny gold coins blinded him from seeing Jesus as Messiah and Savior—just as this proverb warned. It's easy to point out all the faults of this man, but this passage asks us a difficult question: In what ways are we similar to him?



Application: Warning against a Dangerous Addiction

Pastor Chuck teaches us some lessons from a fat camel and warns us about the dangers of an addiction to wealth. An insatiable appetite for riches:

1. Becomes a heady intoxicant rather than a blessing
2. Fools a person into thinking he or she doesn't need God
3. Produces a self-sufficient, anti-God, proud attitude



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30

4. Keeps someone's eyes on the world and off the Lord
5. Perverts values, making someone know the price of everything but the value of nothing
6. Creates a stubborn resistance against humble and helpless dependence
7. Makes someone selfish and stingy

Pause and reflect on this challenging list. Which of these seven dangers strikes home with you? How can you ditch that deceptive and destructive attitude for Jesus' kingdom way?

Is there a new habit you can start that would lead you to use your wealth to glorify God? It might be a new attitude, a new practice, or even a single act you want to do this week.

Money can't buy everything. Not love, not joy, not peace. Most importantly, money can't buy us eternal life. In fact, there is no good work that a person can do to earn favor with God. *So who can be saved?*

Thankfully, anyone who puts his or her trust and allegiance in Christ Jesus can be saved . . . because "with God everything is possible." The God of impossibilities is the one who began your salvation, and He will see it to completion.



Lessons Learned from a Fat Camel

Matthew 19:23–30



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I'm comforted by Jesus' words today, as I'm reminded that nothing is impossible for You. I confess that material possessions occasionally have distracted me from my relationship with You. No earthly good compares to the salvation I've received through Your Son's sacrifice on the cross. Thank You for all that You've given me through Him. It's in His name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 85.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY NINETEEN

Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16

*Your life moves eastward toward pain,
Another's life westward toward gain,
Regardless of how those differences are perceived;
It's your acceptance of God's compass,
Not your feelings about fairness,
That determines the rewards you'll receive.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THAT'S *not fair!* From small children to mature adults, humans have rehearsed this refrain since the dawn of creation. God prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit . . . *that's not fair!* He accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's . . . *that's not fair!* Esau would receive the inheritance over Jacob . . . *that's not fair!*

Now let's hit a little closer to home . . . your lazy colleague gets the promotion over you . . . *that's not fair!* Your apathetic sibling gets a larger inheritance than you . . . *that's not fair!* Though you've been living clean, your report reads malignant while your friend's, who's been living dirty, reads benign . . . *that's not fair!*

The parasite of comparison often infects the mind causing us to put self in the judge's seat to determine what's fair and what isn't. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we will look at one of Jesus' most famous stories to learn what true fairness actually means—not according to us but according to God.



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Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Write your own prayer to God, thanking Him for His generosity toward you.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus didn't always offer His wisdom. At times, He let Himself be prompted by others. In Matthew 20:1–16, He tells a story built upon a conversation He had with a rich man starting in 19:16. What is the first word of *Matthew 20:1*? How does this word show a connection to the preceding context?

Jesus used His encounter with the rich, young man to teach His disciples an important lesson: “But many who are first will be last; and the last, first” (Matthew 19:30 NASB). Jesus knew this statement confused His friends, so He illustrated it by telling a story about something very familiar to most of us: a long day of hard work.



Observation: Who's in the Parable?

Like we've seen previously, Jesus often compared the kingdom to a seemingly simple image that listeners would have understood, but He would use this comparison to communicate a complex idea. To understand what this idea means, we must first observe what the parable says.¹



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW
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STUDY NINETEEN

SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES

STUDY

Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16

Read the *parable in Matthew 20:1–16* and list the characters.

According to [20:2](#), How much did the landowner agree to pay the workers he hired at the beginning of the day?

According to [20:4](#), what did the landowner say he would pay the workers he hired at 9:00 in the morning?



Let’s Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16

Use the chart below to note each worker’s start time and wages as well as the order the owner paid the workers.

Worker’s Start Time	Worker’s Wages	Owner’s Order of Payment

How did the workers hired at the beginning of the day respond in [20:11–12](#) to the actions of the landowner?

Mistake number one: “They assumed.” That’s what we do every day of our lives. We assume, we assume, we assume, we assume. And I can assure you, in life, you can never assume anything. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Now that we’ve observed the key parts of the parable to see the flow of the drama, we can look backstage and learn what this illustration teaches about the kingdom of heaven.



Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16



Interpretation: What's the Point of the Parable?

When interpreting a parable, it can feel tempting to look for hidden meaning in every character, image, or word. But Jesus usually used each parable to communicate *one timeless truth*. Our interpretations should lead us to understand this main idea and what it means for us today.

What do the major images in Jesus' parable represent? Use your *Bible study tools* to guide you through these interpretations.²

Landowner: _____

Workers: _____

Wages: _____

Walk in the sandals of the worker hired early in the day. You woke up at dawn to ensure you arrived at the market early enough to receive work, and you gave your best effort throughout the day to prove that you were a reliable worker who could be hired again. At the end of the day, your sweat-soaked cloak sticks to your skin, your muscles ache, and your eyes feel heavy.

When it's time to reap the reward for your hard work, the foreman places in your hand the same amount as the worker hired *an hour ago*! If *he* gets a day's wage for just one hour of work in the cool evening, shouldn't you get *far more*? . . . *That's not fair!*

But in *Matthew 20:13–15*, Jesus approved of the owner's actions. Why?

God's grace is just and generous. The fact that anybody got hired is grace. The fact that anybody made anything is grace—regardless of the hours. The fact that you can come to know Christ and have eternal life is grace—regardless of what life may throw at you, regardless of what God may permit. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16

A wooden translation of the latter part of Matthew 20:15 says, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” In what ways does this parable reveal God’s goodness? Why might someone look at God’s generous deeds as “evil”?

Did you notice how Jesus concluded His parable in [20:16](#) the same way he introduced it in [19:30](#)? Why did Jesus frame His story this way? What does this tell us about the main idea of the parable? And what does this parable mean for Christians today? For some help, see pages 126 of Pastor Chuck’s commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

While the worker hired at the beginning of the day felt slighted by the landowner, the worker hired at the end of the day must have been brimming with gratitude because of the act of generosity he received. **How wonderful it is that God offers this same generosity today!**



Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16



Correlation: The Example of Job

If anyone had the right to shout, “*That’s not fair!*” it was Job, and his example proves very instructive. Job was righteous and “blameless—a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil” (Job 1:1). Despite Job’s spotless character, he faced some truly horrendous circumstances. Read [1:13–19](#) and summarize what happened to him.

How did Job initially respond to these circumstances in [1:20–22](#); [2:9–10](#)?

As time went on, Job questioned whether God had treated him fairly, and after some time, God addressed Job in a direct and powerful way. Read [38:1–7](#) and summarize God’s words to Job. How did Job respond to God in [40:3–5](#)?

What a powerful example! What would it look like for us to adopt an attitude more like Job’s and apply the truths of Jesus’ parable to our lives?



Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16



Application: Where Are We in the Parable?

Pastor Chuck encourages us to reflect on our lives and consider where we fit in Jesus' parable. We're all among the laborers—recipients of God's generosity—but which camp?

Perhaps, your life is a colorful canvas painted with countless portraits of God's grace. You sympathize with those workers who arrived at the eleventh hour but still received a full day's pay. Or maybe you feel like the first workers—as though you've given so much for God, but it just seems you never get a fair shake. Possibly, you land somewhere in the middle.

With which of these workers do you identify the most? What experiences have caused you to feel this way?

What lesson does God want to teach you through this parable? What would it look like for you to appropriately respond to this lesson today?

It's tempting to assume we know what's fair and what isn't. But we humans have a limited perspective, and what seems unfair to us likely is a powerful example of God's grace. And if not for this grace, every single one of us would face the full judgment of God because of our sin against Him. *That* would be fair, but thankfully, we serve a merciful and generous King.

So let's let God be God!



Let's Let God Be God

Matthew 20:1–16



A FINAL PRAYER

As you end your time in God's Word today, use this prayer from Pastor Chuck to ask God to help apply this passage to your life:

We tend, our Father, to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves with others. I pray that You would catch us up short before we allow that to continue. . . . Give us the mind of Christ that we might see things from His perspective. Help us come to terms with what is right, as difficult as it is.

ENDNOTES

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.
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THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY TWENTY

A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28

There will be no brash lording it over. There will be no flaunting of authority. On Jesus' team, there is no place for self-serving ambition, personal promotion, shameless narcissism, presumptuous arrogance, or bold—even veiled—pride. Few things are more different from our world-system than that.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IF there ever was a human being worthy of being *served*, it was Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. Despite all His power, glory, and divinity, Jesus *chose* to adopt the posture of a slave. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

He earned His wage as a humble carpenter and forsook all the extravagancies wealth could offer. His best friends were vagabond fisherman, and He shared meals with societal outcasts: prostitutes and tax collectors. He healed the sick and the demon-possessed time and again.

Most importantly, though, the King of Heaven *died* so His people could *live*.

What a powerful story! A winsome leader! A compelling model! In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll look deeply at the example of our great King and admire its beauty just as a jeweler would a perfectly cut diamond.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28



PREPARE YOUR HEART

If God did not have a caring, compassionate heart, then everyone would be eternally lost in their self-absorption and self-deception. Offer this prayer to Him today before you dig into His Word:

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son Jesus not to be served but to serve. If not for Him and His sacrifice I would be far from You with no guiding light. I ask that Your Word today would be a lamp for my feet and a light for my path. I pray in Jesus' gracious name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

At this point in our study of Matthew's gospel, we're following Jesus on His final journey to Jerusalem. The disciples expected this expedition to culminate in Jesus taking the throne and overthrowing the oppressive Romans. But the disciples just weren't on the same page as Jesus. Jesus knew what really awaited Him . . . a crucifixion, not a coronation.

This reality shouldn't have startled the disciples. After all, Jesus already told them *twice* that He was going to die in Jerusalem (*Matthew 16:21–28; 17:22–23*). Read Jesus' third prediction of His death in *Matthew 20:17–19*, and summarize what He said.

Third time's a charm . . . right? Let's now turn to Matthew 20:20–28 to see if Jesus' disciples finally got on His page.



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28



Observation: A Discussion of Unfamiliar Greatness

Pastor Chuck explains in his book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* that the first step of Bible study, observation, should look for five kinds of words in a passage: emphasized words, repeated words, related words, alike words, and unlike words.¹ Read *Matthew 20:20–28* and group its contents into some of these categories.

A Request—Matthew 20:20–21

Who made the request to Jesus in *Matthew 20:20*? _____

What did she ask in *20:21*?

A Response and Reaction—Matthew 20:22–24

Summarize Jesus' response in *Matthew 20:22–23* to the mother's request?



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28

How did the rest of the disciples react in [Matthew 20:24](#) to these events? Check a few different translations to get a sense of their emotions. What might have prompted these feelings?

A Clarification and Confession—Matthew 20:25–28

According to Jesus in [Matthew 20:25](#), how do earthly rulers use their power?

They not only had missed His point; they misunderstood the whole issue of kingdom promotion in His kingdom lifestyle. It's not about who sits on the right and who sits on the left. It's not about title. It's not about who's on top. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

How did Jesus call His disciples to act differently from these rulers ([Matthew 20:26–27](#))?

Jesus didn't simply make empty demands of His followers. He led by example. Jesus expected His disciples to serve *because* He was willing to serve. And more than this, He did the most sacrificial service imaginable: giving His own life to save others.



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28



Interpretation: Jesus, the Servant King

Jesus addressed many groups in this passage: the mother, James and John, the Twelve, earthly rulers. Why did He speak about so many topics in one conversation?

What did the mother mean in *Matthew 20:21* by asking for her sons to have seats to the right and left of Jesus' throne? What motivated this question? Use your *Bible study tools* to guide your thoughts.²

Jesus' address in *20:22* is plural, so He shifted His attention to James and John, showing that the request for greatness flowed out of the sin deep in *their* hearts, not their mother's. The brothers likely had an idea of how Jesus would respond to the request, so they had their mother ask Him to soften the blow. But Jesus saw through their scheme, and He didn't offer a soft rebuke.

What's with all this talk about cups? It may sound odd to modern ears, but the “cup” is a common image in Scripture. (See *Isaiah 51:17* and *Matthew 26:39*.) Based on this context, what did Jesus say about Himself and His disciples by using the cup metaphor in *Matthew 20:22–23*? For help, see page 133 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

Suffering must come before significance . . . brokenness before usefulness . . . humility before authority granted . . . the bitter cup of pain before promotion.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28

What timeless truths did Jesus teach about power, authority, and leadership by contrasting earthly rulers with His heavenly kingdom in *Matthew 20:25–28*. Why are these truths significant for Christians today?

Once again, Jesus showed that His way radically reverses the ways of the world. Jesus doesn't measure greatness by status or wealth or power. No. Greatness belongs to servants—to those who are willing to sacrifice even their own lives for the good of those around them.



Correlation: Jesus Emptied Himself

It feels like the apostle Paul had the words of Matthew 20:28 resonating in his mind as he penned the beautiful, theologically rich poem in *Philippians 2:6–11*.

According to Paul in *2:6–8*, what did Jesus do despite His divine nature?

What did the Father do in response to His Son's servant-like disposition? See *2:9–11*.



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28

Now, let's move backward a little. What was the context that led Paul to direct the Philippians to Christ's example in Philippians 2:6–11? What kinds of behaviors was Paul encouraging them to adopt in 2:3–5?

In these few verses, Paul demonstrated exactly what Jesus described in Matthew 20:27: “whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave.” Jesus poured Himself out, even accepting His own death, for us, and now God has exalted His name high above every other name.



Application: Leading by Serving

Pastor Chuck asks us one piercing question that will help us apply the truth of this passage to our lives:

When will you start leading by serving?

This sounds like a contradictory statement. Isn't that why people become leaders in the first place—to *be served*? But Jesus showed that He desired to *offer* service, not *receive* it. In what ways do you see the rulers of our world grabbing for authority, power, and influence rather than adopting an openhanded posture of humility and sacrifice? How is Jesus' way better?



A Roadside Reminder and Reproof

Matthew 20:17–28

What opportunities for leadership has God given you? You may not have a team to lead or have a fancy title, but each one of us has a unique sphere of influence. What would it look like for you to emulate the servant-like attitude of Jesus in your daily routine this week?

This picture we've seen of Jesus' servant heart is both beautiful and compelling. Its beauty is found in the contrast between the humble kingdom of heaven and the proud kingdoms of earth. And it compels us to imitate our King. We can serve others well because we have the perfect image of self-sacrificial service in our Savior.



A FINAL PRAYER

Use this prayer from Pastor Chuck to guide your closing prayer today:

Father, help us to get past ourselves and get beyond the “I, me, mine, and myself” nonsense. Use us in great ways, uncommon greatness, that no one would ever expect. Minister to every one of us as we journey along this thing called life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 100–101.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.



THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY TWENTY-ONE

Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Without Christ, you and I are capable of the most heinous of crimes. Without Christ, we have nothing worthwhile to bring to God. When will we ever acknowledge that? That's why I appreciate the blind men: "Just give us sight; we are blind!" Answering in the twenty-first century, "Just save my soul! I am dark and dead and lost without Christ."

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

CLOSE your eyes and sit in the blackness for a moment. Think about every task you've done so far today—picking out your clothes, preparing your breakfast, taking a morning walk. Now imagine doing those things with your eyes closed. *Imagine being blind.*

Words can hardly describe the unending difficulties or the feelings of fear that may accompany blindness. Just as God made our physical eyes to engage this world, He also intended for us to have spiritual sight to engage with Him. Sin, however, has consigned all humanity to spiritual blindness.

Tragically, many with good physical eyesight live their entire lives not realizing they suffer from another kind of blindness. The spiritually blind refuse to believe that God exists, resist looking at their own brokenness, and reject Christ's sacrifice. Their spiritual sight remains veiled, so they need Jesus to come alongside them and open their eyes to see Him as their Savior and God.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll discover an example of two men who, although suffering from physical blindness, had perfect spiritual vision. God chose to preserve their story to serve as a symbol of our plight and a promise of His power and grace for us today.



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Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Spiritual blindness not only prevents someone from seeing God, but it also dims one's understanding of Scripture. Offer this prayer to God as you prepare to open His Word:

Father, thank You for touching my heart and healing my spiritual blindness. As I open Your Word today, open my eyes to see the truth You've preserved for Your people. Help me receive what You want to teach me today. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus' early ministry was characterized by a few features: profound authoritative teaching, disputes with religious leaders, and countercultural care for the lowliest members of society. Jesus did all of these things from the moment He passed His test in the wilderness (*Matthew 4:17*) until He offered up His final breath upon the cross (*27:50*).

Toward the beginning of His ministry, Jesus encountered two blind men asking for mercy. He recognized their need and their faith, and He healed them (*9:27–31*). A few years later—with the cross in Jerusalem looming larger than ever—Jesus had an almost identical encounter with two *more* blind men. **What did He do that time around?**



Observation: The Compassionate Jesus

Pastor Chuck Swindoll offers some encouraging words for those seeking to understand Scripture: “God’s Word was written for ordinary people—like you and me.”¹ To receive the blessings God offers us through His Word, we don’t have to hunt for any hidden, secret meaning. We simply approach it like we would other texts, beginning with a careful reading to see what it says.



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Read *Matthew 20:29–34* three or four times, perhaps using a few different Bible versions. Each time you read, jot down a new detail that stands out to you.

Whom did the blind men address in *20:30*? Who responded to them in *20:31*, and what was the reaction to their request?

The condescending shouts from the crowd couldn't silence the voices of the blind men. And in *20:31*, they made the same request they did in *20:30*—this time with a little more *passion*. How did Jesus react in *20:34* to the blind men's request? How did Jesus' response contrast with that of the crowd?

When these two blind men heard the name of Jesus, they heard hope. They could imagine what it would be like if He could just touch their eyes and give them what they cannot give themselves: sight. They're desperate. This is their only chance to connect with the one who can transform their physical condition. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Of all the actions Jesus did in *Matthew 20:32–34*, which stands out to you most?

According to *20:34*, how long after Jesus touched the blind men's eyes did the miracle occur? How did the blind men respond to their miraculous healing?

These blind beggars couldn't see Jesus or the impressive crowd trailing behind Him. No, they only *heard* that He was drawing near to their corner of the street. But that was enough for them. They called out louder and louder until Jesus heard them and showed them mercy. ***What an example of great spiritual sight!***



Interpretation: The Believing Blind Men

Although this brief account appears to be simple—especially compared to some of the other miracles Jesus performed—it is steeped with theological truths.

These blind men twice referred to Jesus as the “Son of David.” The title describes more than a mere branch of Israel's family tree. Rather, the title echoes a promise God made to King David hundreds of years earlier in *2 Samuel 7:8–16*.



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Based on this context, what did the blind men show they believed about Jesus by acknowledging His relationship with David? See page 135 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28* for some additional helpful information, or check [Constable's Notes](http://netbible.org) at netbible.org.²

These blind men specifically requested *mercy* from Jesus. Not attention, not glory, not riches . . . just mercy. Now, *mercy* can be defined as “compassion that causes one to help the weak, the sick, or the poor” or even as “compassion or leniency shown to . . . an offender.”³

What kind of mercy did these blind beggars expect from Jesus? How did Jesus show them mercy? How does He show us this kind of mercy today?

It is important for each one of us to realize our actual condition. I'm going to tell you the truth. You are, at the core of your being, a sinner—a sinner by birth, a sinner by choice, and a sinner by nature. You're as bad off as you can possibly be. Apart from Christ, your world is a world of spiritual darkness and death. It makes all the sense in the world that they would cry for mercy. That's your cry. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

What do the blind men's persistent requests in *Matthew 20:30–31, 33* reveal about their faith? How can their faith instruct us as Christ's followers today?

The crowd following Jesus had watched Him perform many miracles, but they missed His message and dismissed the needs of the blind men. Their faith was weak. These two beggars, although blind, had strong faith which allowed them to see Jesus as their merciful King who could meet their desperate needs.



Correlation: Opening Spiritual Blind Eyes

Often, we have a hard time discerning our own spiritual condition. Thankfully, one of the many benefits of studying Scripture is that it acts like a freshly polished mirror reflecting our hearts on its pages.

In *Romans 3:10–18*, Paul hammered the gavel shouting, “Guilty!” The perpetrator? Everyone. Read these verses and briefly summarize the crimes humans have committed against God.



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Thankfully, Paul didn't end his letter with such a harsh refrain. He continued telling his readers of hope found in Christ alone. Read *Romans 3:21–26* and summarize how God provided forgiveness for these wicked crimes.

Reflecting on these convicting yet hopeful words from Paul helps us look at our hearts to examine their spiritual condition. But what would it look like for us to dig a little deeper beyond the surface?



Application: Do You See?

Pastor Chuck encourages us not to see this simply as another nice Bible story. Instead, he encourages us to take this passage as an opportunity to do some difficult self-reflection. He asks one pointed applicational question:

Are you aware of your actual condition?

Take a few minutes to think—and think deeply—about that question, even if it makes you feel a little uncomfortable. What comes to mind as you consider your actual spiritual condition? Write down some reflections below.



Seeing Ourselves through Blind Eyes

Matthew 20:29–34

Our spiritual health is not measured by how many times we've attended church this year or how many Christian friends we have or how many hymns we can sing from memory. Rather God calls us to acknowledge our deep-seated sinfulness, to confess it to Him, and to walk by His Spirit in the newness of life.

How do you sense God calling you to respond to your audit of your spiritual state at this moment?

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see. These two blind men may as well have written the words of this beautiful hymn. By God's grace, Jesus Christ has removed the scales from our eyes as well so that we, too, can see our need for Him, call to Him, and receive mercy.



A FINAL PRAYER

Offer to God a prayer of personal confession and thanksgiving in the space below.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 107.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at netbible.org.
3. J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 926.

