

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Over the years, I've found my life changing and my faith deepening as I met with our heavenly Father in His word. This has been especially true as I've been writing these devotionals and having to live what I write.

I long for you to be able to say the same as you read through Matthew's perspective of Jesus as he wrote in his Gospel.

As I've gotten to know Matthew, I'm overwhelmed by how he was changed by knowing and walking with his Lord and how much he must have longed for us to know Jesus as he did.

These next six chapters of Matthew follow Jesus as He walks with His disciples and interacts with those He loves. Please take your time working through each section and ask the Father how He wants you to respond to what you're seeing and learning.

Blessings on your time as we continue this walk with the Father,

Margie Martin



Israel in Jesus' Time

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:1-4

"came . . . knelt . . . said"

As we finished Matthew 7, Matthew told us that Jesus *taught with authority* and not as the teachers of the law. It's one thing to talk a good game (we all know people who can do that, even ourselves), but our question should always be, can the person back up his or her words with actions? In the next two chapters, Matthew gives us 10 examples of Jesus proving His authority by doing works that none of us could begin to do. As we work through these miracles, let's look at how Jesus interacted with those who were on the receiving end of His actions that proved the truth of His words.

The *first* miracle happened just as Jesus finished talking on the mountain (Sermon on the Mount). As the crowds followed, a man with a skin disease, perhaps leprosy, suddenly got in front of Him, knelt, and asked for help. Had this man been listening on the mountain with the others? I doubt it, because those with infectious skin diseases had to keep themselves apart from others to avoid contagion. But he knew that Jesus had healed others, so perhaps he thought that Jesus could heal him; he could finally hope. And so he *came*.

In his world, this man had lived as an outcast because people were afraid to be near him since his condition was contagious. He was probably lonely and even a little angry that he had to endure this affliction while others didn't. However, when he came to Jesus, he humbled himself even though he was surrounded by the crowd. Jesus was his last hope. And so he *knelt*.

This broken man knew that Jesus had the power to heal him, but he didn't know if Jesus was willing to expend some of His power in his direction. As an outcast, he would have been treated as someone without worth or value, and he was starting to believe the truth of others' opinions. He was choosing to put his future in Jesus' hands but was probably afraid that Jesus would treat him the way everyone else did. And so he *said*, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus was willing and able. He touched the man, and the man was cured. What joy!

Jesus then asked him to keep quiet about the healing and instead show himself to the priests as a testimony to them as God had Moses describe in Leviticus. While we see in Luke 5 that the man didn't do as Jesus asked, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is doing what no other had ever done – heal an infectious skin disease. And Jesus wanted the priests to know about this miracle.

So, how does today's passage strike you? What's going on in your life that you need to come or kneel or ask? Jesus is willing and is waiting for you to take the first step. He will do what He knows the Father wants for the sake of kingdom life in all of us. What are you going to do?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:5-13

"When Jesus heard this, he was amazed . . ."

So many miracles in this section:

- A Roman asks for help and Jesus listens.
- Jesus is amazed by a Gentile's faith.
- Healing happens without a touch and in another location.

The two pictures that Matthew paints for us in his Gospel is what kingdom authority looks like in the here and now and what Jesus' immense love looks like for us personally. The centurion (a Roman leader of men) was used to following his superiors' orders, and he knew his men would follow his orders. A command, a word, was all that was needed for the action to be done. Everyone knew that consequences would happen if orders were ignored, including death.

The Jewish people had a history of knowing what God would do if ignored or disobeyed, but they hadn't heard from Him for 400 years. The only authority they knew were the Romans and the Pharisees, and they avoided the Romans if at all possible. The Pharisees were rule makers, and the consequence of breaking their rules could even result in someone being put out of the synagogue (John 9) and so be kept separate from God and his or her spiritual community.

Luke tells us more about this centurion in Luke 7, but what we see here is that he knew about Jesus and instinctively understood His authority. The centurion's care for his servant was rare in this culture (usually servants were treated worse than animals), and so he went to the only one who could help.

And what happened? "His servant was healed at that very hour." Jesus spoke without having to see or touch the servant.

Jesus was amazed at the man's great faith that was far beyond anyone else's in Israel. Jesus knew that this man symbolized those outside of the Jewish nation who would believe in and follow Him over the centuries.

I guess the most obvious question for us to ask is whether Jesus would be astonished by our faith? Do we know and understand His authority and power so that when He speaks, we do whatever He says?

Today's passage is what I need. One of our sons and his wife are having problems, and my response to their not dealing with their issues is to be angry with them. Not a helpful response, I know. Last night we had a night of worship at church, and I knew I needed to go. As we sang, the truth I got through the words of the music is that we can hang onto our pain, or we can hang onto Jesus. If we don't let go of the pain, we'll never know God's love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. All we're left with is pain that eats at us like cancer. Compassion and concern for them now fill my heart and mind, and I actually slept well last night. Today when I read about authority, this truth explained my experience.

How are you viewing Jesus' authority today? Is it something you want to ignore or work around (as we so often do), or are you leaning into His authority in how you think, speak, and act? Ultimately, the difference means being thrown into the darkness, filled with anxiety, and bondage *OR* peace, freedom, and enjoying the feast Jesus provides.

Which side of the choice appeals to you?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:14-17

"He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him."

Do you remember the last time you had a fever and all you could do was lay in bed because your energy was gone? This is how Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law, who lived in Peter's home. Jesus touched her hand, and the fever left. Now this could be a coincidence because we know fevers seem to stop as quickly as they start. What strikes me, though, is that she *immediately* got up and started waiting on Jesus. She didn't need time to get her energy back; it was as though she had never been sick. Amazing!

In the next paragraph, Matthew tells us that many demon-possessed people were brought to Him, presumably by their friends and family members, and Jesus drove out the spirits "with a word." These men and women were healed and made whole, as if they had never been demon-possessed. Jesus also healed all the sick who came to Him. I bet these men and women had been sick for a long time and had lost hope of ever being healthy again.

With a touch or a word, Jesus could take away these infirmities and diseases and leave people whole and healthy. Of course they would all die eventually, and Jesus knew He would be taking care of the finality of death too, but for now Jesus proved that He had authority over what seems hopeless to us. And He does it with a word or a touch so that lives are forever changed.

Those He healed now had to learn how to live as healed people; old habits had to be broken and new ways of thinking and living learned. Peter's mother-in-law led the way by getting up and serving. Hopefully, the others He healed put their hopelessness behind them and followed her lead.

Do you need a word or a touch by Jesus today? Or maybe someone close to you needs Him, and you're like Peter or the friends of those who were demon-possessed, and your loved one needs you to bring him or her to Jesus. In truth, we all are in need of Jesus' touch and word because we're sick to the core of our being by sin that shows itself in so many ways.

Matthew's encouragement is to come to Jesus and let Him do what He longs to do – then stop being who we were and instead be new in Christ as Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5.

Is changing easy? Heavens no, but do we really want to stay as we've been when hope is standing right in front of us? This healing wasn't done in isolation; family and friends were involved with the sick and demon-possessed, and they need to be involved in the healing and change because of how Jesus' actions will encourage them. What starts with our humility (*coming to Him*) results in hope both for ourselves and others. What are you waiting for?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:18-22

"But Jesus told him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'"

Do Jesus' words in this section sound as harsh to you as they do to me? In the past 20 years I've had to bury both of my parents and my mother-in-law. The idea of not taking this responsibility sounds wrong to me. So, when I came to this section a couple of weeks ago, I was stumped. Somehow I knew that Jesus' words fit into the broad topic of His authority but wasn't quite sure how. I could understand how not having a home could fit into the cost of following Jesus, but not burying parents?

Last night two of my adult sons and my husband were washing the Thanksgiving Day dishes while I put them away, so I thought I'd get their perspective. I got out my Bible, put the verses into context, and then read today's verses. Immediately my husband said, "I know." After our sons threw around their ideas, I asked him for his perspective. He said that Jesus was dealing with the excuses for not accepting His authority in our lives. A light bulb turned on.

We all come up with excuses of why we don't do what is hard for us and praise ourselves for doing what is easy. The teacher of the law said he'd follow Jesus wherever He went, but Jesus knew this teacher would find it hard to give up his comfortable home and lifestyle. Another disciple had a list of what he wanted to do before letting Jesus have authority in his life, but Jesus knew that more excuses would follow.

Today Jesus is asking me to love those He brings my way and let Him have room to work instead of mentally repeating the list of complaints I have against others. This is so hard for me to do – until I started writing today and realized what is at stake.

Are you rehearsing your excuses for not doing what Jesus is asking you to do? For example, He tells us to get out of and stay out of debt. He tells us to humble ourselves and serve. He tells us to ask for forgiveness. He tells us to have pure thoughts. He tells us to honor our spouses and parents. He tells us to work at our jobs as though He's our boss.

Has He been telling you anything else that you've been ignoring?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:23-27

"What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

I've lived in three areas of the U.S. over my life: the Midwest until my early 20's, the San Francisco Bay Area for the next 30 years, and northern Georgia since early 2001.

In Iowa I remember cold and dreary winters and hot summers where the humidity soaked us as we walked from the house to the car – but wonderful springs and falls. In the Bay Area the change of seasons was slight, but we almost always had to wear jackets in the evening because of the ocean breeze. Georgia is fascinating weather-wise. We can watch the storms come east from the Gulf of Mexico or south from Alaska through the Midwest.

The *system* of weather is amazing. As a former Marine Corps helicopter pilot, my husband is always aware of highs and lows, clouds and winds. I think God put these systems into place at creation, but when Adam chose to sin instead of trust God, these systems were affected too. So, we have tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and droughts.

The sudden storm that the disciples experienced in this section was normal on the Sea of Galilee, but that it happened *when* it did reminds me of Moses at the Red Sea, Joshua crossing the Jordan River, and Deborah at the river Kishon (Judges 4 and 5), as well as God's words to Job (Job 38).

So, what does Jesus want His disciples (and us) to know from this section? Here are some observations:

- Jesus' words are more powerful than any storm that comes our way.
- When God is at work, nothing can stop what He puts in place.
- Faith is the answer to fear.

Whether our storms come from the weather or from life, it doesn't matter. Jesus wants us to be looking to Him rather than at the circumstances. We may have to work through the clean-up after a hurricane or an accusation or death of a loved one, but Jesus is with us, providing the strength and help to move forward, step by step.

Are you in the midst of any kind of storm today? Then I pray that these words encourage you to draw near to the One who knows and cares and can bring kingdom life out of any hard situation. Are the waves of your emotions beginning to calm down?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 8:28-34

"[Jesus] said to [the demons], 'Go!' So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down into the steep bank into the lake [of Galilee] and died in the water."

As I read through this section a couple of times, I remembered other details, so I looked at the cross-references in Mark 5 and Luke 8 for a fuller picture of this event. So many questions come to mind:

1. Why did Jesus go to this eastern side of the lake where Gentiles lived? (they raised pigs so had to be Gentiles)
2. Why does Matthew record two men while Luke and Mark have one?
3. How did the demons know Jesus?
4. Why are the demons afraid of Jesus?
5. Why did the demons obey Jesus?
6. Why did the townspeople plead with Jesus to leave?
7. What happened to the demon-possessed men?

As I've said before, I think Matthew's intent is to show us Jesus' authority and His love, and this balance comes through in this section. Here are the answers I came up with to these questions:

1. Jesus came to the Gentiles because He and the Father love them and long for them to be part of God's family.
2. Two men versus one? Well, Matthew would have been travelling with Jesus while Mark and Luke got the story second hand. But perhaps the incident is more important than the number of men. This is still an open question for me.
3. Because Jesus has been from the beginning, the demons knew Him and knew that their time was limited.
4. They knew He has ultimate authority even over them.
5. Everyone will eventually bow their knee to Jesus, regardless of whether they *want* to.
6. I think they saw Jesus destroy their source of income, and their greed won out.
7. *Ah, this is the best part.* Jesus so loved these people who didn't want anything to do with Him that He had these two men stay in the area so they could tell everyone what Jesus had done for them and what He wanted to do for those who would listen to them. *What love!*

Has Jesus released you from the chains of darkness and pain? How easy it would be to go where life is easier, but all too often Jesus wants us to stay where we are and live out the freedom He's provided and live as healed people for others' benefit. Is this what He's asking you to do? What love He has for us and longs to express to others through us!

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:1-8

"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'"

I think the answer to Jesus' question is that it's easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," because no proof is required. I mean, how do we know *right now* that someone's sins are forgiven? It's not as though something dramatic happens so that the change is obvious to everyone. The change happens internally, away from what can be seen, and takes a while to be worked out in our actions.

But "get up and walk" is another matter. Either the person can get up or he can't. It's obvious to everyone.

So, if the One who can say, "get up and walk" and the one who is spoken to – whom everyone knows – gets up and walks home, then maybe this One can *really* forgive sins, even if we can't immediately see any difference.

We all can think of the benefits a paralytic person would experience by being able to walk again or perhaps walk for the first time. But what are the benefits of having our sins forgiven and knowing the One who can forgive our sins? Like the paralytic, we can:

1. Be freed from what limits us.
2. Contribute to what's going on around us rather than always be dependent on others.
3. Have freedom.

And that's just in the here and now, just like physical healing.

But what about those who saw this healing? They were filled with awe and praised God for giving such authority to this man.

If Jesus does have authority over the here and now of our lives, then He is also able to forgive our sins so we can live in freedom and use it for the sake of His kingdom in others' lives.

Are you enjoying such freedom, or *are some constraints of this physical world have you all bound up spiritually and emotionally?* The paralyzed man had to choose to believe Jesus and make the effort to stand up; his friends didn't try to help. Maybe it's time for you to go to the One who can forgive our sins, ask Him to do what only He can do, and then take the steps to act as a healed person, refusing to think as you used to.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:9-13

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

If you said in one sentence about why you first came to Jesus, what would you say? I think Matthew's one sentence is today's verse. Matthew could have easily left out his own come-to-Jesus moment as he wrote about Jesus' authority, but his personal touch helps us personalize Jesus' authority in our lives. It's oh-so-easy to let Jesus interact with others, but what about when He says, "Follow me" to you and to me?

I really don't think today's encounter was Matthew's first time being exposed to Jesus; I'm sure he had heard about Jesus' teaching on the mountainside and how He had healed townspeople and calmed the storm. He knew about Jesus and, as a good Jewish boy, had known about the coming Messiah.

So, what happened to him that caused him to leave the teachings of his youth to become a hated tax-collector who took advantage of his kinsmen? In Tim LeHay's novel on the story of Matthew, he suggests that Matthew experienced the horrific death of his younger brother when Herod killed all boys under two in an attempt to kill Jesus. Matthew's grief for himself and his parents turned into anger against God for allowing it to happen, against Rome for putting Herod in charge, and against his fellow Jews for not avenging the deaths of these boys. Matthew wanted revenge in any way he could get it, and his anger ate at him over the years. Whether or not this is true, something happened to Matthew to make him become a hated tax-collector.

Do you have something from your youth that keeps eating away at you? Many (most?) of us do. But God wants to take the horribleness of sin in our human natures and redeem it for His sake. Whatever pain was in Matthew's life, God so worked in his heart that when Jesus said, "Follow me," Matthew got up, followed Him, and introduced Jesus to his friends who also needed Him. If Matthew hadn't acknowledged the depth of his diseased heart, he would have missed out on love and grace and mercy.

So how did God redeem Matthew's life? Well, as a tax-collector he had to write detailed and accurate records of conversations about taxes owed and paid. This experience trained him so that he could write a detailed and accurate account of Jesus' life.

Are you in the midst of such a training time that God will use later? I've sure had them over the years. We never know what He'll want to use later in our lives, so our goal should be to take full advantage of every circumstance He brings our way. If we do so, that way of thinking, combined with our need of Him, is what God loves to use, and then we get to experience the joy of being used by the God of the universe in the lives of others. What circumstances do you need to rethink?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:14-17

"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn when he is with them?"

I came to this passage a couple of weeks ago and was utterly baffled by what Jesus said. The parallel passages in Mark 2 and Luke 5 didn't help at all. In fact, the Luke passage confused me even more because I had thought Jesus was referring to Himself as new cloth, new wine, and new wineskins, but Luke records Jesus as saying that the old wine is better.

When I get confused over a passage, the websites I go to first are www.pbc.org from the church I was involved in for 30 years: Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, and www.RayStedman.org, the primary pastor for so many years at PBC. In the message library section of the websites, I found one sermon that covered this passage, so I printed it out and asked God for His insight. But before I started reading it, I reread today's passage, and the thought that popped into my head was "Don't mix the old and the new." Hmmmm.

So here we are, and I'm finding that God is unraveling my confusion. It always helps to ask Him for help!

Mourning: From the sermon I learned that the fasting the Jews did was because they were mourning the condition of Israel (Zechariah 7:5, 8:19). Even though the nation had been restored, it didn't fulfill the glorious promises of the Old Testament prophecies, and so the people mourned.

Jesus uses the example of the guests of the bridegroom who rejoice with him while he's present but who will mourn when he's gone. So, while Jesus is with His disciples, they can't mourn over the condition of Israel because the solution to the situation is in their midst. Of course, they'll mourn again for a few days after His death on the cross, but His resurrection will heal that mourning forever.

Cloth and wineskins: When I was in grade school, my mother tried to teach me how to sew. One lesson she taught me that I remember was to prewash cloth before cutting and sewing so the seams wouldn't tear when the garment was washed for the first time.

But the thought that had come to me as I reread our passage – don't mix the old and the new – really sticks in my mind because it is oh-so-easy to try to keep the old laws and traditions while taking on the newness of life Jesus makes available. All too often I hear believers talk as though they're trying to mesh what they've known with what He says in scripture – and it doesn't work. Whether it's man-made rules of denominations or "whatever feels right" of humanistic thinking, a life with Jesus isn't to be combined with any other way of living. He stands by Himself.

Do you have His purity that comes with a walk of faith, or *are you trying to accommodate other ways of living that you're comfortable with, perhaps from the culture around you or your ethnic background?* Is your life reflecting joy by being in the presence of Jesus, or are you mourning over something you don't have? Your answers make all the difference in the world.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:18-26

"News of [bringing the ruler's daughter back to life] spread throughout the region."

One of the comments the editor of my Bible made about Jesus' 10 miracles in chapters 8-9 is that they demonstrate the "wideness in God's mercy." Today's section illustrates this comment by focusing on two females: one the daughter of a leader of the synagogue and the other a nameless woman who had suffered for 12 years with loss of blood. Let's see what Matthew tells us:

Synagogue Leader's Daughter

Well known

Just died

At home

Father kneels before Jesus and asks for help

Jesus shoos away the crowd

Jesus touches her, and she gets up

Older Woman

Unknown and alone

12-year problem

In the crowd

Touches Jesus' cloak without speaking

Jesus ignores the crowd

Jesus heals her

Which person's life do you think was radically altered by this encounter with Jesus: the father, the daughter, or the older woman?

I'm sure the girl was grateful to be back with her family and could look forward to a comfortable life because of her father's stature in the community.

I'm sure the father was grateful every time he saw his daughter, remembering the grief he felt when he asked Jesus for help.

But the woman . . . oh, the gratefulness that must have burst into her heart. For the first time in 12 years, she wasn't embarrassed, she had energy, and she could enter the temple because she was no longer "unclean." On top of that, Jesus had turned and saw her. He associated Himself with her and called her by a term of endearment, "daughter." And He recognized faith in her. She was a daughter in His kingdom.

I think her life was changed forever in a dramatic way. Her joy, and the joy of the ruler and his family, are proofs of why Jesus' disciples didn't fast (remember the last section we looked at?). News of Jesus restoring life to the nation of Israel was spreading. The time for mourning and fasting was over.

*Is your faith like the father's or the woman who was healed? If so, what a joy you are to those around you and to the Father; please enjoy His pleasure. If your faith isn't like theirs, remember that both *came* to Jesus in humility and need; a great place to start a walk of faith!*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:27-34

"But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons'."

So many questions swirl in my mind from these two encounters with Jesus with men who couldn't see or speak. Let's start with the two blind men:

1. Usually when Jesus is called the *Son of God* or *Son of David*, the speakers are demon-possessed. But the two blind men aren't described this way. How could they be so confident?
2. The men followed Jesus inside and then Jesus responded to them. Why didn't He talk to them when they first approached Him outside?
3. Why did Jesus warn them not to say anything to anyone about their healing?

But maybe I'm "looking" at this all wrong. As *blind men* they were dependent on their hearing, and they had been hearing about Jesus and what He was doing. They put two and two together and got their answer:

The promise of the Messiah + what Jesus was doing = Son of God.

They weren't swayed by what they saw because it is so easy to rationalize away from what we see with our flawed vision. They knew they needed mercy and so came to the One who had the power to give it. They saw Jesus for who He really was.

Jesus confirms that He has the power to give them sight; He touches them in their area of need and gives them sight according to their faith.

Why doesn't He want them to tell others? Maybe He cared so much for them that he wanted them to enjoy their sight and their new relationship with Him before getting caught up in the notoriety that He knew would come.

Then we have the *demon-possessed man*. I'm guessing he hadn't always been unable to talk (and some commentators add unable to hear) and so had friends who remember the man he had been and wanted to help in any way they could. I wonder what the first words were that came out of his mouth when Jesus drove out the demon. What would you say if this had been you?

The crowd, including the Pharisees, saw this miracle as *proof* that Jesus had authority over Satan and so is the Messiah who will bring in the kingdom. Jesus healed out of compassion and mercy. He didn't ask the mute man's friends about their faith; He saw it in their actions. Their faith and the knowledge of what their friend would have wanted if not demon-possessed was all the proof Jesus needed.

Our conclusion? Jesus has authority over our physical infirmities and over the demons. While He also had authority over the crowd and the Pharisees, He didn't exercise it. He let them come to their own conclusions based on what they saw, heard, and experienced.

How are you *seeing* life these days: as one with limited or no vision or as one who's been touched by Jesus and sees life as He does?

How are you *speaking* today: as one who is controlled by our enemy, or as one who has been freed from bondage?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:27-34

"But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons'."

As we finish these 10 miracles, let's review what Matthew has told us about what Jesus did, what happened next, and whether the miracle was public or private, because we all need Jesus to work in every area of our lives.

1. Heals man with infectious disease – touched him – told him to go to the priests (public)
2. Heals centurion's paralyzed servant from a distance – the ruler is commended for his faith (public)
3. Heals Peter's mother-in-law who had a fever – touched her – she got up and waited on Him (private with disciples)
4. Calms the storm's winds and waves (private with disciples)
5. Heals two demon-possessed men – they knew he was Son of God – said "Go!" and demons went into pigs that ran into the water (private with disciples)
6. Heals paralytic man brought by his friends (public)
7. Heals ruler's daughter who had just died (public)
8. Heals woman who had been bleeding for 12 years – she touches His cloak – tells her that her confidence in Him has healed her (private)
9. Heals 2 blind men who know who He is – takes them indoors and touches their eyes – commends their faith – tells them to keep healing quiet because He isn't ready to reveal Himself. They spread the news anyway. (private)
10. Heals demon-possessed man who couldn't speak and had been brought to Jesus – drives out the demon – man spoke (I wonder what he said?); crowd amazed but Pharisees try to spin it so prince of demons becomes the focus (public)

From these 10 miracles we see that Jesus never did the same thing twice. Some people came to Him, others were brought to Him, and sometimes He went to them. Some miracles happened in a public setting and others were in private, even in the midst of a crowd. Jesus touched people who needed a touch, others heard a word, and one heard from a distance. Jesus has control over illnesses, storms, distances, demons, and death. He knows, He cares, and He has authority.

What do we learn from this review? I've learned that He won't work in my life the way He's worked in yours. He'll work in a unique way that fits me and my circumstances just like He'll work in your life and circumstances. What have you learned?

We can be like the crowd in miracle 10 who were amazed and then followed Him or be like the Pharisees who gave credit to another. Humility or arrogance; the choice is ours. *Which do you choose?*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 9:35-38

"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

This short section seems to be a transition *from* Jesus describing the kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount and then establishing His authority *to* Jesus reaching out to the people and preparing His disciples to work in the kingdom.

So as Jesus traveled through the towns and villages, we see His heart for the people:

1. He taught in their synagogues: Synagogues started while the Jews were in captivity in Babylon. Since they couldn't get to the temple in Jerusalem to worship, they established local centers for teaching and being together (fellowship). When they returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel and then spread out over the land, they kept these synagogues so they could have local places to meet. Jesus used these gathering places to give truth to the people of who God is and how much He loves them.
2. He preached the good news of the kingdom: While teaching appeals to our logical side and our need for information, preaching appeals to our imagination and our need of hope. Jesus told them that what they knew from their traditions and from the Pharisees wasn't even close to what God had in mind for them. No wonder they had felt that God was distant. What hope!
3. He healed every disease and sickness: The people were used to men explaining God and life to them. But never before had a man had authority over every disease and sickness. His actions gave credibility to His words. He was different. He was worth listening to.
4. He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless: In every society where the leaders are looking out for themselves, people are harassed and helpless. They long for someone to look out for them without taking over, leaders who serve instead of use and abuse. They needed a shepherd. But instead of Jesus saying, "I am He," He prompted his disciples to get involved and be part of the solution. He reminded His disciples that God was in charge of His kingdom, not the Pharisees or Romans. He used words His disciples would understand: sheep, shepherd, and harvest.

What do you need from Jesus today: His perspective on truth, hope, confidence in His authority, understanding, or even just a job? We're either part of the harassed and helpless crowd or one who has met the Lord of the harvest and been sent out to bring in the harvest of what God has been cultivating. Is Jesus your shepherd? Are you ready to be such a shepherd for others?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 10:1-42

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

We're not used to such a long section, are we? Jesus packs so much into these directions to His disciples as He sends them out on their own; so much we can learn from. These 12 men must have been excited but nervous. Jesus was asking them to do what they had been watching Him do as they move from observers to doers.

Luke puts this "sending out" at the end of Jesus' ministry as He is approaching Jerusalem for the last time, so the disciples have a wealth of experiences to support them. Plus, they're going out in teams of two (Mark 6:7) and have been given His authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have skin diseases, and drive out demons.

So, what new information does Jesus give them as they go out in His name?

1. They have His authority and power,
2. Go to those who are lost,
3. Preach a message of hope (the kingdom of Heaven is near),
4. Give and receive freely,
5. Expect God to know and meet *their* needs through others,
6. Be most closely involved with people who want to hear this truth,
7. Know your culture for what it is, and act wisely while staying innocent,
8. Those who hate Jesus will treat them as they treat Him; don't worry about what to say because the Spirit of your Father will speak through you,
9. Divisions in families will happen, but stand firm to the end,
10. If persecuted, leave and go somewhere else,
11. All that is done or said in darkness or in secret will come to the light,
12. Don't be afraid of those who can only kill the body (no matter how horrible that death can be); only fear the One who can kill the soul,
13. Your Father knows the welfare of even the sparrows; and if your Father has numbered the hairs on your head, then He knows and cares for you,
14. God values the stand we make for Him when the pressure is on,
15. Families will be divided over who Jesus is; expect conflict (see #9),
16. While family bonds are important, our first allegiance must be to Jesus,
17. If we hold onto the life we create here, we'll lose out in the end,
18. How someone receives you or treats you is based on that person's attitude toward Jesus,

Conclusion? Jesus expected His 12 disciples to walk in a way worthy of being called in His name. They weren't to have their own agenda or draw attention to themselves. It was to be as though Jesus were walking into that town.

Jesus expects us to walk the same way. *Are you up for this high calling today?* What would that look like in your life?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 11:1-19

"But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

I love this section and the one we just looked at because we see how Jesus interacts with those closest to Him. Yesterday we read His instructions to His own disciples as He sent them out to preach, teach, and heal as He had done while traveling with them. Today we watched Him interacting with John's disciples since John was in prison,

Now John *knew* who Jesus was, so why did he ask his disciples to find out if Jesus really is the One or if someone else were coming?

John's circumstances were probably getting harder and harder for him to deal with, and perhaps he was thinking that the Messiah was going to bring in His kingdom in a wholly different way.

Isn't that true of us too? We *know* who Jesus is, but when our circumstances seem to be getting worse and He doesn't come through in the way we want or expect, we start to wonder, and then we question, and then we doubt.

So, what is Jesus' message to John that we also need to hear? He tells John to look at what He, Jesus, has done rather than at John's own circumstances. Jesus has:

1. Given sight to the blind.
2. Strengthened the lame so they could walk.
3. Removed the leprosy so the infected could join society.
4. Brought hearing to the deaf.
5. Raised the dead to life.
6. Preached the good news to those who are poor in spirit.

He finishes the list by telling John that it would be easy to fall away when life doesn't go the way we think it should, but oh the happiness and joy for anyone who chooses instead to keep believing.

But just so John, his disciples, the crowd, and we don't think that Jesus is critical of John or anyone else who struggles in hard times, Jesus tells them (and us) the truth of who John is because the Father loves and values us:

"I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Jesus also tells them (and us) what is going on behind the scenes because the Father is always working behind the scenes:

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

So, what is Jesus telling us? Here's what I'm hearing today that is the challenge I needed:

- God is at work and His kingdom is forcefully advancing – one person at a time.
- His goal isn't an easy life for me but freedom and life for those who are blind to the truth, unable to walk in righteousness, isolated from life, unable to hear reality, dead because of the chains of sin, and poor in spirit.
- He wants to include me in what He's doing in their lives.

What are you hearing today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 11:20-24

"Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent."

To emphasize His point from the last section that wisdom is proved right by her actions, Jesus moves His attention from the crowd around Him to those in the cities where He had performed most of His miracles.

I think the opportunity of those in the cities to see Him perform numerous miracles is like going to a church that has insightful teaching, amazing music, or a gifted communicator. It's all too easy to keep what we hear or see at arm's length and marvel. But to bring truth into our hearts and minds, we have to respond and *do* something.

The three cities in Galilee where Jesus spent most of His time were Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin (about 2 miles north of Capernaum). Over and over Jesus visited these cities and displayed His power, but it seems that those who heard Him never took His actions to heart; they just wanted an "ah" experience, like with fireworks.

On the other hand, Tyre and Sidon had one miracle performed – a Canaanite woman's daughter was healed (Matthew 15) – and chronologically this happened after Jesus denounced these cities. Sodom had one encounter with God's messenger in the Old Testament and didn't take advantage of it.

So, what good did it do to these three cities to have Jesus visit so often? They haven't lasted through the centuries. Perhaps the visits were for our benefit, so we could hear firsthand from Jesus how important it is to respond to any truth He gives us.

The editor of my Bible version observes that because Jesus didn't get the commitment that He wanted from the crowds through His miracles, He gradually turned to parables, which would draw out those who were really interested, and He then could explain in private to them what He meant.

So, have you had the opportunity to see or learn a lot about Jesus? If so, has this information made you more like Him as you walk through life and interact with others? Or have you mentally filed away the information and stayed the same? Be careful – the more we know, the more we're held responsible for this truth.

Or have you been stiff arming God by keeping truth at arm's length, looking at it but not inviting it into your heart to change you from the inside out? If so, how about bending your arm, softening your heart, and inviting Him in so that wisdom (truth in action) will be proved right by your actions?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 11:25-30

"At that time [when Jesus warned Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin about their lack of belief and commitment after seeing so many miracles] Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.' "

It seems like Jesus is giving the citizens of these three cities a hard time because they didn't take His miracles to heart, but then He praises His Father for hiding the truth of who Jesus is from the wise and learned.

This situation reminds me of Pharaoh (of Moses' fame) who was repeatedly (10 times) given the chance to let the Israelites go free but refused. After the death of first-born children of every Egyptian family, Pharaoh finally relented (Exodus 12:31), but as the Israelites were leaving, God said to Moses, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." (Exodus 14:4)

What do the citizens of the three cities and Pharaoh's insights into God's character tell us? Here are some of my ideas.

1. God can't be known by anything we do in our own strength.
2. God is looking for men and women who humble themselves in His presence as He reveals Himself; who are trusting, like children.
3. God wants us to know Him through His Son, Jesus.
4. Jesus chooses those to whom He reveals His Father.

Jesus' invitation to us in this section is wonderful. He calls out to those who are weary and burdened. He asks us to share a yoke with Him and learn from Him as we walk together. We can trust Him because He is gentle and humble in heart, and He promises us that we will find rest for our souls. He tells us that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. Unlike two animals of equal strength sharing the work, Jesus carries the bulk of load as long as we walk with Him and learn from Him.

Are you depending on your own abilities and strengths today? Then maybe you need to take a hard look at what Jesus promises the citizens of Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin and what had happened to Pharaoh.

Or are you weary and burdened and your soul needs rest? Then you are invited to come to Jesus as a dependent, trusting little child and walk with Him as you get to know the Father.

This choice is open to us every day and in every situation. Which are you going to choose today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 12:1-14

"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Do you honor the Sabbath in your everyday life? I've been challenged over the years to think through and research the implications of this day from God's point of view in the scriptures. This "research" started when I worked for a doctor who had been raised in the Seventh Day Adventist denomination and knew its thinking inside and out but didn't live by its creed (worship on Saturdays rather than Sundays). His partner and staff in another office were all practicing members of that church, so their influence was all around me as I worked, and they were wonderful people to interact with.

So, what did I discover as I researched the scriptures? I'll share the flow of my thought over the years and its implications for how I was to live. I'd love to hear your thoughts after working through this information.

1. The first time the word *Sabbath* is used is in Genesis 2:2 when God finished His work and so could rest.
2. Keeping the Sabbath holy is the 4th commandment (Exodus 20:8) to provide a time for the Israelites to remember all that God had done for them.
3. Israel was to rest on the seventh day and seventh year. Because they didn't do this, I've been told that the number of years in captivity in Babylon equaled the years of Sabbath rest not taken.
4. Jesus proclaimed that He is Lord of the Sabbath and that the minute rules the Pharisees had concocted for that day didn't apply. In fact, what God wanted was mercy and acknowledgement of Him rather than sacrifices and burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)
5. Jesus fulfilled the law with His death and resurrection, so we no longer have to "do" or accomplish anything to follow Him.
6. After Jesus' resurrection, the church met to worship, learn, and be a family together on Sundays instead of Saturdays because the Father raised His Son on the first day of the week, Sunday. (Acts 20:7)
7. The writer of Hebrews talks about entering God's rest in Hebrews 3 and 4. We are to live in His Sabbath-rest every day, not just observe it once a week. Entering this rest means we trust in what Jesus accomplished for us instead of trying to earn His love and acceptance by what we do. A lifestyle of resting in what He's done (but not inactivity) is what He made available.

So, what does this conclusion mean for us?

- It means we're to live a resurrection-powered life every day.
- It means that when we come together, we're to remember what Jesus did for us
(breaking bread = a broken body on the cross).
- It means a life of acknowledging God rather than coming up with our own list of do's and don'ts that reflect us and our abilities and strength rather than Jesus' life.
- It means a life of freedom rather than bondage to rules and regulations.

What kind of life have you been living? *Are you exhausted by trying to live up to God's standards, or have you been living the life Jesus intends for you?* The emotions you're feeling today will lead you to an honest answer. Is it the answer you were expecting?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 12:15-21

"Aware of [the Pharisees plotting how to kill Jesus], Jesus withdrew from that place [the synagogue where Jesus had healed a man with a shriveled hand, the Pharisees had condemned Him for "working" on the Sabbath, and Jesus had told them that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath]. Many followed him, and he healed their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah."

Has anyone ever plotted to kill you? Me neither. Military strategists know what it would take to do such plotting, but theirs would be directed at a group of people (the enemy), not an individual because of something personal. Politicians at every level know what it's like to have another plot their downfall, but not to the point of death. However, we all know what it's like to live under the pressure of horrendous stress; that situation is common to all.

So, what do military people in a war situation, politicians, and we do in such tense situations? We can either cave in or stand up under the pressure and continue. But *how* we continue is the issue. We see the results of war and hear how politicians react and respond. But how do you respond? How do I?

Our hope and example is Jesus. He was under more stress than any of us can imagine, and these attacks were only the beginning. What He knew and what He chose to do is our example. I pray that this look at Jesus will comfort and encourage you today.

What Jesus knew

1. His mission was to do the work of the Father (be His servant)
2. His Father loved Him, delighted in Him, and put His Spirit on Him

What Jesus was to do

1. Proclaim justice
2. Ensure that justice wins in the end

What Jesus wasn't to do

1. Be argumentative, cry out, or be loud
2. Be harsh with a bruised person, or someone who is overwhelmed and barely hanging on

And what is the promise if Jesus stays true to His mission? "In His Name the nations will put their hope." Our hope isn't that a situation will change; our hope, our confidence, is that Jesus is the Son sent by the Father for us. And Jesus will make all things right in His time, (even if it isn't in our lifetime), and for His purposes (not ours).

Based on what you know, what do you need to do, or stop doing today? I realized I was being argumentative and harsh. I needed to sit down, be emotionally still, and begin writing again so the love of God could flow into my heart as I met with Him.

How about you?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 12:22-37

"But I tell you that men [and women too] will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."

Recently I read an exciting fiction book that actually had *Gnosticism* at the heart of the antagonist's thinking. Do you know what this word means? In his short letters written at the end of the first century, John rebutted this popular thinking that had grown up in opposition to Christianity. For a long time, I had thought that Gnosticism died off in the second century, but as I worked through John's letters for my third devotional, I saw that philosophy played out in the later seasons of the Stargate TV shows on the SyFy channel. Now I've seen it in popular fiction.

What is Gnosticism? It's the idea that what's important is what we *know* rather than what we do or say, because nothing good or valuable resides in our bodies. Therefore, it doesn't really matter what we do with our bodies or in our bodies.

But Jesus takes an opposite stance. Using the words *say*, *speak*, etc. 10 times in this section, He says that what is in our hearts will come out in our words and then in our actions. If careless or angry or abusive words come out of our mouths, then evil is already stored in us. We can *know* a lot of truth, but if it hasn't penetrated our hearts, and if we haven't given in to God so that His kingdom is growing in us by the Holy Spirit, we're lost – and our own words prove it.

Just last Saturday I saw – again – when my words show the enemy's influence. I was in a social situation, and I tried to show how smart and clever I was by saying something that puffed me up but put the other person down. We laughed over my "clever" statement, but immediately I knew how my words showed a lack of worth. If I had been remembering God's love toward me as His daughter as shown through His Son's sacrifice, loving and supportive words would have come out of my mouth. I am glad that I saw the situation so quickly so the rest of my words could reflect my Lord and not me.

What do your words say about you and the health of your heart? What does your self-talk – what you say that no one else hears – say about how you're living out the truth you say you know?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 12:38-45

"Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.'"

What arrogance! The men who taught the scriptures and knew the promises of the Messiah dared to ask for a "sign" from Him. They ignored His teachings, His healings, and His life. They wanted their own private sign because somehow they thought that only they could anoint Him as Messiah.

No wonder Jesus' rebuke was so strong: "a wicked and adulterous generation." The sign He gave them was Jonah (whom they probably didn't believe even existed – just a nice story) and the Queen of the South, who wasn't even Jewish, who came to Solomon. (1 Kings 10)

And then Jesus tells a story of what can happen when a man or a nation interacts with God, because this is Israel's story, and probably our stories as well:

- When a man (or a nation) comes to God and the unclean spirits leave, all is well, like a house that has just been cleaned.
- But such a spirit needs a place to live. Unable to find a suitable resting place, it returns to the man (or the nation).
- If the man (or the nation) had filled the rooms with all things related to God and what is important to Him, the spirit won't find a place to live.
- But if the rooms of a life are empty and available, the spirit brings in other spirits that are more wicked, and they all take up residence.

This is what happened to Israel: the nation started well but didn't grow in its relationship with God so ended up as a shell, following the rules and laws but lacking substance. Jesus says that its final condition will be worse than before they started.

Such a warning this is for us who are followers of Jesus Christ! What do we fill our lives with? How do we spend our time and our money? What do our words reveal about what's in our hearts?

Our choices today *do* affect our tomorrows. *What do you want your tomorrows to look like?*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 12:46-50

"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

I experienced this verse even before I had ever read it. When I started a relationship with Jesus, I was living in San Francisco, but the church I was becoming involved with was in Palo Alto, about an hour's drive south of the city. The friend who had started me down this path with Jesus wanted to make sure I got to church and got settled in, so through a series of connections, he found another young woman who was in the city for the summer with Campus Crusade. She picked me up that first Sunday morning, and as soon as I stepped into her car, I "knew" she was a sister, without knowing what that was supposed to mean to me. For the next two month she and I drove to church together, and I started settling in. By the end of the summer when she returned to college, I was ready to step out on my own at church with a new set of friends.

The friend who had started me on this journey, Brian Burgess, was a great help during this time, introducing me to men and women our age who were absolutely committed to walking with Jesus. One time when we were talking about parents and families, he said that while we may be able to choose our friends, God chooses our family for us for His sake.

His insight helped me over the years to lighten the pressure I was putting on my family to be the family I thought I needed. Instead, I was to care for them for the sake of the kingdom.

So here comes Jesus' mother and brothers wanting to interrupt what His Father was having Him do. Perhaps they were embarrassed about the commotion He was causing, or perhaps they were worried about His safety (or their safety since they were related) as He was confronting the Pharisees.

Whatever the reason, Jesus knew that He needed to continue with what His Father had set out for Him, and He made it clear that family ties were not going to stop Him.

I bet they were shocked by His response and probably felt rebuffed. But this isn't the end of their story. We know that His mother and at least two of His half brothers – James and Jude – came to understand who He really was and eventually became leaders among those who followed Jesus after His resurrection.

So how about you? Are you embarrassed by your family or want them to change so you'll be more comfortable?

How do you relate to fellow believers? Do you keep them at a distance or embrace them as our heavenly Father embraces us?

Hmmm, Jesus does get personal, doesn't He? Has He gotten personal with you today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:1-23

"He who has ears, let him hear."

Have you ever put off a project because of some fear or a lack of confidence? That has been my dilemma for the past few months as I've faced working through these parables that we'll be looking at in Matthew 13. Unless a gifted speaker or Jesus Himself has explained them, I've always been baffled by what Jesus was trying to say in His parables. But today is the day to start, and I trust that as the soil of my heart stays receptive to the seeds He plants, He'll explain the secrets of the kingdom of heaven He wants me and you to know.

This first parable is easy to understand because Jesus explains its meaning to His disciples. What interests me, however, is His description of those who *don't* hear or see. Let's see what He has to say – in case He's speaking to us too.

- They have a calloused heart that doesn't care for others and isn't humble (vs. 15).
- They don't take the time or make the effort to understand truth (vs. 19).
- They lack the deep roots that come from living out truth and so wither under the heat of hard times or persecution (vs. 21).
- The worries of life and deceitfulness of wealth choke out their faith in God (vs. 22).

I think we all want to have hearts that hear truth, take it in deeply, and live it out faithfully. But it's so easy to let unhealthy ways of thinking creep in unnoticed and take root. Whether it's an unwillingness to listen to others' input, the belief that my way is the best way, or always blaming someone else, sin is sneaky, and the evil one wants to keep us away from Jesus' life for us.

As I'm writing, Christmas is two weeks away, and today's words are what I need to hear as the worries of work and family are weighing me down. I'm reminded of the admonition the writer of Hebrews gives us:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. (Hebrews 13:15)

A sacrifice requires a death or a giving up of what is considered valuable. So, it's time to die to myself and my load in life and praise God for who He is, regardless of my circumstances.

How about you? *Are you looking at life or at Jesus?* As we look at Him, we become more and more like Him (2 Corinthians 3:18) because we become what we focus on.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

"Then the righteous will shine in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

Remember how I said I'd been putting off tackling these parables? Well, it's been 5 months since I've last been in this chapter, but these parables haven't gone away. Have you been putting off anything for a while? Perhaps God wants to meet you in your procrastination and reveal Himself to you in a new way like He's just done for me.

As I read the first group of verses (24-30), I thought, "Here we go again. How will I ever understand this parable?" To put off writing a little longer, I started looking at the rest of the chapter and noticed the heading "The Parable of the Weeds Explained." Yahoo! Help arrived at just the right time.

Over the past few days as I dreaded looking at these parables, I wondered why Matthew inserted them right in the middle of his Gospel, because this chapter is the middle. If he's writing chronologically, which I assume he is, Jesus is changing from straight talk and miracles that back up what He says to weeding out those who only want what's easy so He can talk to those who really want to hear. The thought that came to me is that parables help us personalize truth. It's when the "what about me?" questions are answered. It's when we stop holding out truth at arm's length and let it start changing us instead.

So how does the Parable of the Weeds help us?

I think it explains our world and gives us hope for the next. The parable shows us that God will place His people everywhere in the world. However, the devil will sow his people everywhere too, especially among the believers (the church) so both will grow up together. This truth means we shouldn't be surprised by the evil around us and among us.

But at the end, Jesus, the Son of Man, will send His angels to weed out from His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. Those who have done evil will get what they deserve because they never bowed their knees to Him. Nothing will be left that can mar the beauty of what the Father has done in the lives of the righteous. What hope! What confidence!

So why does Jesus end His explanation with "He who has ears, let him hear"? I think He's giving us a warning:

Our tendency is to scheme so we'll be in control of our experiences and others will make our lives easier. If we want to be with the righteous at the end of time, we need to put away all that causes us to sin and depend on Him.

I've heard His warning today, especially as I think about others who don't match up to my standards and so become critical of them. *Have you heard Him too?*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:31-32

"I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." Matthew 13:35

Now that we're getting into the parables that *aren't* explained, I knew I needed some serious help so I went to my trusted source: the sermons of Ray Stedman at www.RayStedman.org, the sermons I grew up on spiritually in the 1970s and 1980s. Ray ties together these parables in Matthew 13 to support our verse for today and calls them "The Sermon by the Sea." I'm going to summarize what he says in his sermons on Matthew 13, but I recommend you go to the website I mentioned to read them (free) for yourself.

Starting with the first parable, he says that symbols in scripture always have the same meaning.

the *sower* (man who does something) = the Lord Himself

seed = truth, life

field = the world

mustard tree = unnatural growth from a tiny seed that is never intended to be a tree

birds of the air = evil one

The mustard seed is an irritant; it is fiery and biting. In this case we have the Lord planting truth and life in the world that will arouse, disturb, and irritate men and women so they'll be uncomfortable staying as they are.

The seed (truth) grows in the field (world), and all is well for a while. But the tendency of mankind is to seek comfort and ease, so enjoying pleasures begins to overwhelm the need to deal with what's uncomfortable.

Ray says that this is what has happened to the church over the centuries so that we've ended up with organized religion that claims it is what God intended but doesn't reflect at all what the man in our parable sowed in his field.

This unnatural tree has many branches, which can describe all of the denominations and splinter groups in the church. Their buildings can be imposing and expensive. Their emphasis is on the organization rather than on Jesus, so they'll talk about their view on topics rather than on Jesus' perspective on life.

Into this situation come the birds that make their home in the branches. Often in the Old Testament, "birds of the air" refers to predator birds, not innocent blue birds. These birds were seen snatching away what was sown in the hearer's heart in verse 19.

But isn't it amazing that Jesus knew what was to come and so prepared those who chose to hear His words? He knew that every generation would have a remnant of believers who look to Him rather than look to the *tree* (organized religion) for refuge.

Where are you in today's parable? Are you letting the irritating seed do its work in your heart and mind, or are you getting caught up in the often beautiful trappings of religion and worldly knowledge that confuse a walk a faith? It's a choice each of us must make every day.

Where are you looking today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:33-35

"I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."

Now our perspective changes. We're no longer looking at a sower or a man doing something; now we're looking at a woman who mixes yeast into a large amount of flour (NIV version). Other versions say it's 3 measures of meal.

As you probably know, yeast (or leaven) causes what it's put in to puff up unnaturally. It takes yeast a while to work after it's been added, and yeast makes food go bad faster. With this in mind, let's look at the details of this parable.

Yeast: Yeast was a familiar symbol to Jesus' listeners. They knew it represented sin (remember unleavened bread—no yeast—for the Passover meal before the Israelites left Egypt?) so they would have been shocked that He used it in a parable. They knew to avoid it in their worship so could assume He was giving them a warning. So let's look at what is going on.

3 measures: The yeast is added to 3 measures of meal. Jesus' Jewish listeners knew exactly what He was referring to – the meal offerings in the Old Testament:

- Abraham and the 3 strangers in Genesis 18
- Gideon and the angel of God in Judges 6
- Hannah, Samuel's mother, in the temple in 1 Samuel making an offering to God

Abraham and Gideon made meals to share with God's messengers; they had fellowship together. These two instances form the foundation for the offering Hannah made.

Woman: Women had never had a role in the priests making offerings in the temple starting when God gave His instructions to Moses. So, in this parable we have a woman taking the place of a priest at the temple – a huge red flag to these Jewish people. This act of independence from God brought sin (independence from God) into what was going to be offered to Him, and that offering would eventually corrupt all that it touched.

This act takes me back to the Garden of Eden and the results of the Fall for Eve and Adam. God told her that from now on she would want to rule over her husband (and everything around her), but her safeguard was to humble herself so she could allow her husband to be responsible. Adam had been told not to eat of the fruit of just one tree, but when Eve offered him this fruit, he gave in to her instead of following what God had told him. Adam gave up his responsibility, which allowed her to stop being a helpmate and instead claim a role God hadn't given her.

So, the woman in our parable was taking over, or usurping, authority in the religious life of the nation, and everyone would be affected by her actions.

What do we do with all this information? I think we need to look honestly at the health of our own spiritual lives in how we interact with other believers in the community where God has placed us. *Has sin snuck into your life in any way and corrupted what Jesus has put in place?*

Jesus knew what was going to happen in such situations because He knew us and so gave us this warning. We have to decide what we're going to do about it.

Are we (individually and collectively) known for our openness, honesty, and transparency? Do we acknowledge our sin and sin tendencies? Do we bear each other's burdens? Do we love others as Jesus loves us? Is our fellowship sweet and real? How do you answer these questions?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:44-46

" . . . and then in his joy . . . "

Hidden treasures and a valuable pearl are described in just 66 words; can God have anything important for us in these two short parables? You're right; He does! Today we'll look at the treasures; tomorrow we'll look at the pearl.

We read that Jesus has just left the crowds by the sea and returned to the house (vs. 36). He's now speaking with just His closest followers and wants to share with them what the Father has in store for His beloved humanity.

Remember the symbols we've defined before? Time to use them again as we look at the first of the two parables.

So, Jesus is explaining the kingdom of God – how God works among men and women and how those who love and follow His lead interact with Him and each other. How this kingdom works has been hidden in the world (the field). When Jesus (*a man*) uncovered (*found*) it, He did something strange. He covered it up again (*hid it*). Then in His joy He gave all He had (*gave Himself on the cross*) and bought humanity (*that field*).

What did Jesus find hidden in the world? From reading Ray Stedman's messages, I made some fascinating discoveries. To His Jewish listeners, Jesus' mention of "a treasure" was instantly recognizable to them. They knew from Exodus and Deuteronomy that He meant the nation of Israel living in a close relationship with the God who formed them. This dependent relationship was to be a picture to the rest of humanity of how to live in harmony with their creator and with each other. Paul talks about this in Romans 9-11.

In a world where conflict is the norm between nations as well as individuals, this harmony – or peace – is what we crave but can't create. We try compromises, negotiations, and bribery, but nothing works. The United Nations was formed to keep us at peace with each other on a global level, but we've had continual wars since its inception.

Jesus is telling us that God intends for Israel to *show* us the way to live with God by how the nation lives in loving dependence on Him. We're a long way from seeing that example, but Israel being a nation again after 1900 years is a good start. I don't know what has to happen for a believing remnant of this nation to start living as God created them, but I believe it will happen, because it's what God has put in place. Perhaps we'll see it in the 144,000 servants of God with a seal on their foreheads as described in Revelation 7.

So, what does this parable mean to us today? Well, I think it means that the only way to have peace is by having God be God in our lives.

I think it means that if we've been far off or just pursuing other goals (gods), Jesus is always available if we turn around and follow Him. He's done the hard part; He sold all He had to purchase us, and He did it with *joy* as the writer tells us in Hebrews 12:2.

Is the fight over between you and God as to who is in charge? If you know way down deep in your soul that you're loved and forgiven and have accepted this truth without any "buts," then you're at peace with God. You're also at peace with yourself and others.

Every day we can live this way in the middle of the challenges of life. How are you doing today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:44-46

"... he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

So why a "treasure" in the last parable but a "pearl" today? Is Jesus just repeating Himself for emphasis? I thought that might be the case until I read Ray Stedman's sermon (see Matthew 13:31-32 section for the link). At the end of the sermon, I saw the date Ray shared his insights at Peninsula Bible Church. It was the first Sunday after I became a Christian, 2 days after I made a decision that changed my life 180 degrees. I don't remember this sermon at all (especially since I didn't even have my own bible at that time), but now I see that this sermon that was given so many years ago is God's love gift to me today, some 40 years later. Why? Because my first name means "pearl." Today's parable tells me what He did for me many years ago.

So ready to dig in and discover what God has for you?

kingdom of heaven: What God envisioned when He created us, and what Jesus made available, the reality of true life

a merchant: Like "a man" from earlier parables but a little different. A merchant goes out into the world more to see what's available; he's outward focused.

fine pearls: Of all the jewels mentioned in the Old Testament, pearls are never associated with the nation of Israel. The word is used once in Job, way before Abraham's time, and once in Esther, a Jewish woman living in Persia who became a queen and saved her people. So Jesus' disciples knew when He used pearls as an example, He was speaking of the *other* group of people, the Gentiles along the coast who easily found pearls and loved them.

a pearl of great value: You probably know how a pearl is formed. It's the only jewel that is the product of living matter. A bit of sand gets into the shell of an oyster and irritates it. The oyster works and works at getting rid of the irritant but can't. Over time the process produces a pearl, and in this case, a pearl of great value.

he went away and sold all he had and bought it: Jesus so loved the Gentiles that He gave up all He had to come into our world, live as we do, and die in the most horrible way possible so He could clear the way for us to be able to come to Him and know Him. He knows first-hand our hurts and pain (*irritating sand*) and can heal us by using them to change us so we're ready to live in His kingdom.

So, Jesus gave Himself for the nation of Israel that His Father created so it would be a light to the world, an example of how to live with God so we can experience peace. And He gave Himself for the Gentiles so they could learn from this example and come to know God as their Father through Jesus. God's good news of hope and grace went out to the Gentiles, and the church was born. (The church is God's people, not a building or a denomination.)

Do you feel isolated and alone? Jesus as the merchant is seeking you, and the community of God is waiting for you.

Are the pain and hurt of life overwhelming you? Jesus knows, understands, and wants to transform your pain so you can live the way He intended.

What hope. What love. This message is for all of us. *What are you hearing from Him today?*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:47-50

"This is how it will be at the end of the age."

Did you notice that we don't have "a man" doing something in this final parable? Instead, someone behind the scenes is using a huge net to collect all kinds of fish hidden below the surface. The fishermen bring the catch to shore and evaluate the quality of the fish: the good go in baskets (to be sold), and the bad (worthless) are thrown away (not thrown back into the lake).

Jesus says this is how it will be at the end of the age when He returns. The angels will cause circumstances to happen so that who we are becomes obvious. Outward appearances and nice words can't protect us; our real natures will be seen by all. And the angels will judge us – not other men or women of any status or political persuasion. The angels – who have been watching all along and who can see reality because they are always in God's presence – will evaluate us according to God's standard of righteousness. The wicked will be permanently separated from those who reflect God's character and glory, and some will be sorrowful (weeping) or angry (gnashing of teeth). But their decision is final.

What reaction to this truth do you have? Are you thinking, "It'll never happen!"? Or are you wondering what you can do now to escape such an outcome? Probably you're like me and have the second response. So, what can we do now, today?

I think we experience minor versions of this "separating" all the time. Circumstances are constantly happening where we can own up to what we're doing and humble ourselves to go God's way and not our own. Or we can stiffen our necks and continue on, acting like everyone else is wrong and we deserve to be right. Every day we're given small opportunities to choose, but from time to time, big events confront us and what is really true about our relationship with God becomes obvious.

Are you in the middle of one of these big events, or are you dealing with everyday choices? Either way, Jesus has provided Himself as a way of walking through the circumstances so that the angels can cheer us on. *Can you hear them?*

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:51-52

"... new treasures as well as old."

What an affront Jesus' words must have been to His disciples. After telling them over and over and in so many different ways what the kingdom of heaven was all about, they said they understood what He's been saying. So now He tells them that they are to be teachers of the law (or scribes), the group of religious men who they thought of as the enemy. This group put burdens on the people and tried to trip up Jesus over details. What was He thinking of?

I think Jesus was thinking about the first scribe in the nation of Israel, Ezra, and the example he set that has been distorted over the years (remember how the small mustard seed grew into an unnatural tree?).

Ezra was a descendent of Aaron, who was the first high priest and Moses' brother (Ezra 7 and Exodus 4). Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a group of Jews from Babylon after the temple had been rebuilt. His job was to rebuild the spiritual lives of those who had returned to Israel.

In Ezra 7:10, we're told that Ezra devoted himself to the study of the law, he observed (or lived) it, and *then* he taught it. His life was a demonstration of what he said; he didn't say one thing and do another. His example was the way God wanted His teachers of the law and scribes to be.

And this is how Jesus wanted His disciples to be. They were to know about and live as citizens of the kingdom of God (old treasures). Then they were to take this knowledge that they knew so well into the lives of those who came along with all the issues we all have to face (new treasures).

In Ezra's case, he had to take God's truth and apply it to the problem of the men of Israel misusing their sexuality. They had been unfaithful to God and married women from the "neighboring peoples with their detestable practices." (Ezra 9:1)

The disciples were to take the truth of God that never changes into circumstances that were new to them and then come up with ways of responding that would produce kingdom life in others, especially as they went out to the Gentiles.

Our teachers should be doing this for us, and we should be doing it for those in our world. Truth never changes, but its application is as varied as our circumstances. Like Ezra, we need to know the truth, live the truth, and then share it with others in a way that makes sense to them.

How are you doing with the "knowing" and then the "living"? The world desperately needs what God wants to give through us as we grow in grace and truth in the kingdom of God.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 8-13

Matthew 13:53-58

"And he did not do many miracles [in his hometown] because of their lack of faith."

I think my take-away from the parables in Matthew 13 is that Jesus is explaining to us the difference between *what seems to be* and *what is really happening*. To me the kingdom of heaven is like a play. Before it starts, all that the audience can see is an uninteresting curtain that keeps them from seeing what's beyond it. Then it's time for the play to start, and the curtain to part. All of a sudden, the audience realizes that so much has been happening for such a long time, but only now can they enter into the action. As the play progresses, characters interact, tension mounts, and the solution finally becomes obvious. All along the director knows what's happening and what will be revealed – but only at the right time.

By finishing this section with describing the response of those who knew Jesus as a boy and were friends of His family, Jesus is giving us a kingdom perspective of family.

What was your family's and their friends' response to you when you became a follower of Jesus? If their response wasn't so favorable, perhaps this section will help you see your situation from God's perspective.

One of our daughters-in-law told us that she loved being around us because we treated her as an adult. We realized that this was easy to do since we hadn't known her as a child. It is hard to let those we've known as children become adults as we watch them and interact with them. Jesus' family had a hard time with this too (Matthew 12:46-49) and now we can see that His hometown neighbors wanted to keep Him as "the son of" and "the brother of" and missed out knowing Him as He is. I'm sure His heart broke over their unbelief.

But we know the story isn't over, and I bet knowing the truth of the parables He had just taught kept Jesus going (old and new treasures).

We know that His mother, Mary, was at the cross, and we know that she and His half-brothers were with the disciples when Judas was replaced. (Acts 1:14) We know that Jesus' half-brothers, James and Jude, became part of the leadership in Jerusalem and each wrote a letter that's included in our New Testament.

So, what is the situation spiritually with your family? If it's good, how wonderful. But if not, or if you have friends who struggle in this area, what is our hope? Our hope is in a risen Lord who was not bound by our humanity but who broke the chains of sin so we could know real life. And if He did it for us, our families wouldn't be too hard for Him. We may not see a change in our lifetime (Jesus didn't with His brothers), but God loves our family members more than we ever could and knows how to reach each one with His love and forgiveness to give them the choice.

The play isn't over yet for them or for us.
