

Sunday School Lesson for January 11, 2026

Overview of the Gospel of Matthew

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallahassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this second Sunday of 2026, we're introducing a ten-year plan for Bible study entitled, "Vines by the Book." It's a chapter-by-chapter study of the entire Bible developed from the preaching of Jerry Vines, pastor emeritus of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida. We'll formally begin the study next week with Pastor Trey preaching from the first chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, followed by a study of the second chapter during the Bible Fellowship time. In order to provide some background information to Matthew's record of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, today's lesson will consist of a brief survey of the entire book.

The books that we call the gospels were a relatively new type of literature at their time of writing. Unlike true biographies, they don't have much historical background, and they lack the kinds of detailed information about the major characters involved that you would otherwise expect in a book of history. Unlike the Greek mythological writings, the gospels don't focus on the miracles of Jesus but present them as simply another part of the narrative. This doesn't mean that the gospel writers weren't interested in the historical background or the personalities of the individuals involved because Luke includes some very significant historical information, and John's gospel contains some very personal glimpses into the Person of Jesus Christ.

So, we can say that the gospel writers weren't writing pure history as we might define it today, but they were writing about the life and teachings of an Individual whom they had come to believe was the very Son of God. Mark, for example, tell us that he's writing about the gospel, or the good news, of Jesus Christ. John's purpose in writing his gospel is even clearer. As he nears the conclusion of his record about Jesus, he tells us in chapter twenty, verse 31, "These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the

Son of God, and that believing you might have life through His name.” From each of their own perspectives, the gospel writers were proclaiming the gospel.

In the gospels, we have four similar yet distinct views of the life and teachings of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke make up what are called the “synoptic gospels”—meaning that they parallel one another in structure, content, and wording as they recount many of the same events and teachings of the Lord in a similar timeline while also providing unique perspectives and details from each author.

John’s gospel, on the other hand, is written in a much different style with a focus on revealing Who Jesus is and leading his readers to believe in Him to gain eternal life. Of the writers of the three synoptic gospels, only Matthew was an apostle. Mark, otherwise known as John Mark, was the traveling companion of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter whom we read about in the book of Acts. Luke was probably a medical doctor and a Gentile who wrote about what he had learned from Peter.

The gospel of Matthew is the first book in our New Testaments, although it might not have been the first to be written. Scholars suggest several reasons why Matthew appears first. Early church tradition is unanimous in declaring that Matthew was the author of the gospel that bears his name. If you were to look at all the lists of the gospels that appeared in the earliest days of the Church, you would find that Matthew is always listed first. Many of these early Christians believed that Matthew wrote his record of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus before the others, and Matthew’s gospel includes significant portions of Jesus’ teachings that aren’t included in the other books; for example, Matthew provides us with a fuller version of the Sermon on the Mount than Luke--assuming, of course, that Luke was writing about the same event.

Two other points: Matthew’s gospel was quoted more than any other in Christian writings of the second century. Second, Matthew was a tax collector

which meant that he was an accountant and record keeper. In a time when writing, parchment, and ink were rare, it's easy to imagine that someone who was used to keeping records and who had access to those materials would be the first to record everything he knew of the life of Christ.

Possibly most important of all is the fact that Matthew's style of writing to a primarily Jewish audience provided a logical transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament, especially since Matthew shows how several events in the life of our Lord fulfilled scripture.

So, who was Matthew? He first appears in the gospel that bears his name in chapter nine, verse nine: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." In Mark, chapter two, verse fourteen and Luke, chapter five, verse 27, he's called Levi. In Galilee it was not uncommon to have two names, so both names may have been original. But if Levi was his original name and it was less well known among Christians, that would account for Luke and Mark using it rather than Matthew. Like Simon whom Jesus renamed Peter, Levi could have been given a new name by the Lord--a name that means, "gift of God."

As a tax collector, it was quite likely that he lived a very comfortable life, but was generally despised by his own people. The Roman government didn't collect its own taxes, but subcontracted the job out to those who made a profit out of the deal. It would have been difficult for a strict Jew to even pay taxes, so those who essentially sold themselves to the Romans to do their dirty work as tax collectors were naturally looked upon with scorn and hatred, not only because they acted on behalf of the Jews' Roman oppressors, but also because these tax collectors typically used various forms of abuse, treachery, and fraud to collect the tax and line their own pockets. One commentator writes, "The Jews especially abhorred them as bloodsuckers for a heathen conqueror. For a Jew to enter such a service was the most utter degradation. He was excommunicated, and his whole [family] was regarded as disgraced." Tax

collector though he was, the Lord Jesus called Matthew to follow Him, and he did.

When did Matthew write his gospel? The prominent New Testament scholar, A. T. Robertson says, "My own guess is that A.D. 60 is as good as any." Others are more specific in attempting to date the gospel, pointing out that if Matthew is writing his gospel to prove to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, he had to write before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 since, after that, the breach between the emerging Church and the Old Testament synagogue was widening.

Who was Matthew's original, intended audience--to whom was he writing this message about the Lord Jesus? As you read Matthew, you'll find many prophesies from the Old Testament that he says were fulfilled in the life and works of the Lord. Since Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah whom the Jews had been expecting, it seems apparent that he was writing to a primarily Jewish audience. For example, Matthew stresses Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and of Messianic prophecy; he traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham; Matthew notes that Jesus speaks of God as the "Father in heaven"--a typical Jewish designation of God--some fifteen times. We find this only once in Mark's gospel and not at all in Luke's. Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God" as both Mark and Luke use, probably because of the Jews' reverence for the Name of God. Matthew also refers to Jewish customs and traditions without explaining what they were. He also refers to Jesus as the "Son of David," and he wants to make sure that his readers know that Jesus was born into a Davidic family and therefore has a legitimate claim to the throne of Israel.

We also find several of our Lord's statements recorded by Matthew that would directly appeal to a Jewish audience. For example, Jesus' instructions to His disciples before He sent them out in chapter ten was that they were to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When the Lord was traveling

through Tyre and Sidon, He was approached by a woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon. He told the Syrophenician woman of chapter fifteen, verse 24, that He “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” However, because of the evidence of her faith in the response she gave, Jesus healed her daughter.

Matthew’s frequent reminder that certain events took place as they did so that some prophecy spoken by a prophet would be fulfilled and his tracing of Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham are the two, most significant indications that Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience. By way of contrast, Mark doesn’t tell us anything about the genealogy of Jesus, perhaps because his primarily Gentile audience had no appreciation of genealogies and focusing instead on what Jesus did.

What is Matthew’s core message to his predominately Jewish audience? Unlike the gospel of John, Matthew doesn’t offer us a clear purpose statement. He does, however, present his story in such a way as to offer the readers a broad explanation of the Lord’s work and ministry, His life, death and resurrection, so they might be able to make a fully-informed decision to become a follower of Christ. His is the story of Jesus of Nazareth as a compelling witness to the fact that Jesus is the long-awaited and -anticipated Messiah Who revealed the Kingdom of God to the world and fulfilled the promises of peace and deliverance for both Jews and Gentiles that God spoke of through His prophets.

One study Bible tells us that “Matthew crafted his account to demonstrate Jesus’ messianic identity, his inheritance of the Davidic Kingdom over Israel, and his fulfillment of the promise made to his ancestor Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations. Thus in large part Matthew’s Gospel is an evangelistic tool aimed at his fellow Jews, persuading them to recognize Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. At the same time, the Gospel reveals clearly to Gentiles that salvation through Jesus the Messiah is available to all nations.”

If we were to give Matthew's gospel a title, it might well be "The Gospel of the Messiah and of the new people of God," as Matthew leads his Jewish and Gentile readers to place their faith in Jesus as their Messiah and confirm them in their faith.

There are several distinguishing features of Matthew's gospel that set it apart from Mark, Luke, and John. Let me suggest the more important differences. First, it's clear that Matthew has a strong Jewish background. Second, Matthew is quick to point out that certain events in the life of our Lord fulfilled prophecy. Third, he records Jesus speaking of God as "Father." Fourth, we learn much from what the Lord tells us about the kingdom of heaven. Fifth, Matthew highlights the Davidic lineage, royal majesty, and authority of Jesus.

Sixth, we can see that Matthew is not only interested in the salvation of the Jews, but the salvation of all peoples as seen in the Great Commission--fulfilling Israel's destiny--a destiny that they had tragically rejected. We see this universal appeal of the gospel in the Lord's parables and where the Magi--Gentiles from the East--come to see Jesus; the field is the world in the parable of the tares in chapter thirteen; and God will transfer His kingdom from Israel and give it to others--chapter 21. This universal appeal of the gospel finds its fullest expression in the Great Commission where followers of the Lord Jesus are to make disciples of all the nations.

Seventh, Matthew's is the only gospel to mention the Church--chapter sixteen, verse eighteen, and chapter eighteen, verse seventeen. Eighth, the importance of last things--what theologians call "eschatology"--plays a large role in this gospel, especially in Jesus' parables and His teachings on last things as the end of His earthly ministry draws near in chapters 24 and 25.

Ninth, the teaching ministry of Jesus is given a place of great prominence throughout this gospel. Matthew records for us five sermons or discourses. In chapters five through seven, we find the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus

discusses the meaning of true righteousness. In chapter ten, we read how the Lord first commissioned His disciples and explained to them what it means to be a witness of Him as well as the persecution and rewards that would follow. Matthew records the Lord's teachings about the meaning of the Kingdom of God as He spoke in parables in chapter thirteen. In chapter eighteen, we hear the Lord's teaching concerning the meaning of humility and forgiveness. In chapter 23, Matthew records a series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees for their blatant arrogance and hypocrisy, followed in chapters 24 and 25 with what is called the "Olivet Discourse" because the Lord delivered this message about the end times on the Mount of Olives as He made His way to pray before His arrest.

The structure of the five discourses seems to indicate that Matthew was portraying Jesus as a new and greater Moses for the benefit of his Jewish readers. Like Moses, He delivered part of His message from a mountain, and, like Moses, the teaching came in five sections. For Moses, it was the Pentateuch--the first five books of the Bible. There are other similarities as well. Jesus sojourned in Egypt just as Moses did. Moses appeared with Jesus and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. There are contrasts as well. Jesus began many of His corrections of the misapplication of the Law of Moses by saying, "You have heard that it was said, ... but I say to you"

Perhaps as another means of drawing his Jewish readers to see that Jesus is the Messiah, Matthew effectively organizes his record utilizing Jewish numerology. The genealogy of Jesus is divided into three sections. In the Sermon on the Mount, he selects three examples of righteous conduct, three prohibitions, and three commandments. In other places, we find three parables, three questions, three prayers, and three denials. Perhaps he was thinking of the requirement of Deuteronomy, chapter seventeen, verse six and chapter nineteen, verse fifteen, which he also quotes in chapter eighteen, verse sixteen as the Lord explains how to deal with an erring brother or sister: "If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may

be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” There are also seven parables in chapter seventeen and seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23.

Although we know where Paul was when wrote many of his letters, we don’t know exactly where Matthew penned his gospel. Most scholars suggest Israel or Syria, most likely Antioch, as suggested by Acts, chapter eleven, verse nineteen. It was the church in Antioch, you may remember, that was Paul’s home base for his missionary journeys. Also, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, is the first person to write about the gospel of Matthew in his letters to the believers in Smyrna and to Polycarp.

We could outline Matthew’s gospel by tracing his alternating message from what Jesus did--the narrative sections of the book--and what Jesus said--the five discourses that Matthew records.

The book opens with the story of the birth of Jesus in the first two chapters, including His genealogy through His return from Egypt and His family’s settlement in Nazareth. The second major portion of the book follows His ministry in His works and words. The first narrative, found in chapters three and four, cover the ministry of John the Baptist, our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness, and the call of the first disciples. The first discourse follows that in the Sermon on the Mount found in chapters five through seven.

In the second narrative--chapters eight and nine--we read of several instances of Jesus healing, the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Matthew’s call to follow the Lord, and three instances of deliverance from demonic possession. The second discourse follows in chapter ten with the Lord’s commissioning of the disciples and His instructions to them.

The third narrative, found in chapters eleven and twelve, tells of Jesus’ testimony to John the Baptist, Jesus’ lordship over the Sabbath in His defense of His disciples “harvesting” grain and His healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, His defense of His healings, and His refusal to give no

sign except that of Jonah when the Pharisees demanded that He authenticate His authority with a sign.

The third discourse includes seven parables about the Kingdom of God including the parables of the sower, the wheat and the tares, the grain of mustard seed, leaven, buried treasure, the pearl of great price, and the net that caught both good and bad fish.

The fourth narrative block found in chapters thirteen through seventeen include Jesus' rejection in Nazareth, the death of John the Baptist; the feeding of the five thousand; Jesus' and Peter's walking on the water; the deliverance of the daughter of the Syrophenician woman from her demon possession; the feeding of the four thousand; Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah; Jesus' first mention of His impending suffering, death, and resurrection; the Lord's transfiguration; a second mention of his death and resurrection; and the paying of the Temple tax. The fourth discourse follows in chapter eighteen concerning humility and forgiveness with the parable of the two debtors.

The fifth narrative--from chapters nineteen through 22--includes Jesus' answer to the question about divorce and marriage, Jesus blessing the children, the encounter with the rich young ruler, a third prediction of His death and resurrection, the healing of two blind men near Jericho, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the events that followed, parables about the wicked tenants and the royal wedding feast, and Jesus' answers to various questions posed by the Pharisees including paying taxes to Caesar, the resurrection, the greatest commandment, and the Messiah's relationship to David.

This is followed by the fifth and final discourse in chapters 23 through 25 where the Lord pronounces woes against the Pharisees and answers the disciples' question about the destruction of Jerusalem leading up to His own, glorious return and the judgment to follow.

The last section of Matthew's gospel records the events surrounding the Lord's death and resurrection, beginning in chapter 26 with another

declaration of His impending death, Jesus' anointing in Bethany, and Judas' agreement to betray Him. This is followed by the Lord's Supper, Jesus' praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, His arrest and trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, Peter's denial of Jesus, and Judas' suicide. In the closing section of chapter 27, Matthew tells us about Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. He then concludes his record of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus with his account of the resurrection and the Lord's announcement of the Great Commission in chapter 28: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And we'll take a closer look at each of these events and teachings in the fourteen weeks ahead. So, as we prepare to delve into the Gospel of Matthew, studying it chapter-by-chapter, let me encourage you to read through the entire gospel this week in preparation for our study that will officially begin next week.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!