

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

QUESTION: Why even bother learning the Gospel of Matthew?

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mt 24:35).

As opposed to the legion of voices and opinions in today’s world, the Words of God stand alone as supremely timeless, wise, applicable to every circumstance, and coming to us from a vantage point of Truth, eternal goodness, stability and love.

The words of God contain spiritual power for life. They are able to heal us, protect us, strengthen us, sanctify us and guide us in any and all activities of our lives (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). They teach us who God is, and who we are; what God is capable of doing, and what we are capable of doing; what God has done for us, and what we must do for God.

Through God’s words in the Holy Scriptures we commune with God’s thoughts and His presence, which allow us to discern the good and bad, the true and false, the noble and the dishonorable, in our own thinking and living, and that of today’s world. In short, the words of Christ are living and active, and “sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12).

God’s revelation is Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The inspired writings of the New Testament are the record of this revelation in the life of the Church. We need, therefore, both an inspired personal relationship with Christ, and an intimate knowledge of His life and teachings from the Scriptures. The two must go together. Indeed, St Jerome said, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” **Holy Scripture is the guidebook; Christ Himself is the Guide.** Therefore, we need to master the books that contain the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the first of which found in the New Testament being the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

QUESTION: Who wrote this Gospel?

The Evangelist Matthew was one of the Twelve Apostles. He refers to himself as Matthew the publican (Mt 9:9; 10:3) though Mark (Mk 2:14) and Luke (Lk 5:27) also call him Levi. Every manuscript copy of this Gospel attributes it to Matthew in the title. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (+130), records, as quoted by Eusebius of Caesaria, that Matthew collected the *Logia* (*Sayings*) of Jesus in Hebrew (Aramaic).¹ Is it improbable that Matthew, the records-keeper at a tax office, kept a record of the sayings of Jesus, later compiled into his Gospel account? Since Matthew read Mark’s Gospel, which dates between A.D. 50 to 60, then Matthew’s book may be between 60 and 80. He frequently cites the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant’s expectation of the Messiah, but He is also presented as the Savior of the whole world.

¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16.

The Organization of the Gospel of Matthew (HANDOUT)

<h1 style="margin: 0;">The Gospel of Matthew</h1>																
Focus	Preparation						Proclamation									
Divisions	Arrival of Messiah	Teaching of Messiah	Healing of Messiah	Reaction to Messiah	Sermons of Messiah	Parables of Messiah	Prophecies of Messiah	Finished Work of Messiah								
	1	4	5	7	8	11	12	15	16	19	20	23	24	25	26	28
Topics	Teaching All men						Teaching 12 Men									
	Increasing Acceptance						Increasing Antagonism									
Place	Bethlehem / Nazareth			Galilee			Jerusalem									
Time	4 B.C. - A.D. 33															
Author	The Apostle Matthew															

A Comparison of Matthew to the other Gospels

- SEE HANDOUT TBD

Video Presentation

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/matthew/>

LESSON 2 THE BIRTH AND IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST (Matthew 1 and 2)

Summary of Lesson Teaching:

Who is Jesus Christ? Matthew chapters 1 and 2 describe the **identity** of Christ with **three important narratives: The genealogy, the Virgin Birth, and the adoration of the Magi.**

- **From the Genealogy** we learn Christ is a true human being, the fulfillment of expectation, and yet took upon Himself the good and the bad of humanity. Likewise for us, it doesn't matter what our background is, if we wish to serve Christ.
- **From the Virgin Birth** we learn that Christ is the New Adam; God become man, not God dwelling in a man, IMMANUEL ("God with us"), and our SAVIOR.
- **From the Adoration** we learn that Christ is our King, Priest, and Sacrifice.

Leading Questions:

What are the biggest problems facing the world – and us – today?

- [Let the students answer]
- The answers boil down to two things: bad behavior (sin) and death.

But who can overcome sin and death?

- Mankind needed a **new beginning**.
- We need a **SAVIOR**, who understands the human condition of sin and death, as a human being; and at the same time has the power and authority to heal us, as God.

For this reason, Matthew begins his Gospel by telling us about a new beginning, a new "Genesis." The words, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham," can literally be translated: "The Book of Genesis of Jesus Christ." In other words, a new beginning has been given to all human beings and the world in Jesus Christ.

Notes on Teaching Points:

[1] The Genealogy (1:1-17) tells us that Jesus is truly a human being.

Jesus is like us – there is good and not so good in everyone's family.

- He has a noble, godly ancestry, being a descendent of both Abraham and David, the most faithful servants of God in the Old Testament.
- **Abraham** "believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness" – having left home at age 80 to serve God, and not holding anything back, even his only-begotten son, Isaac (Gen 22:2). Therefore God blessed him, saying: "I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven... and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 26:4)
- **David** was godly and merciful, "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14), and, though having committed grave sins, was a model of righteousness, mercy, faithfulness, and later, great repentance. God vowed to David: "I will set up your seed after you... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:13-14).

- Note that Jesus is the “seed” that fulfills these covenants, the hope that God would send a Deliverer to restore a joyous and complete communion with God for all peoples.

But the Gospel of Matthew “pulls no punches”: It goes out of its way to tell us that Jesus also came from broken families, from sinners, and embarrassing situations. For example:

- Rahab was a prostitute (Josh 2, 6); Tamar committed incest (Gen 38); Ruth was a Gentile (Ruth 1:4); Bathsheba committed adultery (2 Sam 11).

QUESTION: What does the Genealogy teach us? [That Jesus is like all of us. He assumed the good and the bad. It does not matter what our ancestry is, if we wish to serve God]

[2] The Virgin Birth (1:18-25 [Read]) teaches us that He was born in a miraculous manner, of the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20), from Mary, a virgin (1:23).

The fact that Jesus is born by the power of the Holy Spirit is again reminiscent of Genesis 1, where the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed the formless void and the waters; here He overshadows the Virgin Mary.

The Virgin Birth was a miracle, not found in nature. That is why the Righteous Joseph – before the revelation of the angel – thought to “put her away quietly” (being a kind man, he did not want to embarrass her). Such a birth was supernatural and unprecedented.²

QUESTION: Why is the Virgin Birth important? The fact that Jesus is born of a Virgin – without a human father, as a New Adam³ – indicates to us that He is **God become man, not God dwelling in a man**. He is that unique individual who is both human (and so He understands us, as a human being) and divine (and so He can heal us, for He is the Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity).

For this reason, as Matthew tells us, He is called **IMMANUEL – GOD WITH US (1:23). Jesus Christ is God with us!**

Further, **the name “Jesus” itself means “Savior.”** Hence the angel commanded Joseph: “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (1:28).

[3] The Adoration of the Magi (2:1-12) reveals that the Son of God came to be king, priest, and sacrifice.

² A note on 1:25: The word “until” does not mean that an action did take place subsequently. For example, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool’” (Ps 110:1) does not mean that His enemies would cease being a footstool.

³ Only Adam and Jesus are without a human father, and uniquely “son of God.” The fact that Jesus is born of a Virgin means that mankind has been given a new beginning, outside of the cycle of pleasure, pain, and death, and based wholly on righteous self-offering to God.

The Magi were a class of Persian nobles who were known for their mastery of mathematics, science, diplomacy and... astrology. They were well respected throughout the civilized world. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were given an immediate audience with King Herod. They are seeking a newborn King, which makes everyone nervous.

Some believe they saw an inexplicable star, and may have learned the prophecy of the Christ either from the prophet Daniel, or from their fellow former Magus, Balaam, "A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num 24:17).

St John Chrysostom says that this was not a common star, because not all could see it; further, it disappeared for a time in Jerusalem, then reappeared and guided the Magi to the Christ Child. **They saw the star, because they sought God in their hearts; and so He guided them to Christ.**⁴

Pope St Gregory the Great tells us that the gifts of the Magi point to the identity of Christ: **gold, because He is King; frankincense, because He is priest; and myrrh, used to anoint the dead, because He will die, as a sacrifice.**⁵

QUESTION: What does the Star teach us? The Magi were not even Hebrews, members of the Old Testament people, and yet God sent them the star. Indeed, **it doesn't matter who you are – if anyone wishes to find Christ, God will send them a guiding star.**

CONCLUSION: KEY POINTS RE-INTERATED

Who is Jesus?

From the Genealogy we learn Christ is a true human being, the fulfillment of expectation, and yet took upon Himself the good and the bad of humanity. Likewise for us, it doesn't matter what our background is, if we wish to serve Christ.

From the Virgin Birth we learn that Christ is the New Adam; God become man, not God dwelling in a man, IMMANUEL ("God with us"), and our SAVIOR.

From the Adoration we learn that Christ is our King, Priest, and Sacrifice.

⁴ Nicetas Stethatos.

⁵ Homily 8; Homily 10 (PL 76:1110).

Lesson 3: The Baptism of Christ (Mt 3)

Summary of Lesson Teaching

The Baptism of the Lord is the basis of our own baptism. In baptism we see His death and resurrection pre-figured, the sanctification of mankind through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and conquering of the evil powers who enslaved mankind.

Leading Questions:

Why is baptism so important? If it is so powerful, and gives us so many good things, then why do so many of our friends who have been baptized do not seem to even care?

We say in the Creed, "I believe in one baptism, for the remission of sins." Why then was Jesus baptized by John the Baptist, if Jesus was sinless? What does Baptism accomplish for us as Christians?

Notes on Teaching Points

St John the Baptist, Prophet and Forerunner

John is both the last of the Old Testament prophets and "forerunner," or first preacher, of Christ. As such, he is the link between the Old and New Testaments. He is depicted with angelic wings in his icon because his mission is an angelic, as one who announces good tidings.

- According to tradition, St. John and his mother Elizabeth fled to the desert after the murder of his father Zechariah⁶ (Mt. 23:35) and there he was raised and taught by angels.
- "Angel" means "messenger". The ministry of Prophets was angelic in this sense. According to Jer. 23:18-22 a true prophet is one who has stood in the presence of the divine council of God and is sent to declare God's message to His people.
- The prophecy applied to St. John in v. 3 points to his angelic mission as Jesus' messenger who proclaims His coming (cf. Is. 40:3-31). St. John calls Israel to prepare for the return of Yahweh among them by repentance and baptism in the Jordan which signifies that repentance.
- St John was baptizing in the Jordan River, the place at which the Israelites had crossed over from their old life in Egypt to the new life in the promised land.
- John's message of deliverance is for everyone. For entrance into the promised Kingdom of Heaven, one needs not Abrahamic lineage, but a repentant heart and the fruit thereof (vv. 8-10). Note the iconography of the tree with the axe: one must bear not simply repent but also bring forth good fruit – that is, a life of virtue and righteousness, which manifests that Kingdom of Heaven.⁷

⁶ *Protoevangelium of James*, cc. 23-24.

⁷ "So do you want the kingdom of heaven to also be near you? Prepare these ways in your heart, in your senses and in your soul. Pave within you the way of chastity, the way of faith, and the way of holiness. Build roads of justice. Remove every scandal of offense from your heart...And then, indeed through the thoughts of

Question: As a prophet-angel, did St. John tell people what they wanted to hear?

St John is also considered angelic because of his virtuous and ascetic⁸ life, scorning the body and living only for the spirit:

- He lives in the desert of Judea.
- He wears the same clothes as Elijah: a rough camel hair robe with a belt.
- He eats “locusts” (meaning unknown) and wild honey.

He is an “angel in the flesh” with no need of bodily comfort, nor of approval in the court of public opinion.

The Gospel tells us that multitudes came to him from all over to confess their sins and be baptized. John was charismatic, tough, and yet compassionate. Therefore, the people trusted him. They came to him to confess their sins and to repent; That is, to leave their sinful behavior and start a new life of righteousness, free of a bad conscience.

Historical Note: The Jewish priest-historian **Flavius Josephus** (A.D. 37-c.100) describes John the Baptist as a “good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God. For only thus, in John's opinion, would the baptism he administered be acceptable to God... Now many people came in crowds to him, for they were greatly moved by his words.”⁹

The Baptism of Christ

Jesus did not confess any sins, for He had none to confess. John is even reticent to baptize Him because of this. But Jesus insisted, to “fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). What does this mean? Why was Jesus baptized?

We find an answer when we pay attention to what happened to Jesus (Mt 3:16-17):

- “The heavens were opened to Him” – that is, the presence of God was made accessible.
- The Spirit of God descended and alighted upon Him – that is, the Holy Spirit rested and remained with Him, as a human being, permanently.
- A voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” – that is, Jesus is confirmed to have an familial relationship with God, as a Son to a Father.

All of this confirms Jesus’ “righteousness” as a human being. Importantly, it also forges a path for every Christian.

your heart and the very movements of your soul, Christ the King will enter along certain paths” (St. Chromatius of Aquileia, *Tracts on Matthew*).

⁸ “Ascetic” means self-disciplined; it can refer to austerity (avoiding luxury or comfort) or even athletic training (being very strict and regimented); in short, the avoidance of anything that distracts the mind, or makes a person negligent or lazy.

⁹ *Jewish Antiquities* (18.109-119). Josephus further tells us that Herod had John executed, because he was afraid of his influence over people. When Herod’s army was destroyed by King Aretus of Syria, the Jews saw this as a punishment for his unjust execution of John.

Because Jesus Christ was baptized, we can be baptized.

Baptism is for sinners, and by being baptized, our sinless Lord identified Himself with us; His baptism teaches that He took upon Himself not the sin, but the consequences of our sin.

Therefore, all that happened to Christ will also happen to us, making us “Christians”:

- The heavens open to us: God hears our prayers, is close to us, embraces us.
- The Holy Spirit abides in us permanently: No matter what, He will reside in our innermost soul, such that we become “temples” of God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).
- We become children of God, adopted sons and daughters (Rom 8:15; Gal. 4:5).
- We are empowered and commissioned to fight evil.

St Cyril of Jerusalem (+386): “Jesus sanctified Baptism by being Himself baptized. If the Son of God was baptized, what godly man is he that despises Baptism? But He was baptized not that He might receive remission of sins, for He was sinless; but being sinless, He was baptized, that He might give to them that are baptized a divine and excellent grace... that we might receive both salvation and honor.”¹⁰

St Athanasius the Great (+373): “If then for our sake He sanctifies Himself, and does this when He has become man, it is very plain that the Spirit's descent on Him in Jordan was a descent upon us, because of His bearing our body. And it did not take place for the benefit of the Word, but for our sanctification, that we might share His anointing, and of us it might be said, ‘Do you not know that you are God's Temple, and the Spirit of God dwells in you (1 Cor 3:16)?’ For when the Lord, as man, was washed in Jordan, it was we who were washed in Him and by Him. And when He received the Spirit, it was we who by Him were made recipients of it.”¹¹

The Fathers of the Orthodox Church further see the Baptism of Christ as:

- A New Genesis, with God's voice, His Word, the Holy Spirit and the water present, as in Genesis chapter one, thereby sanctifying all creation anew; and
- A “Theophany” (“Revelation of God”) since we have all the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity revealed: the voice of God the Father, the presence of the God the Son incarnate, and the descent of God the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus' baptism foreshadows His death and descent into Hades, His victory over the evil spirits and the devil and His triumphant Resurrection. Therefore the icon of His baptism often depicts beasts or the “bound strong man” (cf. Mt 12:29) in the water, representing demonic forces.¹²

¹⁰ Catechetical Lecture III.11.

¹¹ Discourse Against the Arians I.12.47.

¹² Again, St Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture III.11: “According to Job, there was in the waters the dragon that draws up Jordan into his mouth (Job 40:18). Since, therefore, it was necessary to break the heads of the dragon in pieces, He went down and bound the strong one in the waters, that we might receive power to tread upon serpents and scorpions (Lk 10:19).... The Life encountered him, that the mouth of Death might

Concluding Points:

The Baptism of Christ is foundation of our Baptism; what Jesus experienced as a man, paves the way for each of us who is baptized into Christ.

- In our baptism:
 - We are given a new birth in the Spirit; our nature is renewed and we become adopted children of God (Rom 8:15).
 - We participate in the death, resurrection, and sanctification of Christ (Rom 6:3).
 - We “put on Christ” becoming Christians (Gal 3:27).
 - The Holy Spirit abides in us permanently.
- However, Baptism is a gift. Like any gift, we are free to utilize it, or ignore it.
 - The divine power requires our freely willed appropriation.
 - If one is given a tool, one must learn about it and use it to build things.
 - A tool sitting around unused is forgotten.
 - We must knock at the door of our heart (Mt 7:7); for the Kingdom of Heaven is within us (Lk 17:21).
- However, we never lose the grace of baptism, as sinful as we may become (e.g., St Mary of Egypt said, “I am guarded with the grace of baptism”).

henceforth be stopped, and all we that are saved might say, ‘O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?’ (1 Cor 15:55). The sting of death is drained by Baptism.”

Lesson 4: The Temptation of Christ (Mt 4:1-11)

Summary of Lesson Teaching

After His incredible grace-filled Baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit to be tempted. The temptations which befell Jesus reflect those that afflict all of us, in one form or another: fame, wealth, power. Jesus' victory over temptation reverses Adam's failure and the devil's consequent domination of mankind. We likewise are shown how we may triumph over sin and the devil when we face temptation.

Leading Questions:

What is temptation? Does it come to us as something evil, or something good?

If we desire to follow Christ, why are we still tempted?

Do our failures mean that we cannot change, or be victorious over sin?

Is Satan real?

Notes on Teaching Points

It is significant that the incidents of Jesus' baptism and temptation are placed side by side, for such is emblematic of the Christian life. Sometimes hard times follow the good. There is a lesson in this: After the reception of God's grace and good things, we will be called to use these gifts. After our baptism into Christ and reception of the Holy Spirit in chrismation we can expect to struggle with the enemy and be tempted. Such will require our effort and determination, but will also show us that, with God's help, we can be victorious.

How Should We Understand "Temptation"?

- Temptations often begin as a simple thought. Then we decide to think about the thought and "engage" it. The heart allows the thought – and this is the first step of sin, of succumbing to temptation. Then we act on it; if we act repeatedly it becomes an uncontrollable habit, a sinful passion. We will discuss this process more during the Sermon on the Mount.
- Temptation often presents good things in the wrong context. What makes us want a good thing in the wrong context is often our own pride, egotism or selfish gratification. In such a scenario, a good thing can lead to sin, instead of being as God intended it, as a blessing to bring us joy and help us serve God and obey His commandments. A good thing in the wrong context can be sinful and destructive.
 - The most simple example is bread. Bread is good – it is our basic human food. But in the midst of Christ's fast, bread was not a good, but a source of temptation.
 - Adam and Eve were tempted to be gods. But to be such was God's plan for them in the first place, to be like Him. When they chose to pursue this goal egotistically, aside from a communion with God, it brought about their separation from God instead.
 - Take sexual relations as another example: Such are good and a blessing within marriage, but can be hurtful and destructive outside of marriage.

- Within marriage, they nurture the exclusive bond between husband and wife, express and confirm faithfulness, self-giving, love, and life, and occasion the miracle of new life, the children of the couple.
 - But outside of marriage, such relations can be profoundly hurtful and damaging, lead to profound feelings of guilt, betrayal, and brokenness.
- Temptation is often about context instead of the thing itself. Just as like fire: It is good in a hearth, where it gives light, warmth, ability to cook food, etc. But outside of the hearth it is destructive and can burn down a house, and even an entire neighborhood.
- Evil can pass itself off as good. The devil himself can appear as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).
- The devil quotes the Holy Scripture! Yet does so out of context, misinterpreted, etc.
 - For this reason, the Orthodox Church only interprets the Holy Scripture in light of the consensus of the Fathers and Saints. Interpretation is never a matter of personal opinion.

The Temptation of Christ

If God permitted and allowed His Son to be tempted, what does that indicate about how we should think about temptations we face?

The very fact that Jesus was tempted teaches us that the experience of being tempted is not of itself evil or sinful.

- In fact, whereas the devil shows us good things in an evil context (the temptation), God can take the evil of temptation and make it into something good: our training and strengthening in mind and heart to serve God.
 - Conquering temptation is a means for spiritual growth.
 - We learn that God will never abandon us (1 Cor 10:13).
 - Pope St. Gregory the Great teaches that God takes what the devil intends for evil and our undoing as a means whereby He trains and strengthens us.¹³
- We learn who we are and the power of baptismal grace inside of us when we struggle against temptation.

Jesus was tempted with three things:

- [i] To break His fast by making stones into bread.
 - This temptation is about choosing that which is physically satisfying in the moment, rather than what is God-pleasing.
 - It is ultimately to live for the flesh and not the spirit.
- [ii] To demonstrate His power by throwing Himself down from the Temple.
 - To “tempt God” is to do what is inherently foolish, and expect God to protect you.
 - It is also to act with bravado instead of humility, seeking to achieve notoriety and fame.
- [iii] To accept political power by worshipping the devil

¹³ “Not just the good serve God by the help they give us, but the wicked also serve him by the trials they inflict on us...The will of the elect spirits harmonizes with the divine mercy, and the minds of the fallen ones, when they serve their own evil ends, obey the judgment of God’s stern decrees” (*Moralia in Job*, 2:38).

- This is a willingness to accept evil for the purpose of power and control over others.
- It is ultimately an egotistical ambition: To strive for power, authority or any kind of success without obedience to God and His righteousness.

Jesus was victorious over temptation.

- Jesus cites Scripture in the correct context.
- Jesus places God first in all things.
- Jesus does not think about Himself, but about God's righteousness.

In being victorious, Jesus undoes and reverses Adam's fall, and re-establishes the freedom of human nature from demonic influence.

Since Jesus has Himself known what it is to be tempted as a man, He is able to help us in our temptations (Heb. 2:17-18). Jesus gives us the pattern whereby we may triumph in our own temptations:

- Being anointed with the Spirit.
- Struggling with ascetical discipline.
- Knowing the Scriptures and their proper meaning and interpretation.
- Always putting God and His righteousness first in every circumstance of life.