

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 5, 2017

[Matthew 23:1-12](#) & [1st Thessalonians 2:9-13](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 23:1-12 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Humble Pie(ty)” – November 5, 2017)

The parable of the two sons (21:28-32), the parable of the vineyard and the tenants (21:33-44) and the parable of the marriage feast (22:1-14) incriminate those who hold positions of religious authority because they fail to recognize the hand of God at work through Jesus. These parables provide fictional portraits of what the reader will witness in the following exchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders. The Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and scribes will challenge Jesus with impossible questions, questions designed "to entrap him in what he said" (22:15) because they understand that these parables condemn them (21:45-46). After baffling and shaming his opponents, Jesus pronounces a series of woes to these leaders for hindering others from entering the kingdom of heaven (vv. 13-36). In the midst of these exchanges, Jesus turns to the crowds and to the disciples and makes a surprising statement: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (vv. 2-3). What does it mean to practice "whatever they teach you"? Jesus will accuse them of being "blind guides" (v. 16) and "hypocrites" (vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29) who place heavy burdens upon the people (23:4). Are the crowds to follow them? This passage, though seemingly less critical of the position of the religious leaders, further substantiates their hypocrisy and echoes Jesus' teaching on the humble service indicative of God's kingdom.

Jesus' advice in verses 1-12 is addressed to the crowds and disciples. Perhaps this is the same audience that has witnessed the question-and-answer sessions and that has been amazed by Jesus' responses regarding paying taxes to Caesar and marrying in light of the resurrection (22:22, 33). The previous dialogue has taken place between Jesus and the religious leaders, and the woes that follow will also involve these same parties. The passage is a break in the dialogue and serves as recognition that the crowds and disciples are susceptible to being swayed by the authority of these religious teachers.

Because of the vulnerability of the people, Jesus' words highlight again the deceptive power and manipulation of his opponents. In fact, the question of power subtly weaves throughout this passage. The Pharisees and scribes are threatened by the power of the people, while the people are amazed at the power of Jesus to escape the verbal traps of the leaders. Likewise, Jesus' power is demonstrated through the plots of the authorities to hinder his ministry, through his popularity with the crowds and through his pronouncement of judgment upon the Jewish leaders. Jesus recognizes the power of those who sit on "Moses' seat" (v. 2), but this seat pales in comparison with the power of Jesus' own seat at the right hand of the Lord (22:41-46).

The "seat of Moses" is a vague reference, but one which surely connotes authority. It has been suggested that this seat is a literal seat since some synagogues, built centuries after Matthew's gospel was written, contain stone seats in a prominent position. Perhaps this stone seat is the referent in verse 6: "They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues." The archaeological evidence for this seat is late, however. From a literary standpoint, the seat could metaphorically refer to authority, as it does in the immediately preceding passage with reference to the son of David seated at the right hand of the Lord (22:41-46). Whatever the case, Jesus' words acknowledge a special link between the occupation of these leaders and the treasured law handed down by Moses.

Although Jesus shows respect for their connection to God's law, the portrait that Jesus paints of the scribes and Pharisees is a grave one. They know the law, but fail to live it. They possess knowledge, but fail to be transformed by it. They have access to the kingdom of heaven, but shut its gates. In this condemnation of the leaders' actions, the author of Matthew tends to lump all religious authorities together and to present them all as charlatans. No new information is given in this passage since all these accusations have surfaced at some point in Matthew's gospel and especially within the passage's context. Yet, here Jesus is positioning the people as victims. The leaders to whom they have looked for leadership have not only failed to show them who God truly is, but have cut them off from God's kingdom (v. 13). Furthermore, they did this with the rightful authority granted to those who sit on the "seat of Moses." Those who hold such a position have the authority to teach what the law requires, and so should have an audience.

The fact that they possess knowledge of the law of Moses is obvious in the trickery of their questions (e.g., 22:15-33) and is broadcast by their appearance. They wear phylacteries containing Scripture and long fringes or tassels as a tangible reminder of God's commandments, yet Jesus mocks the irony of their appearance. These physical reminders of God's Word were intended to spark more than awareness of the commandments, but also application. Numbers 15:39-40 explains the reason for wearing the fringe: "You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God." The fringe then becomes a sign of their condemnation. They are acting according to the desires of their hearts for their own honor. They revel in telling others what to do (v. 4), while they themselves long for the pleasure of honorable seats at banquets and prominent places in the synagogues. They enjoy the status bestowed on them when those of inferior social status acknowledge them as "rabbi" and shout out such an honored title in the public eye of the marketplace.

These leaders have all the appearance of piety, but none of the action. They are like the son who says that he will obey his father and then fails to do so (21:28-32), the invited guests who mistreat the messengers (22:6), or the tenants who have been entrusted with the care of the vineyard but kill the owner's son (21:33-44). They have a special privilege by their very position as those who sit on Moses' seat, but they have used their position to lock people out of the kingdom (23:13), to misguide (v. 16), to feed their self-interests (vv. 25-26) and to kill God's messengers (vv. 29-36).

Instead of following the example set by the religious teachers, Jesus urges the crowds and disciples to understand that the kingdom is marked by humility. Those who would enter need not rely on their own self-righteousness or false piety. Those who would follow Jesus must answer to one Father, and not revel in any honor due to their familial heritage (v. 9). Those who follow the Son must recognize only one Master, the Christ (v. 10). It is not possible both to be self-serving and to practice God's commandments. This kingdom, as Matthew reminds his readers again and again, is one of reversal: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 12).

Commentary on 1st Thess. 2:9-13 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Fat Tire Fathers" – 10/30/2005)

Most scholars agree that 1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest letter. Composed around A.D. 50, the letter evidences many of the characteristics that made Paul a powerful and persuasive preacher and advocate for the Christian faith. In the letter as a whole, including 2:9-13, he adopts elements of the classic Greek form of paraenesis, or moral exhortation, and weaves them into one of his most pastoral letters. He manages to hold himself and his comrades up as examples for the church to emulate and at the same time proclaims his love for the Christians of Thessalonica.

In chapters 1-3 Paul describes and emphasizes the relationship between himself and his readers in Thessalonica as a basis for his instructions to them in chapters 4-5. This is a typical paraenetic pattern — holding up an example and describing it in detail in order to list characteristics that the reader is to emulate — and it is not unusual for the writer to use himself as the example to follow, just as Paul does here. However, while the goal of the classic philosophical argument is to guide the reader into the "good" life, Paul gently moves his readers into the way that is appropriate to God (v. 12).

Following 2:1-8 in which he repeatedly points to the purpose of his visit to Thessalonica — to "declare" (v. 2), be "entrusted with" (v. 4), and to "share" (v. 8) the gospel of God — Paul calls on the Thessalonians to "remember" (μνημονεύετε) his labor while he was with them. He labored and toiled so that he might not burden any of them while he was proclaiming the gospel (v. 9). He did this in spite of the fact that he had every right to make demands on them as an apostle of Christ (v. 7). Paul's point is striking, since manual labor was held in disdain especially by members of the upper classes in Thessalonica and elsewhere. Paul gave up his rights for the sake of his message, and following the paraenetic style of the time, he now points to that example. He will later implore his readers to emulate him and find work with their hands (4:10-11).

Paul not only points to his company's self-sufficiency as a virtue, but he adds that he and his comrades were "pure, upright," and blameless" (v. 10), during their tenure in Thessalonica. He calls upon his readers and upon God to be witnesses to that behavior. In classic Greek moral argument the virtues of the good person are to be emulated as the way to a "good" life. Paul takes this traditional rhetorical structure of his time and turns it to point toward the God whose gospel he proclaims (v. 10). Whatever example Paul provides is not for the "good" life in and of itself, but is a guide to "a life worthy of God ..." (v. 12).

He uses the powerful metaphor of a father with his children (v. 11) to further describe his relationship with his readers. The series of participles that he uses to describe his gentle instruction — "urging," "encouraging" and "pleading" — evoke images of a patient and loving parent guiding his children away from harm and toward a good and healthy way. Paul's use of family/parental imagery here is typical (see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; 4:15; Galatians 4:19; Philemon 10). He repeatedly refers to the Thessalonians as "brothers and sisters" (1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 6, 9, 13; 5:1, 12, 26). In using such imagery Paul binds his readers into a spiritual family that replaces the closeness of their biological families that may be lost as they embrace their new faith.

Paul guides his listeners toward a goal: to "lead" a life "worthy" of God. The Greek περιπατεῖν can also be translated "walk." The LXX uses the term to translate the Hebrew word *halak*, denoting a commitment or persistence in adhering to a particular direction or set of requirements (see, e.g., Isaiah 38:3; Jeremiah 9:13; Proverbs 28:6). In particular, Paul is here, calling on the Thessalonians to live or walk in a way that will be worthy or appropriate to the God who is calling. God is not calling them into uncertainty or nothingness; instead God is calling into the kingdom and into glory (v. 12). Thus the end of the walk is already known if the Thessalonians continue on the true path. The end is in the future and cannot yet be seen clearly, but it is certain as a promise from God (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:50-57).

The first thanksgiving of the letter appears in 1:2 in a place normal for the classical letter form. But a second, unusual thanksgiving appears here in 2:13. Letter writers of Paul's time, including Paul himself, used relatively stringent forms to compose their epistles, and the appearance of a second thanksgiving at this point is highly unusual. Based on this seeming break in form, some commentators have proposed that a fragment of a second, non-Pauline letter has been inserted here by an early editor of Paul's letters. They add, as proof of an inserted fragment, that Paul's caustic treatment of the Jews in verses 13-16 does not match his somewhat softer treatment of them elsewhere (see Romans 11). However such a form critical explanation is not necessary to account for this seeming break.

The first thanksgiving of 1:2 is a general epistolary form, giving thanks for the Thessalonians. The effect and purpose of the second thanksgiving in verse 13 is to restate Paul's thanks in a narrower focus, limited to the action of the Thessalonians in accepting the gospel as God's word and not as a human word. Just as Paul emphasized his mission as declaring and sharing the "gospel of God" (vv. 1-8), so now his joy is based on the Thessalonians' acceptance and ratification that the word is indeed from God and not from human messengers.

The basis that Paul establishes in his description of his visit to Thessalonica in chapters 1-3 will be continued and used as the grounds for his moral and eschatological arguments in chapters 4-5. Paul, who would not rely on the Thessalonians for support while he was among them, can now call upon them not to wrong or exploit a brother or a sister (4:6). The "pure, upright, and blameless" behavior of Paul and his companions is the basis for his call to holiness for the church (4:7). And the God who is calling the Thessalonians into the kingdom and glory is the God who calls them to holiness rather than impurity (4:7) and the same God who will be faithful to the ones called (5:24).

Additional Resources

- ["The Text this Week"](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at ["Hitchhiking the Word"](#), a blog on the lectionary texts from the Episcopal tradition. Good thoughts esp. this week re: the text from Thessalonians text.

Reflection Questions on Matthew 23:1-12:

1. In a world today that is replete with public scandals and controversy surrounding leaders in everything from politics, entertainment, not to mention the church, what might this text have to say about our modern culture of leadership and/or celebrity? Are the words Jesus offers here simply cautionary, or is there good news to be found in them?
2. Jesus talks in this text about the “burdens” that are hard to bear (v. 4) that have been placed on the people by their religious leaders. What heavy burdens does religion lay on people today? How are our religious leaders culpable?
3. Most of us would agree that leaders, whether in church or in society, deserve a healthy respect. But what about bad leaders? Jesus begins these words by granting that his hearers should “do whatever they [the scribes and Pharisees] teach you, and follow it”, because of their positions of authority (v. 1-3). Yet he then turns around and immediately discredits their examples. What then is the place of contentious disobedience? Is there a time when an authority or a leader should NOT be granted respect.
4. Jesus ends this passage with promises of exaltation for those who “humble themselves” (v 12.) Is this a word for everyone, or just leaders? What is the relationship between a healthy self-esteem and humility?

Reflection Questions on 1st Thessalonians 2:9-13:

1. What do you make of Paul’s self-referential words and lifting himself up as an example to be followed in light of the gospel text from Matthew today? Is the difference simply that Paul is a good leader, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (remember Paul was previously a Pharisee himself!)? And while Jesus advocating no one to be called “Father” on earth, here is Paul in this passage clearly casting himself in that very role in relation to the Thessalonians (v 11-12). Are these two divergent teachings/ways? Or can they be reconciled?
2. What does it mean to “lead a life worthy of God” (v. 12)? What are the markers of such a life? Does it come with obligations or responsibilities beyond the “acceptance” which Paul celebrates in v. 13?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?