

Patterns of Life in the Spirit: St. Matthew's Gospel

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Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew, it has been observed by many, is a veritable handbook of Christian discipleship. This makes it a worthy object of study in this class, and offers an indication of the method we should follow.

Most surveys of a Gospel begin with a summary of the historical critical investigations of the text, its original audience, its date of authorship, and its author. It is also customary to compare the particular Gospel's theological outlook with those of the others. Neither time nor our particular interest permit us to do this in any depth here. And such an introduction is not really necessary.

The Gospel of Matthew was, judging by the number of manuscripts extant and the widespread use of them, the most popular Gospel presentation in the earliest Church. Although most scholars believe that the Gospel was written fairly well into the first century, perhaps between 80 and 90 AD, and that it followed the writing of Mark's Gospel, the evidence for these beliefs is rather thin. A few scholars have held that the Gospel was written much earlier, certainly before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. And there is renewed interest in the ancient tradition that Matthew was actually written first among the Synoptics (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke). For what it is worth, I am persuaded that the Gospel was written at roughly the same time as St. Paul was writing his letters – some time in the 50s – and was actually penned by the disciple and apostle Matthew.¹

But whatever may be the case with respect to Matthew and its relationships with the other Gospels, or its time of writing, it is surely the case that for a generation (and perhaps two or three), this was the only presentation of the life and teaching of Jesus which many Christians would know or have access to. It shaped these Christians in their understanding of and living out the Christian life. So the precise time of its writing, or the identity of its author, or the relationships it may or may not have had among the Gospels altogether turns out to be irrelevant.

What we want to know is how Matthew understood and communicated the Christian Faith in Jesus. In this connection we will ask three questions of the text:

1. What is the *goal* of life in Christ?
2. What is the *basis* of life in Christ?
3. What is the *character* of life in Christ?

¹ It may well be that the canonical Gospel, the Gospel as we now have it, is an editing and "perfecting" of Matthew's original, as the ancient testimony of Papias would seem to indicate: see Bauckham, pp. 202 ff.

History? Or Historicizing?

Before we begin to answer these questions, it will be helpful to make two observations about the Gospel of Matthew from our perspective as Christians who have all the Gospels and a rich history of their study.

First, the question has incessantly arisen since the beginning of critical study whether Matthew is a history, or whether he is historicizing some elements. That is, is he telling us what happened? Or is he in some sense taking events from the past and applying them to his contemporary situation? The point may be best illustrated in his treatment of disciples.

At times, Matthew seems to give a picture of the disciples and Jesus in their own historical setting. For example, at 10.5 Jesus, after calling his first disciples, tells them not to go out among the Gentiles but to restrict their ministry to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But just a few verses along (10.18), he warns them that they will be dragged before “governors and kings” and give testimony to the “Gentiles.” This latter warning seems to reflect a much later time and Matthew seems to be addressing Jesus’ teaching to this later audience. So which is it?

The answer, of course, would be *both*. Matthew is writing under the impact of the resurrection. He is writing, furthermore, to instruct the continuing community of Jesus’ disciples in the character and way of discipleship. Matthew is also writing in the conviction that, as Jesus once said, “my words will never pass away.” (24.35) So, of course, everything that Jesus said to his disciples *then* is valid for his disciples *now*. And Matthew’s object is to make this connection. Matthew takes material (whether from sources or his own remembrance) and presents it with a view simultaneously to the past, the present and the future.

Second, it is helpful at the beginning to notice that Matthew treats disciples differently than the other Gospel writers. For example, in Mark, the disciples regularly fail to understand Jesus’ teaching, especially the parables. In Matthew, understanding is prominent and important and Jesus spends time and energy in teaching them and helping them understand. In 13.51, after giving several parables, Jesus asks the disciples “Do you understand these things?” They reply, “Yes.” Then Jesus says, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old.” In other words, it is not just enough that they understand, but Jesus is making the point that understanding and application of his teaching is critical to their being disciples in the first place. So Matthew is also writing to deepen the understanding – the knowledge and implementation – of Jesus’ teaching for disciples in his day.

For Matthew, clearly, the goal of life in Christ is “the Kingdom.”

It is hard to overestimate the place of the notion of “kingdom” in Matthew’s story of Jesus. He uses the word more than any other NT writer.² He is virtually alone in using the word as a stand alone concept, a

² Mt uses the word 55 times; Lk 46; Mk 20; Jn 5.

fact which is inconceivable among the rabbinic writers.³ He can use it this way in speaking of the “Gospel of the kingdom” (4.23; 9.35; 24.14), or “sons of the kingdom” (8.12; 13.38), or the “word of the kingdom” (13.19). For Matthew it is the motto, so to speak, of Jesus himself.⁴ And the parables identified as “parables of the kingdom” occur ten times in Mt, as compared with two each in Mark and Luke.

Even when, however, the word itself does not occur, the concept is still present. The healings which Jesus brings about and the exorcisms he performs are signs that the kingdom is a present reality – that God is breaking through. (12.28)

But what does this word mean? We will explore some of the implications of and teachings concerning the kingdom later. But it is clear that the kingdom – or perhaps Kingdom (with a capital K) – is the central reality and the encompassing goal for the Christian life in Matthew’s Gospel. We should note at this point that there has in the history of Christian thought been many ways of conceiving and deploying the concept of the kingdom. We cannot go into any detail here. But it may be helpful to our task to consider some of these alternative ways.

Much of the confusion over the “kingdom” comes from the word itself. “Kingdom” seems to suggest a geographical place, or a “realm” or reach over which one exerts rule or authority, or perhaps both. The word can be used in the multivalent way in the Bible itself.

In the ancient and Medieval world, a kingdom referred primarily to the reach of the king’s power itself, rather than to geography primarily. A kingdom in this sense was constituted by the recognition of and compliance with a certain, usually royal, authority. In the modern world, dominated by the notion of the nation-state, a kingdom is thought to be primarily a geographical unit, a stretch of land with borders and a (more or less) coherent government that exerts power over it.

These understandings have had an impact on theological thought. From identifications of the “kingdom” with the Church as over against the world, to the application of the “kingdom” to the social order in general, to the interiorization of the “kingdom” in psychological or experiential schemes, much has been thought and written about the Kingdom of God. Does God exert His rule in realms or in rules? Does the kingdom refer primarily to something yet to come, to life after death, or to the coming of a new social order characterized by justice? Or does the kingdom refer to an inner state of mind?

We want to press beyond these developments to recover, if we can, the sense in which Matthew understands and responds to the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus.

Three passages will help to clarify this sense.

Mt 6.25-34. Here we have Jesus speaking in the middle of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. The subject is anxiety, and precisely anxiety over life itself. “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” he asks. One might expect some prudential wisdom here. But Jesus’ analysis is more far-

³ Jewish writers would use the circumlocution, “kingdom of heaven;” see Luz, in EDNT, 1:201.

⁴ Luz, in EDNT, 1:203

reaching. He refers to God's providence in creation – the birds of the air, the lilies of the field – and how God cares for them all. Then he speaks to his followers with the assurance that they are of more value than these. It is the way of the world to worry about these needs and to try to meet them. But Jesus' counsel is as deep as his analysis: "seek first the kingdom of God," he says, and all these practical matters will be taken care of as well. What he is saying is that the kingdom of God is the primary concern and the consuming end of each human life. It is the thing which frames life, gives it its meaning, and puts everything in perspective.

Mt 13.43. "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." Here the context is the end-time. The saying occurs in the Parable of the Weeds, which has to do with the reality that in this world, the wheat and the weeds, saints and sinners grow together and side by side. In the end, the wheat – the righteous – and the weeds – the unrighteous – will be separated, and the verse above is the conclusion to which Jesus points his disciples. But the vision is arresting: the kingdom is precisely the "kingdom of their Father," underscoring an intimate and direct relationship to God; and the righteous will "shine" in that kingdom, no longer encumbered by anxiety within or threats without. This recalls Jesus' claim that his disciples are the "light of the world" (5.14). And while this reality may be somewhat ambiguous in this life, in the end it will be as bright as the sun. This is the vision of the kingdom as the overarching gift of God, and that inspires and shapes the Christian life.

Mt 28.16-20. This is the famous Great Commission of Jesus given to the disciples on mountain⁵ in Galilee following the resurrection. And here we have the clearest example of a significant passage that does not mention "kingdom" *per se*, but is nevertheless the ultimate expression of the kingdom notion. There are three elements in the passage: the declaration, the command, and the promise. Jesus declares that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This declaration clearly identifies Jesus with God – it is God's authority which Jesus bears here, and which makes the ensuing command the command of God Himself. In virtue of this declaration, therefore, the "kingdom of God" is now also and at the same time the "kingdom of Jesus." We shall have more to say about the command later. But we should know in confirmation of what was just said that the command to baptize in the Name, not only of the Father and the Spirit, but also the Son, has the same effect. The Son is now co-equal – to be identified with – the Father. Finally, the promise, "I will be with you to the close of the age" is a promise of omnipresence – a characteristic of God alone. It is a promise of community, a community that is with and in the Godhead and that transcends all limits of time and space.

In the light of these three passages, we may say the following: the "kingdom" stands for the goal of the Christian life in the sense that, 1) it is the encompassing foundation for how one lives from day to day, 2) provides the emboldening vision of what one is to look for in the age to come, and 3) is rooted in the embracing reality of the triune community that is God Himself.

Obviously, the kingdom stands for a notion that is very large. How do we frame the idea of the kingdom in a manageable concept? It is popular today to use expressions like "the rule of God" or "the reign of

⁵ "Mountains" figure prominently in Matthew, recalling the icon and significance of Moses. (4.8; 5.1; 8.1; 14.23; 15.29; 17.1; 28.16)

God" in place of "the kingdom of God." I think it is more useful to draw help from the Gospel itself, however. And I find "authority" to be more helpful in this regard. It is the word which Jesus himself uses, and the question of authority – specifically, what authority Jesus claims – looms large in the Gospel stories. I believe that if we replace "kingdom" with "authority" in the various parables which Jesus uses to talk about the kingdom, we can more easily make sense of those passages. The word in Greek (ἐξουσία - exousia), furthermore, combines both the sense of "right" and "might" and often refers to God's sovereignty over His whole creation as well as the human sphere. The kingdom therefore refers to living in and under God's authority, power and grace. And since Jesus shares all these with God and in God, the kingdom means also living in and under Jesus' authority.

The basis of life in Christ is conformity with Christ himself – becoming and being "disciples".

We have seen that the notion of the kingdom of God in Matthew is the central theological concept and the robust goal that orients and animates the Christian life. We shall look in this section at how this is so.

Let us go back to where we left off in the previous section – to the closing verses of the Gospel. Here as we noted we have a declaration, a command, and a promise. The command is to "make disciples."

Discipleship, like the notion of the kingdom itself, is a central theological concept in Matthew. He uses the word "disciple" more than any other Synoptic writer.⁶ But the statistics alone do not explain the place of disciples in his Gospel. The Church is made up of disciples, is characterized by discipleship, and is charged to make disciples. And as we noted at the outset, many commentators have claimed that Matthew's Gospel is a veritable handbook on discipleship!

So what is a disciple?

We often associate the word with being a student, a learner. In the ancient world, however, a *mathetes* - a disciple - is more akin to being an apprentice.⁷ At his famous trial, Socrates was charged among other things with making disciples. But he vigorously protested this accusation. He was not interested in making disciples, but in getting people to think. In some ways, for Socrates the notion of a disciple - either having them or making them - was demeaning. It signified dependence and in some sense limitation. Socrates did not want people being dependent upon him; nor did he want to assume any responsibility for the lives of others. This was not, he said, his "mission." Anyone interested in listening to him was welcome. What they did with what they heard was up them.

The matter is clearly different when we come to Matthew's story of Jesus. Jesus *calls* disciples, *instructs* them, *contends* with them, *prays* with them and *expects* great things from them. In fact, a disciple (*mathetes* - μαθητής) in relation to Jesus is far more than a pupil in relation to a teacher. And it is this

⁶ 74 times, as compared with 46 in Mark and 37 in Luke. John uses the word 78 times.

⁷ Kittel, TDNT, IV:416.

relation which is most characteristic of the concept of *mathetes* in general: it is the relationship of imitation (mimeisthai - μιμεισθαί).⁸

I have already suggested that this word is most closely translated by our word apprentice. In the ancient world, an apprentice is one who is entrusted to the care and discipline of a master practitioner. Furthermore, an apprentice in some sense imitates the master by conforming not only to what he directs, but to how he lives. For example, one who wanted to learn to be a potter would be apprenticed to a master potter. The goal of the apprenticeship was not just to communicate certain knowledge to the apprentice, but to shape his whole outlook. He might begin with the very menial task of sifting dirt. And he might do this for months or even years. The idea was to get the apprentice to appreciate the nature of the very basic substances with which he would later work. He would have to be well attuned to see and feel, perhaps even smell and taste, as the master did. The world of the apprentice would have to be transformed and reshaped into the pattern of the master himself.⁹

With all this in mind, then, the command of the risen Lord to his followers to "make disciples" moves from a general sense of mission to one that is more concrete. They are to "go, and make apprentices".

But how are they to do this?

The answer is not far to see. There are two elements in the command to "making apprentices:" the first is baptism; and the second is "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Ironically, Matthew does not give attention to baptism *per se*. This is not to suggest that baptism was unimportant to him - far from it. He gives considerable attention to both John's practice of baptizing and to Jesus' own baptism. And the fact that "baptizing" is included in this final command of the Lord is itself sufficient to demonstrate its importance to Matthew.

But there are no other passages where baptism is discussed or even alluded to. Curiously, in the story of James and John and their request to sit at the Lord's right and left hands (Matt 20.20-28), Matthew omits the words, "you will be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with" found in the parallel (and perhaps his source) at Mark 10.39.

What are we to make of this?

There is only one possible conclusion. Despite there being two elements in this command, there is really only one dynamic to it: what we would call today "catechesis." In other words, the Great Commission is a command to "make apprentices" by fully incorporating persons into the life of Christ and shaping them in the pattern of Christ's life.

⁸ Kittel, TDNT, IV:417.

⁹ The more general notion of instruction in Greek culture was conveyed by the term *paideia*, παιδεία. As with our (Latin) word education, it meant leading the child (*pais* – παις) from ignorance to knowledge. This was primarily an matter of addressing the intellect, of instructing by memorization, precept and discipline.

In this connection, the parables play an indispensable role. As Tom Wright has written, “the parables are not *information about* the kingdom, but are part of the *means of* bringing it to birth.”¹⁰

In his numerous parables concerning the kingdom, Matthew has Jesus introduce them with the formula “the kingdom . . . may be compared to.” This sounds like reasoning by analogy. What we might expect, if this is the case, is a laundry list of what the kingdom is, what is expected of those who enter or receive it, or how to live in it. But the actual teaching of the parables disappoints so far as this kind of laundry list goes.

The formula actually does something else: it displays aspects of living in Christ himself. The phrase is now generally translated by commentators as “this is how the kingdom is . . .”, or “it is this way with the kingdom . . .”.¹¹ For example, consider the little parables of the Mustard Seed (13.31-32) or the Leaven (13.33): the kingdom is less *like* the objects described *per se*, but its coming – the way in which we see it and receive it – *is*. As with the mustard seed, or the leaven, receiving and accepting God’s authority in our lives through Christ may begin in very small ways. But as we live into this relationship, the Spirit of God begins a transformation which is surprising and out of all proportion to the beginnings.

Or consider the parables of the Hidden Treasure (13.44) or the Pearl (13.45-46). In both cases, an individual found something of great value and in turn exerted great effort – even risk – in pursuing it. So it is with God’s authority in our lives through Christ. This relationship is demanding and even risky (as we shall see), but is worth our investment in it.

With the parables we do not have a series of facts to be stored away, still less a program to employ, but insights into God’s action and authority, and our response.

Furthermore, the parables must be joined with the whole of the presentation of Jesus in this Gospel. Matthew writes in a highly structured way. He presents an alternation between narrative of Jesus’ actions (including healing) and discourses (including parables). The parables, just like the stories of healings or the commandments of Jesus, indeed the whole of his ministry, are intended to inform and shape the disciples of Jesus – his “apprentices” – in conforming and incorporating their lives to his.

We will turn now to considering the marks of this incorporation by looking at Matthew 10.

The character of life in Christ is marked by four words: 1) go; 2) preach; 3) care; 4) suffer.

Matthew's 10th chapter is a sustained reflection on discipleship. It opens with Jesus summoning the disciples and giving them “authority” – clearly his own. (10.1)

¹⁰ Wright, Jesus, p. 176. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ See Keener, p. 386; Jeremias, p. 420. Jeremias calls this the “datival introduction”, that is, it is written in the dative or instrumental case.

There are four marks of discipleship that are prominent in this passage, summed up by the words, "go" (10.5, 7), "preach" (10.7), "care" (10.8 ff.), and "suffer" (10.16 ff.). Underlying these four marks is a foundational principle: conformity to Jesus.

Jesus premises his instruction to the disciples on the principle that they must be conformed to his life. This is expressed in various ways in this relatively short passage. For example, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master." (10.24) Or again, "he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (10.38; see also 16.24) Or again, "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (10.39; see also 16.25)

The pattern of Jesus' life is, of course, the whole concern of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is the Son of God, the work and gift of God's own doing. Jesus comes to fulfill the law and the prophets, and in obedience carry out God's will and purpose. Everything he does is dedicated to this work. He is faithful. He is also authoritative - even in his teaching, he demonstrates a unique and intimate knowledge of God's purposes. This teaching and the healings he performs exhibit God's presence and power. This intimacy with God also arouses opposition and results in his suffering. Yet he presses on, traveling from place to place, caring for the needy, restoring the broken and wounded, and proclaiming the kingdom or authority of God.

"For his disciples [Jesus] is not so much an example as a basic model for life."¹² The disciples, as far as Matthew is concerned, are not spectators, observing Jesus' life from a safe distance and learning basic facts about him. Rather, as Jesus makes plain in this 10th chapter, they are included in him and intended to be shaped by and through him. They are to be, indeed, apprentices.

GO:

The disciples, like Jesus, are trained to be *go-ers* - itinerant, traveling witnesses. Jesus' mission of reaching as many souls as possible with the Good News of God's authority becomes their mission as well. We see this in the opening pages of Matthew's story. Right from the beginning, Jesus is uprooted with his parents and goes down for a time into Egypt. And later, in the midst of his ministry, Jesus tells the disciples that "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head;" (8.20) That is, he has no proper home in this world. This Gospel portrays Jesus as always on the move. But here, in chapter 10, we see Jesus command the disciples to "Go." They are to go to the lost sheep of Israel, initially. But Jesus goes on to tell them that they will eventually travel far more broadly. (10.17-18) This commandment foreshadows the Great Commission in the last verses of the Gospel. And this is no mistake. As Jesus is a missionary in the first instance, so his "apprentices" are to be missionaries as well. Indeed, the very community Christ launched, the Church, is missionary in character. And just like Jesus himself, the disciples are to see themselves as "sojourners" in this earthly life. In chapter 10, they are to travel light, accepting hospitality to be sure, but never staying or settling in.

There is another dimension to this command. We may put this under the heading of Matthew's pneumatology – his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

¹² Luz, 2005, p. 159.

The Holy Spirit makes certain appearances in the Gospel, all of which have to do with Jesus' mission and undergirding it. For example, it is the Spirit that launches, so to speak, the life of Jesus at the beginning. (1.18) It is the Spirit (speaking through an angel) that tells Joseph the truth about him and tells him to take the child into Egypt. (1.20; 2.19) It is the Spirit who inspires John the Baptist and his testimony to Jesus, and John testifies that he will baptize with the Spirit. (3.11) At the crucial point of his baptism, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descend upon him and authorize his preaching. (3.16) It is the Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness for his confrontation with the Satan. (4.1) All of this comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As if to bracket the whole, the Spirit once again appears at the end of the Gospel where Jesus commands baptism in the Name of the Holy Spirit as well as the Father and the Son. (28.19)

In chapter 12, the Spirit also appears – this time in three distinct instances. The first has to do with Jesus' withdrawal from confrontation with the Pharisees. (12.15) Matthew uses this occasion to quote a passage from Isaiah: Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him". (12.18) Soon thereafter, Jesus is engaged with the Pharisees, and says that his healings and exorcisms are evidence that he is working by the Spirit. (12.28) Finally, Jesus teaches that the one unforgivable sin is that of "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit," which, in the context, means judging what the Spirit can and cannot do. (12.31-32). It is clear that Matthew understands the whole of Jesus' ministry as the work of the Spirit, and that the disciples are to understand this and act in accordance with it.

But perhaps the most important single passage occurs precisely in our chapter 10. Jesus tells the disciples that their "going" and their "preaching" – in fact all that he calls them to do – will be led by the Spirit. "Do not be anxious" he says. It is not their own native abilities or intellectual capacities which will be determinative when they face opposition or challenge. "It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (10.20)

If the Spirit works in Jesus from beginning to end, sending him as it were, then the lives of the disciples who are sent by Jesus and given his authority must know that the same Spirit works in and through them and in the same way.

PREACH:

The disciples are not only to travel far and wide, but to be preachers, proclaimers of the same message that Jesus has proclaimed. The "kingdom" (whether "of heaven" or "of God") is the substance of Jesus' own proclamation, and can be referred to as such without further elaboration. (3.2; 4.17; 9.35). Likewise, the disciples are to preach "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (10.7)

It is instructive that the great chapter of parables, chapter 13, begins with the Parable of the Sower. You will recall it: a farmer went out to sow seed. The story would have been familiar to anyone living in the territory of Galilee. Sowers sowed seed from a bag, casting the seed on their little patches of ground. The soil is variable, unlike modern farms: some soil is rocky and hard, some deeper and more fertile. In this case the seed lands in four different sorts of ground: some on shallow ground

along a path, some on rocky ground, some among thorn bushes, and some on very fertile ground. Not surprisingly, the yield from this effort was affected by the ground on which the seed fell.

This parable is in some way seminal for all of Jesus' preaching (pun intended). He takes pains to interpret it so that the disciples will understand it. (13.10-23) In the first instance, the seed, which is said to be the "word of the kingdom" – its proclamation – falls on those who do not understand it. The "evil one" comes, therefore, and snatches it away. In the second case, the "word" falls on those who receive it joyfully, but who have no "root in themselves" – who have no depth of understanding or deeper experience with God – and when times get tough (e.g., persecution arises), they fall away. In the third instance, the "word" falls on those who are beset by worldly concerns and fears – or "delight in riches" – and the word is choked to death. Lastly, the word falls on those who hear it and understand it, and who bear fruit by it in faithful obedience. And in these the "word" comes to fruition in an astounding way!

It is hard to miss in this parable the dual themes of understanding and faithful obedience. And this is what proclamation of the "kingdom" entails. To proclaim the "kingdom" as they are commanded to do in Matthew 10, the disciples must themselves "understand" and be obedient. By the same token, preaching the "kingdom" means to produce the same characteristics in those who hear. It is the same thing as the command to make "apprentices" at the end of the Gospel: the immediate circle of apprentices must imitate Jesus as he preaches and teaches and acts, and in turn new apprentices are to imitate them.

Understanding is an important concept and motif in Matthew's Gospel, as we have seen. Undoubtedly, this goes back to one of the most important OT texts for Jesus, which he quotes in this context: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." (Isa 6.9-10) The prophetic message of Isaiah is addressed to the Jews, but in Matthew's context the "they" refers to Jews and Gentiles alike – to everyone who is not heeding Jesus' word.

The word for "understand" here is *sunemi* – συνιμι, and means "to put together" as one might put pieces of a puzzle together. This "putting together" by Matthew results in one of the most compact and memorable passages in all of Scripture. It is known as the Sermon on The Mount. (Matt 5-7)

The Sermon on the Mount is not actually a "sermon" but an "epitome", a compilation of Jesus' instruction. The introduction to the passage (5.2) suggests, not that Jesus taught these things in a single sitting, but that he customarily taught the things that follow. The Sermon begins, of course, with the beatitudes, which point in two directions at once: Jesus points to the future, to the kinds of characteristics and actions which God will approve; and Jesus simultaneously points to the kinds of things his disciples should "understand" and do in the present. These sayings function as markers for true discipleship.

Then, in the chapters that follow, Jesus helps his disciples "understand" his teaching. The 5th chapter shows him interpreting, correctly and more deeply than any other teachers, the commandments of God in the Scriptures. Chapter 6 focuses on a correct and deeper understanding of piety, the

practices of religion that are rewarded by the Father. And finally, the 7th chapter points to the way disciples understanding how they are to relate to each other in their community and the world.

Real understanding comes about when we put together the following pieces:

- The kingdom requires repentance - not merely a "change of mind", but a turning or returning to God. (3.2, John the Baptist's preaching; 4.17, Jesus' preaching; also 11.20-21, 21.29)
- The kingdom requires humility – being “poor” in spirit and therefore dependent on God's Spirit (5.3, universally thought to be the foundational beatitude)
- The kingdom requires obedience (5.19-20) – indeed an obedience that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees! (Disciples are to pray “your kingdom come” – and understand that this entails “your will be done on earth as in heaven”!)
- The kingdom requires perseverance and discipline. (The Temptation is the model story here – 4.1-11; “many are called, but few are chosen” - 22.14;
- The kingdom is to rank first in the priorities of the disciples (6.33) This is the subject of at least three parables as well: the Hidden Treasure (13.44); the Pearl (13.45-46); and the Camel (19.23-24). It is captured most clearly in 10.37-38.
- The kingdom is characterized by service and humility. (“the first shall be last, and the last first” – 19.30, 20.16; “the greatest among you must be servant of all” – 20.26; 23.11; indeed, one must become like a little child, 18.1-4; 19.14)

The themes of “going” and “preaching” are comprehensive: they include going and preaching to the whole world. This is critically important in Matthew. Much has been made in recent years about the so-called “council” in Jerusalem as marking a turning point in the life of the early Church. This turning point has to do with inclusion of the Gentiles into the Christian community, it is said. But as Matthew presents his story of Jesus, it is clear that Jesus intended this to be the case from the beginning. Jesus begins his ministry in “Galilee of the Gentiles”, the northern most portion of Israel.(4.12-13) He establishes his base of operations in Capernaum, a significant crossroads town where Gentile merchants as well as Jewish travelers passed through on a regular basis. Furthermore, Jesus leads his disciples into Gentile territory on many occasions (the country of the Gadarene, 8.28 ff.; the region of Tyre and Sidon, 15.21; Caesarea Philippi, 16.13;) Perhaps the paradigmatic story is that of the healing of the Centurion's servant in chapter 8. (8.5-13) Here, Jesus marvels at the faith placed in him by this Roman Gentile. Not only does he heal the Centurion's servant, but he declares to his disciples, “I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” (8.11) In one of his final parables (The Tenants, 21.33-44) Jesus, after speaking of the failure of Israel, makes the startling declaration, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.” (21.43) And, of course, as we have seen, Jesus envisions his disciples giving testimony to the Gentiles (10.18) Why even Gentiles are numbered among Jesus' ancestors (Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth) and it was the Gentile Magi who first came to “worship” him. (3.11)

Matthew's readers would have heard in these instances (and numerous others) an imperative of mission far beyond Israel, and they would have located this imperative in Jesus himself, not in any putative later council. It is hard to imagine anything other than the authority of Jesus himself providing the foundation for a mission of proclaiming the kingdom to Gentiles. And as far as Matthew is concerned, and be it noted in this most "Jewish" of Gospels, one need look no further than that.

CARE:

Jesus is often characterized during his ministry, by Matthew, by his "compassion." (9.36; 14.14; 15.32; 20.34) This is what motivated his ministry: he saw the people as harassed and helpless, "like sheep without a shepherd" (9.36), and this same compassion he urged upon his disciples, telling them that they should pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. We see this compassion not just in a general sense, but most poignantly in the face of need: on the one hand, when the crowds were hungry (15.32), and also when they were sick (14.14; 20.34). Furthermore, Jesus demonstrates this compassion *with* children, in many ways the "least" members of society and the most vulnerable, (18.2-3; 19.13-15) and *in* his extended remarks about their care. (18.5-6; cf also 10.42) Jesus' compassion derives from the Father: in one of his most memorable parables (18.23-35), the master of a certain servant had compassion on him and forgave him his debts.

It is not surprising then that Jesus commissions his disciples to be missionaries of compassion – doers of deeds as well as heralds of the word. Indeed, just as Jesus' healings were themselves signs of the "kingdom," the authority of God, so Jesus expects his disciples to carry on this work and to be signs in the same way. This is brought out most clearly and succinctly in 10.1, where Jesus "gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity."

Jesus also has the expectation that his disciples will care, as he does, for those in need. His Parable of the Sheep and Goats near the end of the Gospel (25.31-46) gives emphasis to the practical implications of this expectation: feeding the hungry and thirsty, clothing the naked, tending the sick, welcoming the stranger, visiting those in prison. Here the focus is on "ordinary" acts of compassion rather than "super ordinary" acts such as healings or exorcisms. In doing these kinds of things, Jesus tells the disciples, "you are doing them to me!"

There were actually two aspects to this ministry of compassion. The first aspect had to do with healing and outreach, as we have seen. The second with the disciples' own life-style. Both were, for Matthew, interrelated.

In addition to being told to raise the dead, cast out demons and bring healing, Jesus tells his disciples that they are not to seek pay. (10.8) This latter injunction is unique to Matthew's Gospel and puts the following verses into a unique perspective. He goes on to tell them that they are not to take provisions with them in their ministry – no money, no food, not even a change of clothes. They are to have no possessions at all! They are to be entirely dependent on God and on the people among whom they carry on their ministry. (10.9-11) This reinforces the notion of itinerancy that we have

discussed: like Jesus, the disciples are expected to have no home. But it goes a step further. They are expected to let property and possessions go as well! Jesus had set this theme of his ministry early on: in the Sermon on the Mount, he tells his disciples that they are not to have anxiety over what to eat, or what to wear, or over anything at all. (6.25-32) These are the concerns of the pagans (Gentiles), not citizens of the kingdom! Rather, their confidence and trust must be in God's power to provide. And in his prayer, Jesus taught them that they ask for no more than the "bread" of the day. (6.11) Their treasure must be "laid up in heaven", not in the things of earth. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (6.21)

Both of these aspects were trying for the disciples, and Matthew makes that clear. On the one hand, the disciples have difficulty in carrying out the ministry of healing. One father brings his son to the disciples for healing from a demon. The disciples cannot effect the healing, however. This provokes a stern rebuke from Jesus. Later the disciples ask Jesus why they failed, and he tells them frankly that it has to do with their trust in God. (17.14-21) On the other hand, when the Rich Young Man came to Jesus to ask what he must do to be saved, Jesus eventually tells him that he must sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow him. This causes some concern among the disciples: "if the rich cannot be saved, who can?" Peter even draws attention to the fact that they have left everything for Jesus, but he seems to have anxiety over that fact. (19.16-30)

It is clear that in Matthew Jesus expects his disciples to be like himself, and to identify with what we might call the "broken and the broke." Their ministry is not just to travel far and wide and to preach, but to be a community of God's authority and power, living in utter trust and commitment to the kingdom. Matthew seems to pull no punches in this regard. The expectations of Jesus are demanding and difficult. They reach deep into the soul¹³ and extend out into the world. But these expectations are real. If there is good news in it, it is that the power derives from God and from His Christ, not from ourselves. The stories of the feeding of multitudes (2 of them in Matthew: 14.13-21; 15.29-38) and the calming of the storms (also 2: 8.23-27; 14.22-33), coming as they do in relative proximity to each other, seems to reinforce this fact.

Of course, we are not alone in this ministry of compassion. We belong to the community of disciples. Where two or three of his disciples are gathered, Jesus promises, he will be in their midst. (18.20) Indeed, the community itself is to demonstrate by its life together that they are operating by a different "code" of conduct. Matthew's Jesus tells them how to resolve inner conflicts (18.15-17)¹⁴; that they are to serve each other (20.23-28); and that the "greatest" among them must see themselves as the least (18.1-4; 23.11); and of course, Jesus repeated his assertion that the "first" or leading member of the community must be "last" in the sense of both humility and servanthood (19.30; 20.16; the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard emphasizes this point, 20.1-16). Even though life in the community may not be peaches and cream – after all, no less than Peter raises the question of how many times a brother must be forgiven (18.21) – they are to seek a new way. (The

¹³ Here we might point to the teachings in the Sermon: "adultery" is not an outward act but an inner lust; "murder" is fostered in the inward intent; real piety is not what one does publicly, but "in secret", etc.

¹⁴ This passage is unique to Matthew; in Lk, the command of Jesus is merely to "forgive".

Parable Jesus gives in answer to Peter (18.23-35) illustrates how God forgives, and enjoins the disciples to do the same.) It is to those who seek, who ask, who knock on the door of God's grace (7.7-8) who receive strength – even strength to be “perfect” as God is! (5.48)

The imperative to compassion may be summed up in the way that Jesus summed up the whole of the Law and the Prophets – in other words, all of God's will: namely, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (22.37-29) These two commandments not only point us to the vertical or “religious” dimension of life but also to the horizontal, out into the world. They are wed and inseparable. The love of God leads inexorably for true disciples of Jesus to care and compassion in action in the world to which they are sent.

SUFFER:

We come to the final, and in some ways most difficult “characteristic” of the disciple: that of suffering. Jesus says, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves”. This must have been rather sobering as a “recruitment” slogan. It is intensified by his later statement, “you will be hated by all.” (10.22; see also, 24.9 – “hated by all nations”)

As one scholar points out, Luther translated this as “you *must* be hated.”¹⁵ There is an inevitability to the suffering that Matthew underscores. Jesus says “you will be handed over,” (παραδιδωμι), anticipating the “handing over” of Jesus himself later in the Gospel. (10.17, 19, 21) And he tells them that they will be persecuted, flogged, dragged into court, and put to death.

Indeed, to be a disciple is to “take up your cross.” (10.38) This is true because a “servant is not greater than his master.” But it may be true in a variety of ways.

Jesus knows that his immediate disciples will in fact suffer greatly as they pursue his mission. But, on a larger level, *all* disciples may expect to suffer some kind of turmoil insofar as they demonstrate their faithfulness to him. Jesus points to family strife in this connection: “a man [will be set] against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. (10.35-36)

There is a general dimension to Jesus' teaching on suffering. It was common in the Old Testament Scriptures to reflect on the problem of why the righteous suffer. Jesus in part addresses this concern in his Parable of the Weeds (13.24-30): the righteous and the unrighteous coexist in this world; and in any case, God makes his sun to shine on the just and the unjust, equally (5.45). The righteous may sometimes, perhaps often, raise the suspicions and envy of their neighbors. This is part and parcel of life generally.

But in chapter 10, Jesus' teaching has more urgency. He points to what we may call the “christological” dimension. As those to whom Jesus gives his own authority, and those who are called into conformity with his life, the disciples will by their suffering demonstrate the kingdom,

¹⁵ Luz, 2005, p. 157.

“God’s authority and power, in and to this world. As he is lifted up, and then shows God’s vindication in his resurrection,¹⁶ they, too, will vindicated and glorify God’s Christ. “Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.” (10.32) So suffering is, to anticipate Paul, to be united with Christ, and to “fulfill” his sufferings.¹⁷ By suffering, the disciple is shown to be so united with Christ and “imitating” him in complete conformity.

Despite the warnings of sufferings to come, whatever their nature, Jesus’ words of promise soar in Matthew’s Gospel: “Fear not,” he says. (10.26, 28, 31) Jesus knows what God rewards, and how generous is God’s grace. At his coming, those who have been faithful and obedient, true disciples, will reign with him. And all the imbalances of this world will be set to right. “My words will never pass away.” (24.35) “I will be with always, even to the close of the age!” (28.20)

Conclusion

We have approached the Gospel of Matthew with three questions concerning the Pattern of Life in the Spirit. The goal of the Christian life is nothing less than the “kingdom of God, understood as living in and under God’s sovereign authority and power.” The basis for life in Christ we have seen is, in fact, conformity with Christ – being Christ’s “disciples” or “apprentices.” And finally, we explored the characteristics of life in Christ as Matthew displays them: disciples are to “go,” “preach,” “care,” and “suffer” in conformity with their Lord.

Disciples are to live in community, study the Scriptures and Christ himself, understand and apply these according to Christ’s precept and example, and reach out in love of God and of others. Above all, they are “sent” to “make apprentices” like their Lord and themselves, multiplying under God’s grace and guidance the number of apprentices who live in and under his “kingdom” and transforming all of life.

In his writing, Matthew has given us many memorable and unique insights into the life, then and now, of Jesus. But, consistent with his own work, he is not interested in the “new” or innovative aspects of his own “theology,” but in being an authentic disciple as he understands that term. The result is not only a work that sheds light on the Jesus of history but discipleship itself.

¹⁶ This is John’s language, but the idea set is the same in Matthew.

¹⁷ Col 1.24 – “Complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”; see also, Phil 3.10; 2 Cor 1.5-7; Rom 5.3. The idea is not that Jesus’ suffering is somehow “incomplete.” Rather, the idea is similar to Jesus’ statement to John the Baptist, “it is important to fulfill all righteousness.” One must be “completely identified” and in “complete harmony” with God’s will and purpose.

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One final note: I find that books that deal with the parables tend to deal with them all without particular distinction with respect to the Gospel writers. There may be value in doing so in a general way. But in the case of the Gospel of Matthew, the parables serve a particular function that may or may not apply in the other cases.