



# Presbyterians *Read*



## Week 2

“Matthew is keen to point out that Jesus is redefining what God’s kingdom looks like, and hence what being God’s messiah might actually mean . . . The meek will inherit the earth, and Jesus is leading the way. God’s kingdom belongs to the humble, and Jesus is showing how it’s done. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer, are persecuted, and even killed, because they are following God’s way... and Jesus will go ahead of them in that, too” (Wright 43).

### Theme: Jesus’ Teachings on the Kingdom

#### Opening Psalm

To open your discussion each week, we recommend reading a psalm together. N.T. Wright uses the psalms from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for his Sunday devotions. This week’s psalm is Psalm 121.

#### General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week’s readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week’s readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week’s reading?
- Was there a theme in this week’s readings that stood out?

#### Overview of Theme

*We recommend reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.*

When Jesus began teaching about the kingdom of God, people were surprised because it was not the type of kingdom many of his contemporaries were expecting. Nobody knew exactly what form God’s reign would take, but first-century Jews had expectations of what it might look like based on Old Testament prophecies. Many were expecting God to send a King like David to overthrow their oppressors militarily and establish a new political kingdom. Other expectations included: a cosmic figure that would descend from the clouds, an authoritative priest who would provide new divinely-inspired interpretations of the law, or a prophet like Moses who would arise from among his people to provide them with a new direction (Ehrman 119-120).

The Gospel of Matthew positions Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, but how he fulfilled them challenged the prevailing social order of that day. Jesus teaches his followers that they must follow the Law of Moses, but they should do so in a new way that aligns the reality ushered in by his arrival as their long-awaited messiah.

In this week's readings, Wright focuses not only on Jesus' teachings on the kingdom, but also on how people reacted to them. He invites us to witness the sending of the twelve disciples through the eyes of those being sent out "like sheep surrounded by wolves" (Matt. 19:16) and John's imprisonment through the eyes of a Jewish audience who expected the messiah to overthrow the oppressor Herod who had put him in jail (Matt. 19:7-14). What we learn as we witness these events alongside those who were there is that the kingdom the Jesus decisively launched in his ministry was one of nonviolence. If the kingdom were to come through force, coercion and violence—like the kingdoms of this world—it would be the vulnerable who would suffer the most (Wright 43). And the vulnerable and the marginalized are at the heart of God's kingdom.

As we discussed last week, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the complete reversal of social order the new kingdom represents: those who are blessed are the meek, the humble, and those who suffer instead of the wealthy, successful and powerful. As Wright points out, this was good news for some, but for those who "wanted a different kind of kingdom," Jesus' message of peace, forgiveness and justice for the poor was a challenge to the power and prestige they held as political and religious leaders.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks harshly against the leaders of his time who failed to recognize that this new upside-down kingdom *was* the kingdom they'd been waiting for. Before we might have a chance to mistakenly assume, like so many Christians have over the years, that we are somehow superior to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time, Wright reminds us that we also often fail miserably at ceding to the demands of the kingdom. The real battle Jesus was fighting for the sake of the kingdom was not against the flesh-and-blood leaders of his day, but against the powers of darkness that show themselves in normal human wickedness and violence (Wright 45).

Jesus challenges us through his life and his teaching to live a life of forgiveness and peace. The reign of God that Jesus embodied, with its presence in the here and now, made living the kingdom life he proclaims not an impossible ideal but a real opportunity available to all of us.

### **Reading Focus**

The Gospels do not provide straightforward, step-by-step answers for how we are meant to live as citizens of the new reality Jesus announces. Instead, the nature of God's reign and its intersection with our everyday lives is revealed in parables. Parables are stories of ordinary people and events that Jesus endows with deep spiritual significance. Wright explains why Jesus taught in parables so well that it is worth quoting in full:

"Jesus didn't tell parables to provide friendly little illustrations of abstract theology. He told parables because what he was doing was so different, so explosive, and so dangerous, that the only way he could talk about it was to use stories. These are earthly, and sometimes heavenly, stories with an emphatically earthly meaning. They explain the full meaning not of distant timeless truths, but of what Jesus was up to then and there. This is what is going on, they say, if only you had eyes to see. Or, indeed, as Jesus frequently says, ears to hear" (p. 49).

It is worth pausing for a minute after reviewing this quote to ask:

- What is N.T. Wright telling us about how we are meant to read the parables?
- What are Jesus' parables inviting us to see and hear?
- What response are we being called to?

These questions will be at the heart of today's discussion and you are invited to keep them in mind as you read in the coming weeks.

### Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) N.T. Wright raises an important question about the reign of God that many people have: If God's kingdom has come, why is the world still such a mess? Have you grappled with this question in your own faith life? How have you come to understand (or not) the presence of God's kingdom in a world that is still broken and suffering?
- 2) If you haven't done so already, review pp. 48-49 in *Lent for Everyone*. How does N.T. Wright's explanation of the parables help to answer the above question?

### Key Scripture Verse: 13:31-33, 44-46

- Read N.T. Wright's translation of Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46 (found below and on p. 47)
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-46, or another version of your choice.

#### Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

He put another parable to them.

"The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like a grain of mustard seed, which someone took and sowed in a field. It's the smallest of all the seeds, but when it grows it turns into the biggest of the shrubs. It becomes a tree, and the birds in the sky can then come and nest in its branches."

He told them another parable.

"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven," he said, "which a woman took and hid inside three measures of flour, until the whole thing was leavened..."

"The Kingdom of heaven," Jesus continued, "is like treasure hidden in a field. Someone found it and hid it, and in great delight went off and sold everything he possessed, and about that field."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a trader who was looking for fine pearls, and who found one that was spectacularly valuable. He went off and sold everything he possessed, and about it."

### Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) What do the parables in this passage reveal about what God is doing to establish God's kingdom?
- 2) Based on these parables, what qualities should a person seeking God's kingdom possess? How do you seek the kingdom in your life?
- 3) What is your church community doing to equip people to participate in the kingdom?

### Closing Prayer

To close your discussion each week, we recommend saying the Lord's prayer together. For suggestions on using the Lord's prayer as a guide for intercessory prayer, see the Lenten Spiritual Practice guidelines.

