



Presbyterians *Read*



Week 4

“God provides us with good things of all sorts. Instead of the sheep who are led to food and drink, we become people who, strengthened by God’s food, discover that he is gently following them in the new ventures to which they are called. ‘Goodness and mercy,’ or in another translation ‘kindness and faithful love,’ will follow us. That is to say, God himself will follow us—and God, as we constantly need to remind ourselves, is himself overflowing with goodness, kindness, mercy and faithful love”
(Wright, p. 73).

Theme: God is Sovereign in 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 23.

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.

As we continue to reflect on what it means to be kingdom people, it is important to remember that it is God, not us, who determines and directs when and how the kingdom unfolds and spreads in the world. We *enter* the kingdom as participants. We *step into* a role and plan that is set out by God. Of course, we have choice in how much we yield our lives to God’s reign. We can choose to embrace or reject the kingdom Jesus announces. That is what this week’s readings were all about.

For the fourth week of Lent, Wright focuses on God’s sovereignty in the kingdom and the many ways that humans misunderstand, refuse and turn our backs on God’s plan in favour of our own. He begins

with a reflection on a psalm that reminds us that God's plan for us is good because God is "overflowing with goodness, kindness, mercy and faithful love" (73). God is faithful to us, and we are called to be faithful to God. Yet, our own ambitions, sense of what is right, desire to protect things as they are, and fear of change cloud our ability to recognize and participate in God's kingdom-project.

This week's readings from Matthew illustrate the different ways that people in Jesus' time misunderstood his kingdom message and how Jesus corrected them. Matthew depicts Jesus as specifically calling out the Jewish leadership of his time. He critiques them for, as Wright describes it, "standing in the way of what God was wanting to do" (86) by rejecting the new vision of God's kingdom that he was announcing and living out.

When encountering Jesus' harsh criticism of the Jewish leadership of his time, it is important to remember Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Throughout the gospel, Matthew depicts Jesus as commanding his followers to adhere to traditional Jewish law, but to do so in a new way. When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, he answers with the words of the *shema*—a daily Jewish prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4—saying, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength" Then, he immediately adds a second commandment, which he says is equally important: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:36–39).

It was the spirit of *how* the Mosaic law was being lived out by the Jewish leaders that Jesus critiqued. The values of the upside-down kingdom, where the last are first and the first are last, were being neglected by those who had power and privilege. Unfortunately, this is a situation continues to be all too familiar. Jesus' charge against the leaders of his time was that they were failing in their God-given responsibilities to love, forgive, seek justice and give themselves over to God's will. We, too, often fail in this regard.

Contextualizing the Critique of Jewish Leaders in Matthew

Certain passages from the New Testament have been used to justify prejudice and hostility against Jewish people. To avoid this form of dangerous misinterpretation, it is important that we read critically and with historical context in mind. In *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writers*, Ehrman provides helpful contextualization:

"Matthew... does not himself portray all Jews as wicked opponents of God, as 'Christ-killers' (an anti-Semitic slogan largely derived from this [Matt. 27:25] passage). Quite the contrary. As we have seen, Jesus himself is a Jew in this Gospel, as are all of his disciples. [...] Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus condemn Jews for being Jews. Whenever Jesus lambastes specific opponents in Matthew, they are in every instance Jewish leaders (Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, and so on). [...] The problem for Matthew is never the Jews or the Jewish religion per se; it is the Jewish authorities. The Gospel consistently affirms Judaism, at least Judaism as it was interpreted by Matthew's Jesus" (130–131).

Reading Focus

As we are drawn into Matthew's depictions of people misunderstanding or rejecting Jesus's kingdom message, it is easy to become self-righteousness. "If I was there, I would have been one of the ones who understood," we think.

But what happens if we resist the urge to be self-righteous and instead put ourselves in the place of the Pharisees, chief priests and scribes? That is, after all, the place where we often find ourselves. We, too, often question, doubt, and resist God's plan. We, too, can be hypocritical, distort God's will, and protect our own privilege at the cost of others.

At the heart of God's kingdom is *grace*—the love and mercy God gives us freely, even when we do not deserve it. What happens if we stand back and read from a place of awe at the fact that, like the doubters and disbelievers of Jesus' time, we are being offered a seat at the wedding banquet that we do not deserve?

You are encouraged to read through the lens of grace as we approach Holy Week. When you encounter a person in scripture that you are tempted to judge or feel superior to, remember that God's desire is to provide *all of us* with good things, which is why God sent his son.

Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) N.T. Wright points out that we often approach the gospel hoping to find “a Jesus who tells us it's all right, we don't have to worry, nobody's going to get hurt, no one will ever be cross” (86). That is definitely not the Jesus we encountered in this week's readings. Discuss the things that Jesus said or did in this week's readings that challenged your understanding of him.
- 2) Being corrected is difficult, especially when that correction comes from God. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt that God was calling you to repent, change your ways or adjust your beliefs? How did you react? What was the outcome?

Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 20:1–16

- Read N.T. Wright's translation of Matthew 20: 1–16 (found below and on p. 77)
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 20:1–16, or another version of your choice.

Matthew 20:1–16

“So you see,” Jesus continued, “the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed with the workers to give them a pound a day and sent them off to his vineyard.

He went out again in the middle of the morning, and saw some others standing in the marketplace with nothing to do.

“You too can go to the vineyard,” he said, “and I'll give you what's right.” So off they went.

He went out again about midday, and then in the middle of the afternoon, and did the same. Then, with only an hour of the day left, he went out and found other people standing there.

“Why are you standing here all day with nothing to do?” He asked them.

“Because no one has hired us,” they replied.

“Well,” he said, “you too can go into the vineyard.”

“When evening came, the vineyard-owner said to his servant, “Call the workers and give them their pay. Start with the last, and go on to the first.”

So the ones who had worked for one hour came, and each of them received a pound. When the first ones came, they thought they would get something more; but they, too each received a pound.

When they had been given it, they grumbled against the landowner. “This lot who came in last,” they said, “have only worked for one hour—and they've been put on a level with us! And we did all the hard work, all day, and in the heat as well!”

“My friend,” he said to one of them, “I'm not doing you any wrong. You agreed with me on one pound, didn't you? Take it! It's yours! An be on your way. I want to give this fellow who came at the end of the day the same as you. Or are you suggesting that I'm not allowed to do what I like with my own money? Or are you giving me the evil eye because I'm good?”

“So those at the back will be at the front, and the front ones at the back.”

Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) What is revealed about the principles of the kingdom of God in this parable? What do we learn about the relationship between God and the people of God's kingdom?
- 2) Who are the people in your communities and cities that are seen as less worthy than others? What are the stories that get told about why they deserve to be considered last?
- 3) If Jesus came to your congregation, what would he say about the way that you are living into God's kingdom vision? What part of your shared life together would he praise and parts would he ask you to change?

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.

