

Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus Weekly Reading Guides

Jesus' Last Week

I truly hope and pray that this journey has been a blessing to each of you. I hope that it has deepened your knowledge of the scriptures, given you new ways of looking at the scriptures, and has given you some insight into hearing how they might be speaking to you in this moment in your life. I also hope that, in this time that is so challenging to us as disciples, it has provided a place of calm and peace in which to reset and reaffirm our commitment to the kind of persons we want to be in all areas of our life. I know that this time has been a blessing to me and I thank you for letting me into your busy lives and schedules to share my love for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In this last week of our journey, we read and reflect on the last days of Jesus' life. It is my prayer that these readings will help us to fully experience the humanity of Jesus as he chooses to be true to what God asked of him. We will see all the human emotions and all the best and worst of which we humans are capable. Read these passages slowly. Be aware of what you are seeing and hearing and feeling. Imagine yourself in Jesus' place. Imagine yourself in the disciple's place. Imagine yourself in the place of all the characters you encounter.

Each version contains much of the same material. Reflect on what is unique in the way these stories are told in each version. Make a few notes along the way.

Read: Matthew 21:1-28:10

Matthew tells us the story of Jesus' last week in sections.

First, the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on what we would come to call Palm Sunday. Then the cleansing of the Temple, two grand and profound acts. What statement do you think Jesus is making in each of these acts? (Chapter 21.1-17)

Then Jesus teaches. The Fig tree. A confrontation about authority. Then Parables. What added meaning comes through these moments when we hear them as happening in the last week of Jesus' life? What about the two sons? Who are the wicked tenants? What is the wedding banquet all about? (21.18-22.22)

Jesus then speaks of the resurrection, of the greatest commandment and the Son of David. These question-and-answer exchanges with the religious authorities seek to establish Jesus as a higher authority than them all. Why is this important for the disciples to hear? (22.23-46)

In Chapter 23, Jesus denounces the religious authorities directly. These are hard sayings. In what areas of life and practice do you fall into the role of being the one misguided in your self righteousness? (23.1-36)

What insight do we gain into Jesus' heart in Matthew 23. 37-39?

Chapter 24 brings talk of destruction, persecutions, sacrilege and the coming of the Son of Man? Why is Jesus telling the disciples these things now?

Chapter 25 brings more parables, most notably the one about the judgement of the nations. What strikes you about the criteria for judgement? Is it what we thought it would be?

In 26-28.10, the pace picks up. If you can, read these chapters in one sitting, getting caught up in the relentless forward movement of the narrative. Feel the rush of emotions. Feel the dramatic completion of Jesus' life. Jesus would stop at nothing, even death on a cross, to reveal the depth of love. How can we let that love fill our life? Guide our life?

Read: Mark 11:1-16:8

In Mark, the pace is fast and furious from the beginning to the end. As you read Mark's version, note how it is similar to Matthew. How is it different?

In what way is Mark 14.32-42 the pivotal moment in the story?

In Mark 14.66-72, we see Peter denying Jesus? How does this story make you feel? Do you relate to Peter, the one who always answered and who always seemed to get it wrong? How do you see Peter in terms of his heart? Is he truly devoted, even in his faults? What does it say that he was the one Jesus chose to lead all the rest of the disciples?

Read: Luke 19:28-24:12

What strikes you as different from Matthew and Mark in the telling of this story?

Why do you think Luke included the story of the widow's offering? (21.1-4)

Why do you think Luke included the dispute over who is greatest? (22.24-30)

One of the treasures of Luke's version is found in 24.13-35 and in 24. 36 -49.

How do these post-resurrection appearances of Jesus still speak and encourage today?

Happy reading and reflecting!

Parables

Jesus used parables to teach about the Kingdom and God and a Kingdom kind of life. Parables have been called “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” They are really a short, relatable story that uses common, everyday life to teach a spiritual lesson, often by contrasting or comparing the characteristics of God’s way and the world’s way. Jesus says that parables serve the dual purpose of revealing truth to those who are receptive and listening and to conceal from those who willfully choose to be ignorant of what God is doing.

We have Jesus telling somewhere between 30 and 50 parables in the Gospels, depending on how strict the definition of “parable” and how many times they appear across the three synoptic Gospels. In any case, it was one of Jesus most effective methods of teaching his followers about the Kingdom of God. We will look at 10 parables this week. As you read them, I encourage you to use your imagination. Picture in your mind the setting, the characters, the sights and sounds of what is being described. Hear Jesus voice as the stories are told, knowing that He is the embodiment of God’s love and God’s presence in this real world and with the real people being described.

Read: Luke 10:25-37

The scene described by Jesus of danger on the road was a real one, and a fact his listeners would be aware of as they listen.

- What does this parable teach you about the heart of the expert in the law?
- What does it teach about the religious leader’s heart?
- What does it tell you about God’s heart?
- What does it teach you about your heart right now?

Read: Luke 15

This chapter holds three parables that need to go together. These parables contain the key element of joy.

- Have you lost something valuable and precious to you?
- What was your coin?
- What was your sheep?
- Is Jesus focused more about things being lost or things being found?
- In the last parable, the story of the lost son, which son do you relate to most?
- Which son is really lost in this story?
- What does it say about us when we cannot celebrate?

Read: Matthew 13:44-50

This reading also contains three parables that are connected. They are all describing aspects of the Kingdom of God and how we come to find it.

- What do you think Jesus is leading us to consider in the story of the treasure?
- The story of the pearl?
- Can our experience of God be both serendipitous and intentional at the same time?
- What do you hear in the parable of the net?
- What is our role in relating to other people?

Read: Matthew 18:23-35

This is a dark parable.

- What is Jesus' teaching is the obligation of forgiveness?
- Do you feel forgiven by God in your life right now?
- Do you find it hard to forgive?
- How might remembering when you were forgiven help you relate to others who have hurt, wronged, or disappointed you?

Read: Matthew 20:1-16

Over the years of my ministry, I think this parable has caused more people discomfort than any other.

- Why does this story disturb us so?
- Why do we find it comforting that God is ridiculously generous to all?
- What keeps us from being able to celebrate God's generosity and grace to others?
- What culturally works against it? What religiously works against it?

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

- What is this parable about?
- Why would the one servant see the Master in such a harsh light while the others did not? Is Jesus talking about trusting God?
- Is Jesus talking about the way we view the Master determines how we live out of life's gifts?
- When have you found it hard to trust God? When have you found it easy?

Week 3 - The I AM Statements

Welcome to week three of our journey! This week's reading is a shorter assignment than the Sermon on the Mount which we read last week. So, I encourage you to read these sayings each day if possible. Let them sit in your mind and heart. Be open to the mystery of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

- What does it mean for Jesus to be the things he declares himself to be?
- Which of these images do you find most personal at this time in your life?
- Which do you find most inspiring? Most confusing?

Over the week of reflection we might be surprised at the answers that come to us.

First, a brief word about the Gospel of John.

In Matthew, the writer quotes Hebrew scripture and seeks to lead us to make the connection between the ancient expectations and the fulfillment of the Messianic hope in Jesus.

Mark lists miracle after miracle, urging us to claim Jesus as the Messiah, the one we should choose to follow as did those first disciples.

Luke tells us parable after parable as a way of connecting Jesus to our human experiences of joy and sorrow, abundance and scarcity, faith, and doubt.

Because these three Gospels tell basically the same story of Jesus' roughly 33 years on the planet, they are called the Synoptic Gospels. They tell the story of Jesus from more or less the same point of view. They share much of the same material and follow a similar timeline.

John, on the other hand, is quite different. John is considered to be the last Gospel written down. The theology is much more developed and the language more sophisticated. Rather than focusing on Jesus sharing our human experience, John focuses on the divinity of Jesus. I believe that John's goal is to show that Jesus IS God.

Read the following I AM statements from the Book of John:

- John 6:35
- John 8:12
- John 10:7-9
- John 10:11
- John 11:25
- John 14:16
- John 15:1

As you reflect on these sayings, consider these questions:

- What does it mean for Jesus to be the things he declares himself to be?
- Which of these images do you find most personal at this time in your life?
- Which do you find most inspiring? Most confusing?
- Where in the Bible do we first hear the phrase, “I Am”?
- If Jesus is the bread of life, what does this mean for those who have no bread?
- In your mind, what is the deepest darkness in our world? In your life?
- What does the talk of sheep and gates and shepherds mean to you in our modern, non-agrarian context?
- What strikes you most about the encounter between Jesus and Mary and Martha? What does resurrection mean to you in your life experience?
- How is Jesus “the way, the truth and the life”?
- When do you feel most connected to “the true vine”? When do you feel the most cut-off from “the true vine”?
- In what ways have you experienced Jesus as God in your life?

Week 2 – The Sermon on the Mount

Welcome to week two in our journey! I hope that you found the reflections on The Beatitudes to be meaningful and helpful in your spiritual life. This week we read the entire Sermon on the Mount – don't worry, it is just three chapters! But in it we find the largest collection of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. Read these teachings with an eye for them being the foundational truths on which Jesus built his ministry.

Read: Matthew Chapters 5-7

As you read the three chapters that make up the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps this broad outline will help guide your reading and reflection.

- Chapter 4:23 – 5:16
The Beatitudes: Character and Destiny of Disciples
Disciples as Salt and Light
- Chapter 5:17 – 48
Jesus Reinterpreting the Law to the True Intent of the Law
- Chapter 6:1-18
Practicing True Piety
- Chapter 6:19 – 24
Our Relationship to Things
- Chapter 6:25- 7:11
Anxiety
Judging Others
Pearls Before Swine
Asking and Receiving
- Chapter 7:12
The Summary of Jesus' Teaching
- Chapter 7:13-29
Two by Two:

Two Ways
Two Harvests
Two Builders
Conclusion

Some questions to help you reflect:

- Does Jesus describe an attitude and practice of life that seems to be common these days?
- Do you think the Sermon on the Mount described a way of life common in Jesus' days?
- Jesus was a devout Jew who followed the practices of synagogue and Temple. Why do you think he felt a reinterpretation of the law was needed?
- What do you find the hardest to hear in these teachings?
- What do you find most encouraging?
- The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) could not be clearer. Why do you think it seems to be ignored today?
- If you were to live more fully into the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, what would be the most challenging? What do you think would be the most rewarding?

Week 1 – The Beatitudes

Dear fellow travelers through this journey of “Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus,”

I am so glad to have you join me in this study of some of Jesus’ core teachings. This week we begin by reading the Beatitudes. In Matthew, they are from the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke, the Sermon on the Plain. Since this first week has readings that are short, I suggest you read these two versions on different days. Perhaps Matthew for two days, skip a day, then read Luke for two days. Try to hear these words separately from one another, do not try to merge them together. Let them speak on their own.

Let me say that I am fairly certain that Jesus would have taught these ideas on numerous occasions, and I am fairly certain that there would be some variance in his choice of words from presentation to presentation. That should not be troubling to us. It actually reinforces the understanding that Jesus met people where they were and spoke to them the words that would open for them a Kingdom kind of life.

As you read Matthew, remember that Matthew is writing directly to Jewish followers of Jesus.

- How might that shape the words we hear Jesus use in conveying these truths?

As you read Luke, remember that Luke is writing as a Gentile from a Gentile perspective To Gentiles.

- How might this shape the words we hear Jesus use in conveying these truths?

As you read, use the questions that follow to assist in your reflection.

Read: Matthew 5:1-12

- Who do you think made up the crowd on the mountainside that day?
- What kind of people came to hear Jesus?
- As you read these verses, how do they fit with your experience of life?
- Do you feel “blessed” when poor in spirit? When grieving? When committed to being a gentle person in a power obsessed world? When feeling hungry and thirsty deep down to the soles of your feet?
- Is Jesus describing the way the world looks at life and at people?
- How might Jesus trying to turn our understanding of life upside down?
- What kind of world is Jesus describing?

Read: Luke 6. 17-36

- What is different from Matthew in regard to where Jesus is standing in Luke's telling of the "Blessings and Woes"?
- What is Jesus doing in this reading prior to teaching the beatitudes?
- Do these words seem more generalized or more personal than Matthew's version?
- What impact does it have on you to hear the contrast of the "blessings" to the "woes"?
- If Jesus loves all and calls all, how are we to hear the harsh words of woe?

General Reflection Questions

- In your reflections, what is the purpose of the Beatitudes?
- Are they speaking of this world and this life or of the world to come?
- How do these words of Jesus speak to you if you are in a place where:
 - You feel unworthy?
 - You feel heartbroken?
 - You feel downtrodden?
 - You are challenged by those in your life who need forgiveness from you?
 - You are struggling to stay committed to your faith?
 - You feel defeated by the ugliness and disappointment in the world?
 - You feel you are paying a price for your convictions?

Happy reading and may you find meaning in these reflections that will help you fix your eyes on Jesus today and every day.