

Week 1: The Gospel of Matthew

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Of the four gospel accounts in the Bible, do you have a favorite? What is it that appeals to you most about it?
3. When you think of Jesus, what characteristics come to mind? How do you picture him? Why do you think has most shaped your view of Jesus?
4. Read Mark 8:27-30 and Matthew 16:13-18. How do you understand the differences between these two accounts of the same story? What might they indicate about the author's intentions for writing the Gospel of Matthew? How can both accounts be true without being identical?
5. Read Matthew 1:22-23, 2:14-15, 4:13-16. These are just a few examples the author gives of how Jesus fulfilled Jewish Scripture. Why do you think this was an important theme for Matthew? Why might it still have relevance for us today?
6. Read Matthew 5:3-12. The speaker on Sunday stated that Matthew's Gospel has a noticeable focus on the oppressed and marginalized, and views the rich, powerful, and educated with suspicion. Why might this have been an important theme for the gospel's intended audience? Why might it be an important theme for us today?
7. Read Matthew 16:24-26 and 28:19-20. Reflecting back on all the passages read, how does the author present Jesus as (i) the fulfillment of our hopes, (ii) God's presence with us, and (iii) a model for us to follow? Which of these resonates with you most at this time? Take some time to share and pray for one another.

Practice for the week: Practicing the Presence of God

"Practicing the presence of God" is a spiritual practice articulated by Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century French monk. He wrote:

It consists in taking delight in and becoming accustomed to [God's] divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him all the time, at every moment... In order to form a habit of conversing with God continually, and referring all we do to Him, we must at first apply to Him with some diligence: but that after a little care we should find His love inwardly excite us to it without any difficulty... A little lifting up of the

heart suffices; a little remembrance of God... nobody perceives it, and nothing is easier than to repeat often in the day these little acts of inward worship.

Experiment with practicing the presence of God this week. Develop the habit of returning to God even in the midst of your daily tasks. Setting a regular chime on your phone or strategically placing post-it notes can help serve as a reminder to return to an awareness of God's presence. Praying a brief breath prayer, expressing gratitude, remembering a treasured story from the gospels, or simply thinking about one aspect of what God is like may be helpful during these moments.

At the end of each day, think about how you practiced the presence of God. Did remembering God's presence with you impact how you thought about that current moment? Were there certain situations or times of the day that helped or hindered you from being aware of God's presence? How might you continue this practice in the future?