

Matthew – The Gospel of Promised Blessings

Preface – Introduction – Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**
[see p.11 in Leader Guide]
- **Matthew Skinner Bio**
 - MDiv and PhD from Princeton
 - Ordained as a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA)
 - Professor at Luther Seminary since 2002
 - Accredited by the UMC and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - St. Paul, MN
 - Specializes in Gospels and Acts, emphasizing cultural relevance
- **Video – Lesson 1**
 - How do you think Jesus himself would react to the way he is portrayed in the Gospels?
 - How does the “*Kingdom of God*” meaning more the “*reign of God*,” rather than *heaven*, affect your interpretation of Jesus’ message?
- **Preface**
 - How would you characterize the Gospel of Matthew from your personal experience?
- **Introduction**
 - Considering the preachers who consult Skinner when faced with preaching from the Matthew-oriented lectionary every three years, do you consider Matthew challenging to understand?
 - Have you witnessed antisemitic rhetoric using the Gospel as rationalization?
 - [xvi] Skinner describes a period of harmonious existence between Christian and non-Christian Jews in the first century, which broke down in the second. Do you think that division has worsened or improved in modern times?
 - How do you react to the dichotomy of Matthew being considered both the most and the least Jewish of the Gospels?
 - [xix] Where have you seen our church “file the sharp edges off Jesus, because they make us feel uncomfortable”?
 - [xx] Like the other NT books, Matthew highlights Jesus ultimately judging the world and references “hell” more frequently than all the others.
 - Why do you think Matthew would choose to do so?
- **Chapter 1**
 - Why do you think Skinner chose to start his book with the combination of The Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Sheep and Goats?
 - [1] Why might approaching the Bible with the question “What does this text promise?” be better than “What is the text telling me to do?”
 - To whom might each of the Gospel authors’ choice of opening public scenes be most effective?
 - Matthew – Sermon on the Mount
 - Mark – Exorcism of an Unclean Spirit
 - Luke – Reading from Isaiah in the synagogue

- John – Turning water into wine
- Beatitudes – Matthew 5:1-12 (read)
 - What modern-day groups do these eight call to mind?
 - [6] What are your thoughts on Skinner’s Greek-based translation of “blessed” as being happy, satisfied, or unburdened?
- Ye of Little Faith – Matthew 6:30-33 (read)
 - [7] In the context of this passage, do you agree with Skinner that “trust” is the best Greek translation, as opposed to “faith” or “belief”?
 - How might each give the passage a different meaning?
- Workers in the Vineyard – Matthew 20:1-16
 - [9] *The people who weren’t chosen to work until 5pm are probably those who struggle to find work, like the infirm or elderly.*
 - [10] *“God’s generosity benefits those who need it most.”*
- Sheep and Goats – Matthew 25:31-46
 - [11] How does the fact that undomesticated sheep and goats being nearly indistinguishable in Jesus’ time affect your interpretation of this parable?
 - [12] Both groups are surprised. As a result, what might Jesus be saying about us?
 - [13] “there’s something sacramental about the acts of kindness that the sheep perform”
 - How might you associate such kindness with a sacrament?
 - It’s not a matter of “doing unto” people like Jesus, but unto Jesus himself.
 - What does this say to you about the nature of Jesus?
 - Matthew 25:31b - “All the nations will be gathered before him”
 - Skinner highlights the use of “nations” here, as opposed to “church people.”
 - What does this say to you? *Skinner says “Jesus is accessible to all”*
- **Other Reflections?**

References for material:

- [*Matthew: The Gospel of Promised Blessings*](#)
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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer**
[see p.20 in Leader Guide]
- **Video – Lesson 2**
- **Chapter 2**
https://gl.church/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Heaven_Hell.-Harp_Accordian-768x1048.jpeg
[or search Google with this phrase: “far side accordion”]
 - Skinner points out when the Bible is used as a weapon to terrorize or shame congregations
 - Where have you seen this in your past?
 - Where have you seen this in our local church?
 - In response to this, do you find yourself gravitating toward verses that focus on God’s love vs. judgment?
 - Do you see any drawbacks in doing so?
 - Matthew 3:1-12
 - What do you know about John the Baptist? *Jesus’ cousin through Mary/Elizabeth; 6 months difference in age; dressed and ate weirdly; called for repentance and announced the Kingdom; baptized Jesus; wondered about Jesus’ messiahship; Jesus reckons him to Elijah (twice in Matthew); beheaded by Herod*
 - [23] Repentance and confession are more about truth-telling than feeling sad
 - How do you see truth-telling as vital for repentance?
 - How do you practice repentance and confession?
 - John the Baptist points out *communal* wrongs vs. just personal
 - Where have you seen communal confession and repentance?
 - In what ways do you find yourself resembling the Pharisees vs. other people in the Gospels?
 - Matthew 7:24-27 (read)
 - What do you see as the primary message here?
 - [25] Why do you think Jesus presents stories with such dualism?
 - What are the benefits and drawbacks to dualism?
 - Matthew 13:47-50 (read)
 - Last of the six “the kingdom of heaven is like...” parables in Matthew 13
 - [28] parable *from Greek parable meaning something placed alongside something else*
 - *Jesus is illuminating a particular aspect of the Kingdom*
 - Skinner observes that the bad fish can mean both evil people *and* evil forces
 - Does this help you reconcile the imagery of weeping and gnashing of teeth?
 - Reflections
 - [33] “If the world is a harsh place...then divine love without judgment just gives people company in their unending misery.”
 - How might Jesus’ emphasis on God’s judgment provide you comfort?
- Other Reflections?

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Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer**

[see p.31 in Leader Guide]

- **Video – Lesson 3**

- Who do you think of when you hear “visionary”?
- Who are the visionaries in your life?
- How does the understanding that it doesn’t matter how the sheep got lost affect your understanding of the Parable of the Lost Sheep?
- How have you experienced “transformative forgiveness”?

- **Chapter 3**

- Matthew 5:17-6:1 (have different volunteers read 17, 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34a, 38-39, 43-44)
 - How do you react to Jesus’ “...but I say to you” commentary on OT teachings?
 - [41] Skinner cites Mary Hinkle Short as describing the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus’ “I Have a Dream” speech
 - In what ways do you see them as similar? Different?
 - Read Matthew 5:48 in anything but CEB or The Message
 - Now read in CEB and The Message
 - How do these translations help?
- Matthew 9:35-10:25 (Jesus sending out the 12 Disciples)
 - What is your reaction when you read Judas’s inclusion in this list?
 - Read Matthew 10:1
 - [42] Skinner points out that Jesus’ intent is not to grow church membership, but rather to spread mercy and foster connection.
 - Do you think Jesus’ intent changed between then and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20?
 - Why do you think Matthew excludes what the disciples actually do while they’re sent on this mission?
- Matthew 18:1-14 (read Matthew 18:1-5)
 - What is it about children that Jesus is trying to emphasize here? *Skinner says “vulnerability”*
 - [already discussed this passage in the video section]
- Matthew 18:15-20 (read Matthew 18:15 in NIV and see footnote; now read in CEB)
 - How is this clarification important?
 - [49] “Jesus knows that religious communities often harbor people who enjoy bullying others”
 - Where have you seen this?
- Matthew 18:21-35 (Parable of the Unmerciful Servant)
 - When do you find forgiving others hard?
 - When do you find receiving forgiveness hard?
 - [50] *Skinner points out some limitations with the parable*
 - *Forgiven man has no conscience*
 - *The king recants his forgiveness*
 - *Comparing forgiveness to canceled debt*
 - [51] *Skinner’s convictions on forgiveness:*
 - *Rarely happens in a single action*
 - *Doesn’t mean forgetting*
 - *Sometimes pressing a person to forgive can put them in danger or cause trauma*
 - What are your reactions to Skinner’s observations?
- Reflections
 - [53] “The passages we considered in this chapter shake us from complacency”

- Of what we've discussed, where do you see yourself most complacent?
 - **Other Reflections?**
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Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer**
[see p.41 in Leader Guide]
- **Video – Lesson 4**
- **Chapter 4**
 - Matthew 1:1-17
 - What do you remember about the five women named in this first chapter?
 - *Tamar – foreign daughter-in-law of Judah who disguised herself as a prostitute to get pregnant by him*
 - *Rahab – foreign prostitute in Jericho who hid two spies from Joshua*
 - *Ruth – foreign widow*
 - *Bathsheba – wife of a foreigner (Uriah) and adulteress with King David*
 - *Mary – mother of our Lord*
 - Why do you think Matthew explicitly included them?
 - Matthew 9:9-13 (read)
 - [60] Skinner talks about Jesus being drawn to those on society's edges.
 - When have you found yourself eating among those who might be considered as such?
 - 9:12 (from Hosea 6:6) – "...I desire mercy, not sacrifice"
 - Where are we guilty today of offering sacrifices rather than mercy? *Kindness up front vs. atonement in retrospect*
 - Matthew 11:28-30 (read)
 - Does this passage offer you similar comfort as it does to Skinner?
 - In what ways do you find Jesus' burden light?
 - Matthew 12:15-21
 - Compassion – Latin: com + pati (with + suffer) Greek: splagchnizomai (root meaning intestines)
 - How does this color the passages discussing Jesus having compassion on the crowds?
 - Matthew 12:18-21 (read)
 - Quotes Isaiah 42:1-4
 - What do you think is meant by v.20?
 - Matthew 15:29-31 (read)
 - Skinner says there can be two false impressions drawn from healing stories:
 - Ailments stem from personal flaws or sins
 - Jesus is rewarding people for their faith in him
 - What do you think the point is with Matthew's inclusion of Jesus' healing stories?
 - Matthew 28:16-20 (read)
 - Skinner points out that the most "beautiful thing about these disciples" is they are flawed and incomplete.
 - What does this say to you?
- **Other Reflections?**

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Chapter 5

- **Opening Prayer**
[see p.50 in Leader Guide]
- **Video – Lesson 5**
 - How might your privilege get in the way of being merciful to the world?
 - How do you combat this?
- **Chapter 5**
 - Matthew 23:1-36 [don't read] – 7 Woes – which of these resonate to you?...
 - Shut the door of the kingdom in people's faces
 - Travel far to win a single convert, and make them twice as much a child of hell as you
 - Swearing by the temple means nothing, but swearing by gold of the temple is binding
 - Give tenth of spices but neglect justice, mercy and faithfulness
 - Clean the outside of the cup, but inside is full of greed and self-indulgence
 - Like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of dead and unclean
 - Say "if we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we wouldn't have shed the prophets' blood"
 - *Skinner emphasizes that Jesus' ire against Pharisees is not a condemnation of Judaism*
 - The important point to us is his condemnation of hypocrisy
 - Where do you see hypocrisy in Christianity today?
 - Matthew 25:1-13 (Bridesmaids) and 25:14-30 (Talents) [don't read]
 - How have either/both of these parables troubled you in the past?
 - Does Skinner's interpretation help (*guarding against inaction rather than mercy*)?
 - Do you draw a different message from either parable?
 - Both parables emphasize the need to wait (i.e., for the groom and master to return)
 - [80] "Christianity is a waiting religion"
 - To what extent do you agree/disagree?
 - Matthew 27:11-26 – Pilate's cunning and cruelty (read 27:21-26)
 - How have you traditionally characterized Pilate?
 - [83] Weak-willed?
 - [84] Undergoing a legal dilemma in dealing with Jesus?
 - [86] "Pilate provides a model for how domineering people thrive when they lure others into shouldering blame for the abuses they commit."
 - Can you provide examples? *Rapists*
 - Matthew 27:62-28:6 – Guards at the tomb (read)
 - Matthew adds Pharisees asking Pilate to secure the tomb
 - Why is this important to the story? *Divine power to open the tomb. Matthew may be inciting further division of Christians vs. Jews*
- **Other Reflections?**

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Chapter 6 & Afterword

- **Opening Prayer**
[see p.57 in Leader Guide]
- **Video – Lesson 6**
- **Chapter 6**
 - [92] “I receive news from pastors about congregations sliding into the mire of snippy polarization.”
 - How is this true or untrue about our congregation?
 - What topics are taboo in our church?
 - Matthew 2:1-12 – Arrival of the Magi (read)
 - What do you find to be peculiar about this story? *Skinner observes: Christ’s arrival is revealed to Magi from a different land*
 - [96] Herod protects the status quo with the prospect of a culture-changing Messiah
 - How have you seen our leaders fall into protecting the status quo?
 - Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 – Weeds among the Wheat (read)
 - In light of Jesus’ explanation, what message do you draw for yourself from this parable?
 - [98] “Faith can be a fragile thing, whether it’s ‘little faith’ or maturing faith. The need to give faith an environment to survive and grow outweighs other concerns.”
 - Where do you see us succeeding and failing in providing such an environment that nurtures little or maturing faith?
 - What environment would nurture you in your maturing faith?
 - When are we guilty of trying to “pull out the weeds” immediately upon detecting them?
 - *Skinner notes that we are presumptuous in identifying what qualifies as a weed in the first place.*
 - Matthew 13:31-32 – Mustard Seed (read)
 - What message do you draw from this parable?
 - [102] “Calling the church a family in our era is problematic... it promises a depth of relationship and mutual care that few congregations can provide.”
 - What are your reactions to this in light of our church?
 - Matthew 27:25 – Response to Pilate – “His blood is on us and on our children” (read)
 - [104] Skinner declares the most likely explanation for the inclusion of the crowd’s statement: to attribute the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 as a consequence
 - Has the inclusion of this statement had any impact on you or your view of Jews?
 - [105] Skinner notes that we should not pretend unsavory parts of our shared history didn’t happen.
 - Where are we guilty of this?
 - How has it hurt us?
- **Afterword**
 - Matthew 14:28-32 – Jesus and Peter Walk on Water (read)
 - How might you identify with Peter in this scenario?
 - What do you admire about him?
 - How might we better emulate Jesus in dealing with someone “of little faith”?
- **Other Reflections?**

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