

February 2, 2025
Too Much Debt or Praying For Relief
Matthew 6:5-15

Unifying Principle (Focus of Lesson)

Many people struggle to achieve sustainable lives in a world of debt and obligation. How can we be released from the obligation to make ends meet? Jesus teaches us to pray for the forgiveness of debts that is a hallmark of God's reign.

Goals For the Learner

1. To understand that the debt Jesus addresses is part of a system that overwhelms the poor with obligations to the ruling powers.
2. To focus on forgiving debt as a sign of God's coming kingdom.
3. To commit to fighting policies that preclude ordinary people from prospering today.

Challenges For the Week

1. How would you articulate the idea of material debt forgiveness in the Bible, including the Jubilee decree (Leviticus 25), Jesus's inaugural sermon (Luke 4), and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35)?
2. Note that in the Lord's Prayer, forgiving debtors is the only thing expected of us. Everything else is a gift, even God's forgiveness of our indebtedness to God.
3. Contrast the kingdom of this world and its emphasis on debt and obligation with the kingdom of heaven based on forgiveness, grace, and mercy (see Luke 6:36). Is forgiveness the central act of the kingdom of God?
4. Prepare a word study of *opheiléma*, which can represent both financial and moral debt.
5. What would happen if, during an economic downturn and elevated unemployment, all debts were forgiven for those in dire straits? What if the church advocated and prayed for material debt relief for the poor?
6. What in your opinion are reasons why Christians only talk about the forgiveness of debts in a spiritualized way? What if we prayed, "Forgive us our material and moral debts, as we forgive our debtors"?

February 9, 2025

Stand Up or Resistance to the Kingdom

Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24

Unifying Principle (Focus of Lesson)

People resist changes that affect them. What resistance might we expect when we stand up for changes that are good and right? Matthew records Jesus's pronouncement that there is violence against the kingdom of heaven, which is under constant attack.

Goals For the Learner

1. To evaluate the resistance Jesus and John the Baptist faced as an attack on the kingdom of heaven.
2. To identify sources of resistance in the world toward the kingdom of heaven.
3. To exercise Christian practices that produce righteousness in the face of opposition.

Challenges For the Week

1. Review the video "Overview: Matthew 1–13" at bibleproject.com. Highlight Matthew's mission to reveal the conflict between earthly kingdoms (Rome, social convention) and the kingdom of heaven that Jesus inaugurates.
2. Recall and summarize the person and work of John the Baptizer in Matthew as the prophet of the kingdom and forerunner of Jesus.
3. Some English translations of the Greek *biasati* have referenced "forceful believers," though most favor the translation "violent opponents" (see NRSV, for example). How do the two interpretations affect the way you read the story? Identify current examples of forceful believers and violent opponents to God's reign.
4. In your opinion why are miracles not enough to lead to repentance and belief in Jesus?
5. Discover ways to recognize the kingdom in our midst based on the mission of Jesus. How can we know that God is at work today, according to Matthew?
6. Is it worse to be actively opposed to God's kingdom or indifferent to it? Why?

February 16, 2025

What More Do I Have to Do? The First Will Be Last

Matthew 19:16-30

Unifying Principle (Focus of Lesson)

People seek to acquire wealth and possessions. How might the pursuit of wealth stand in the way of a purposeful life? Jesus says it is practically impossible for rich or poor to enter God's kingdom if they attempt to do so through their own effort, because it is only possible for those who put their trust in God.

Goals for the Learner

1. To analyze the conflict the rich young man felt in weighing the cost and reward of following Jesus.
2. To affirm the grace of God who makes salvation possible.
3. Integrate understanding the cost of following Jesus into our discipleship.

Challenges For the Week

1. Create a game called "What Would You Sacrifice to Enter the Kingdom of Heaven?" List people, places, experiences, possessions, etc. on separate index cards and draw from the pile. Write why you would or would not sacrifice the item.
2. Review the meaning of the "kingdom of heaven" as God's realm here on earth, inaugurated by Jesus, who is meek, compassionate, nonviolent, and in opposition to the kingdoms of this world.
3. Review the meaning of *grace* and how grace plays a role in Jesus's response to the young man. Jesus says that we can't enter his kingdom based on our effort but on God's grace.
4. Why it is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven?
5. Conversely, is it easy for a poor person to enter the kingdom of heaven? Note how often Jesus's encountered the faith and persistence of the poor and infirm.
6. In response to Peter, Jesus describes an upside-down kingdom in which the first are last and the last first. Where in the world is this true? How can we reshape our lives to live in accord with Jesus's teaching?

February 23, 2025

Don't Be a Goat or Kingdom Life

Matthew 25:31-46

Unifying Principle (Focus)

We are often judged based on known and unknown criteria. Whose (or what) standards should matter to us the most? Matthew 25 tells us that the criterion for the Son of Man's final judgment of responsible kingdom living will be based on service to the "least of these."

Goals for the Learner

1. To investigate Jesus's criteria for responsible kingdom living in the parable of the sheep and the goats.
2. To identify where one's values align/fall short of Jesus's standards for kingdom dwellers.
3. To lead your church in ministries that serve the "least of these."

Challenges for the Week

1. Note that Matthew 25 is part of a section that begins with the disciples asking, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3b). Read the parable of sheep and goats as a response to the disciples' question: Jesus, who is coming, is present now in the least of these.
2. What is the context for the parable. Palestinian sheep and goats looked similar from a distance and often grazed together. But they were separated at night because the goats required a warmer place to rest.
3. Prepare a word study on "brothers and sisters" (Greek *adelphoi*, either biological siblings or spiritual kin) and *elachistōn* ("least," either literal children or fellow believers). Compare Matthew 10:40-42 (esp. v. 42).
4. Is caring for the needy is equivalent to discipleship? Or is the sum of discipleship caring for the needy without keeping score? How does 2 Thessalonians 3:10 inform this discussion, if at all?
5. Create a story timeline, noting that the separation occurs before either group is told what they have or haven't done. The sheep are blessed not for their "good deeds," but because they are sheep, God's people. As sheep, they behave in ways that bring good things for the needy and to Christ.
6. Ask a leader of your church's ministry of compassion to speak about their efforts to offer pastoral care and encouragement to others as a mandate from Jesus.