

# DISCIPLE FAST TRACK

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“As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, ‘Follow me,’ and he got up and followed him.”  
—Matthew 9:9

## 1 Radical Discipleship

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### OUR HUMAN CONDITION

We are anxious. We conform to our culture, knowing all the while that it is sick and riddled with brokenness and confusion.

Jesus is a constant threat to our established ways. His lifestyle conflicts with our values. We hope he will go away; but when he keeps coming on, we reject, ridicule, and finally crucify him.

### ASSIGNMENT

As you study and read Matthew, notice two different emphases: (1) the call to radical discipleship and (2) the mounting tension that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. In the early portions of Matthew, look especially for value clashes, religious controversy, and political conflicts.

Then as you approach what is classically called the Passion (arrest, trial, the Crucifixion, and burial) and the Resurrection, read slowly and ponder.

Pray daily before study:

“Turn my heart to your laws,  
not to greedy gain.

Turn my eyes away from looking at  
worthless things.

Make me live by your way.

Confirm your promise to your servant—  
the promise that is for all those who  
honor you” (Psalm 119:36-38).

Prayer concerns for the week:

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**Day 1 Read Matthew 1–6** (birth narrative, radical discipleship).

**Day 2 Read Matthew 7–13** (the mission, secrets of the Kingdom).

**Day 3 Read Matthew 14–18** (life and leadership in the church, religious controversy).

**Day 4 Read Matthew 19–23** (entry into Jerusalem, being ready for judgment).

**Day 5 Read Matthew 24–28** (political conflicts, the Last Supper, the Resurrection, Great Commission).

**Day 6 Read “The Bible Teaching” and the “Marks of Discipleship” and answer the questions.**

**Day 7 Rest, pray, and attend class.**

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## THE BIBLE TEACHING

From the opening words of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew is making a statement: Jesus, the Son of David, has come to be the Savior for all humankind. His name was Jesus, a derivative of *Joshua*, meaning literally, "Yahweh is salvation."

Matthew arranged the genealogy into three groups of fourteen names each (Matthew 1:17). He omitted a few kings in order to achieve this neatness. But why three groups? Because Jewish history had three great stages: Abraham to David, David to exile in Babylon, and exile in Babylon to Jesus Christ. And women's names are included—most unusual in an ancient Jewish genealogy.

Matthew wanted his Jewish readers to understand that Jesus came first of all to his own people, the Jews. However, the wise men, who are thought to have been Gentiles "from the east," show that Jesus came to save Gentiles also.

Tension surrounding Jesus began with his birth. When the wise men from the east (Gentiles) asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2), a political crisis arose. Herod the Great carried precisely that title, and he feared any other claimant to the throne. He was ruler of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. He murdered his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his uncle, and according to Matthew, all the children under two years old in Bethlehem to protect that title. He was one of the most important rulers in the Roman Empire, and his purpose was always to protect that status.

Jesus, by contrast, was born in a tiny village of Jewish peasant stock, a refugee in Egypt (like the Hebrew slaves), a carpenter in a poor section of the country. He had no wealth or political power and rejected the title of king (the common notion of Messiah was that of a political leader).

Matthew contrasts the Herods—powerful rulers and representatives of the Roman Empire—and Jesus, who filled the dual role of successor to King David and Son of God, the only true ruler of the Jews. The contrast and the conflict between the Herods and Jesus run through the Gospel from beginning to end.

### The Call to Radical Discipleship

Jesus made an absolute demand. When he said, "Follow me," he meant leaving something or someone or some place behind. To obey meant to walk into the unknown unencumbered—ready to listen, to learn, to witness, to serve. The word *disciple* means "learner."

Simon and Andrew, James and John, left their fishing nets and relatives. Matthew, also called Levi, left his tax office. Jesus offered other persons radical discipleship, but they would not break loose from the things that held them. Jesus warned a scribe, a prospective disciple, that he would often be sleeping on the ground. We hear no more of the man (Matthew 8:19-20). Another wanted to wait until his elderly father died. "Follow me,"

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said Jesus, and that man also faded (8:21-23). Still later a rich man considered discipleship. “Go, sell what you own . . . then . . . come follow me.” But the man “went away saddened, because he had many possessions” (19:16-22). Even family members cannot stand in the way of discipleship (10:34-39). The Christian must have a single eye, seeking first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness (6:33; read again 13:44-46).

The first word in Jesus’ ministry was the word *repent* (4:17). From that time Jesus began to announce, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (NRSV).

*Repent* means not only to confess and be sorry for your sins but also, and more importantly, to turn around. *Repentance* means to change directions, have a new way of thinking and living, lead a new life.

The Sermon on the Mount (5–7) distills some of Jesus’ most demanding statements:

- Speak only the truth.
- Do not lust even in your hearts.
- Root out rage from your emotions.
- Forgive without measure.
- Love your enemies.
- Pray privately.
- Wash your face when you fast so no one will know.
- Give without getting credit.
- Avoid being judgmental.
- Work for peace.

Jesus’ concern for righteousness permeates the Sermon on the Mount. These Kingdom people will be a peculiar people. They will live lives of quiet gratitude, simply asking for daily bread, just like the Israelites receiving manna in the wilderness. If persecution comes, they should be grateful. Without doubt, these new disciples are expected to live a righteousness that “is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees” (5:20).

What is the new righteousness? It is a life characterized by repentance, a life wrenched away from worldly living, now pointed in a fresh Kingdom direction.

Receiving forgiveness and new direction, disciples then extend forgiveness to others daily (as in the Lord’s Prayer) and forever (as in seventy-seven times). So repentance speaks of new beginnings and of continually fresh commitments to the ways of God.

### The Controversy

Jesus’ preaching immediately became controversial. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17-20). But look at how he interpreted the Law: “You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don’t commit murder*. . . . But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment” (5:21-22). No wonder the religious leaders began to ask, “Who does Jesus

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think he is to redefine the law of Moses? Where does he get his authority?"

Jesus' attack on superficiality was devastating, particularly in regard to religious pomp and hypocrisy.

As you read Matthew, notice Jesus' scathing denunciations of people who crave titles, places of honor, outward recognition (Matthew 6:1-7). Read again Matthew 23, the "woe" chapter, and recall Amos 4:1-5. We ought to tithe, Jesus said, but we dare not neglect weightier matters such as justice and mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23, NRSV).

Jesus challenges us economically too. We all worry about what clothes we'll wear, whether we will have enough food to eat. He said, "Gentiles [meaning those not of the people of God] long for all these things" (6:32). So we do. And to say God will clothe us and feed us if we "desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness" (6:33) threatens our me-first, money-hungry society.

## Tension With Religious Leaders

To understand the New Testament, we must know something about four influential religious groups of the period.

**Pharisees.** Laymen, not priests, forerunners of rabbis, teachers in local synagogues. Serious about interpreting and keeping the religious laws, including all the oral interpretations. Pharisees sat on "Moses' seat" in the synagogue with authority to interpret Scripture. They recognized Jesus as a teacher, hence the continued discussions. Theologically conservative, yet made room for mystery, freedom, resurrection. Great influence with the people. Some liberal, others conservative.

**Essenes.** Second largest group, scattered in all the towns, radically righteous. Thought everything in the Temple was wrong; believed the priests were illegitimate, the Temple corrupt. Rigid, legalistic, conservative. Celibate, no marriage, no children (except those adopted by the community). Ultra-scrupulous, prayed for Messiah, believed in "end times."

**Sadducees.** Priestly families, mostly living in Jerusalem and Jericho, descendants of Zadok who anointed Solomon. Aristocratic, wealthy, long-established families who assimilated much Greek and Roman culture. Believed God rewarded the good with health and wealth, punished the evil with sickness and poverty. No heaven or hell, no resurrection. Cooperated with Romans to preserve Temple worship and their own position. Controlled the Sanhedrin during Jesus' ministry. Their concern: Temple worship.

**Zealots.** Violently opposed the Roman occupation. Eager for revolt, praying for a Messiah-king to lead the uprising. Consisted of ex-slaves, superpatriots, and some bandits. Four beliefs: (a) served no one but God; (b) opposed slavery; (c) violently opposed Rome (don't pay taxes or cooperate; hide a sword in your bed; ready for Messiah); (d) preferred death, even by suicide, to slavery; willing to die for the cause.

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Now let us see why Jesus came into conflict with these religious groups. Abraham and the other ancestors were blessed in order to be a blessing (Genesis 12:2-3). Israel is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6). Instead, however, close fellowship evolved into smugness, Sabbath observance became a set of rules, and food laws made fellowship with others impossible. God, Creator of the universe, it was thought, had taken up residence in the Temple in Jerusalem. Greek culture was shunned; Roman soldiers were despised.

When Jesus said of the Roman centurion, “I say to you with all seriousness that even in Israel I haven’t found faith like this” (Matthew 8:10), his statement offended the Zealots. When he ate with ceremonially unclean people at Matthew’s dinner, his action offended the Pharisees in particular, because they were meticulous in keeping food laws and avoiding sinners as a form of righteousness (9:10-13). Jesus, like Hosea and Amos, argued that steadfast love took precedence over ceremony (see Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24). But Jesus went further than the prophets: He came precisely to bring sinners, outcasts, and alienated people into fellowship.

Jesus’ inclusiveness offended. Jewish men of the times offered a daily prayer thanking God that they had not been born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. Matthew stresses Jesus’ attention to the poor, the marginalized, the untouchable, and the foreigner.

### **The Mission**

Disciples are not just “to be.” They are called “to do.” The community of faith is thrust into mission. A leper cried out and was healed (Matthew 8:2-4). A Roman officer, a centurion in charge of one hundred soldiers, asked help for a paralyzed servant. Amazed at the faith of the Gentile soldier, Jesus remarked, “There are many who will come from east and west and sit down to eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (8:5-13). The servant was healed.

Next Jesus did what only God can do—forgive sins. The paralytic was healed. Then, Jesus called Matthew the tax collector to be a disciple. At Matthew’s dinner party, amid criticism for eating with the tax collectors who were ceremonially unclean and were hated because they collected Roman taxes, Jesus was still claiming people: “I didn’t come to call righteous people, but sinners” (9:13).

Now watch: The work of the Kingdom is designed to explode in magnitude. Jesus said to the disciples, “The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest” (9:37-38). Jesus actually expected the disciples to do the same things he had been doing! At first they are to go only to the Jews. Later they will go to the whole world. “As you go, make this announcement: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons” (10:7-8).

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Rabbis used the term *yoke* in reference to the Law. What did Jesus mean by “Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves” (11:29)?

If Jesus calls us to radical discipleship, in what sense is his yoke easy and his burden light (11:30)?

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## A Different Messiah

Jesus wanted his disciples to be more concerned about moral law than ceremonial law. Some Jewish teachers, building on oral tradition, were “majoring in minors.” Some rabbis taught that people should wash their hands ritualistically seven times before and after a meal. Jesus focused on spiritual matters: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults” (Matthew 15:19).

Tension mounted when Jesus confronted the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, asking, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). He was doing two things: establishing their faith in him as Messiah and, equally important, clarifying what kind of Messiah he was to be. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day” (16:21). The people thought Messiah would come in power, a conquering hero on a white horse.

Jesus moved the disciples to an even deeper level. The Messiah is going to suffer. The Christian community will suffer as well. But look at what happened. When Jesus said that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, Peter protested. Jesus rebuked him severely (Matthew 16:22-23). Why? Because Jesus was walking the way of the cross. We will walk it also. The cross of Jesus will be the standard for the Christian community. We will be saved by that cross. We will live by that cross.

## Watching and Waiting

The Christian community, with the leadership of the Anointed One, is both experiencing a foretaste of the Kingdom and awaiting the Kingdom’s complete fulfillment.

So, as we wait and watch, we are to be faithful to our spouses (Matthew 19:3-9) or single for Kingdom work (19:10-12), gentle and loving with children (19:13-15), and unconcerned about getting rich (19:23-30). All will get the same salvation whether early in life or at the eleventh hour, for salvation is not earned. It is

given us out of the grace of God (20:1-16). Leaders in the church are those who serve most humbly and most faithfully (20:20-28).

Jesus carefully orchestrated the entry into Jerusalem. On one hand, the Anointed One must bring the Kingdom encounter to Jerusalem. On the other hand, people must, at least in retrospect, understand what kind of Messiah he is. He must try to present Messiah not as a political king like David but as God's compassionate and holy, yet vulnerable, Son-Messenger.

## Gathering Storm

The religious leaders were afraid of Jesus, because if Jesus stirred up trouble, the Romans would come down hard on them. An insurrection could destroy everyone, especially the Temple.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus to quiet the crowd on Palm Sunday (Luke 19:39-40), they were afraid the Roman soldiers would see them as an unruly mob disturbing the peace and would kill hundreds.

Who killed Jesus? No one wanted to take the blame. The Sanhedrin, though offended by Jesus' teachings, though certain of his blasphemy, wanted him executed by Rome. So they charged him not with breaking the Jewish law but with sedition. Pilate tried to pass the buck to Herod Antipas, who had killed John the Baptist. But Herod had to go back to Galilee, where Jesus was popular. Pilate flogged Jesus, which meant almost certain death through loss of blood, infection, or tetanus. No wonder Jesus could not carry his cross.

When Sanhedrin leaders demanded Jesus' death as an enemy of Rome, Pilate did the deed yet put the blame on the religious leaders once again. The title *King of the Jews* meant another insurrectionist had been stamped out.

Who killed Jesus? Every hand lifted in anger, every lie, every act of self-interest. You and I and all the sinners of the world drove the nails.

## MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Can you see how often the church makes discipleship seem too easy? "Accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior" is so true but often superficial, lacking the radical demands, the total commitment of discipleship: Give up everything and follow Jesus.

Describe where you are in your discipleship. Have you responded to Christ's call, "Follow me"? Is anything or anyone holding you back?

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### **Mark of Discipleship**

*Disciples accept Christ's call to radical discipleship, abandoning sham and pretense, becoming vulnerable, and entering the ministry of making disciples.*

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How is radical discipleship the answer to our need to conform to culture and the status quo?

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In what areas of your life does Jesus continue to threaten your values, your lifestyle?

As a participant in the Kingdom community, what tension, if any, are you encountering in society? in the economic or political system? with your neighbors and friends? in your church?

## **IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE**

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) contains some of the highest ethical insights ever proclaimed. Study it carefully. The

Beatitudes (5:3-12) are the “essence of the essence.” Paraphrase the eight Beatitudes in your own words.

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In a Bible dictionary, look up the following people who were involved in the Crucifixion and jot down a descriptive note or two about each one: Judas Iscariot, Caiaphas, Pilate, Barabbas, Simon of Cyrene, Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea, Herod Antipas (see Luke 23:6-12).

## **SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT**

Because the commands are clear in Matthew 25, make one visit during the week to one of the following places or persons: a drug rehabilitation center, a rescue mission, a hospital, a person with cancer, a nursing home, a jail or penitentiary, a person who is homebound, a person with a handicapping condition, a shelter for the homeless, a teenager who does not go to church, a person on social welfare, a person of another culture. If appropriate, take a small gift (toothpaste to jail, cookies to homebound persons, reading material, flowers). Don't do all the talking; be there to listen. Especially try to go into a situation where you have never been before. Be ready to tell the group members next week about your experience and what you learned about yourself.