



Session 3: Matthew 14-16:12

for the week of October 3rd

The Compassion of the Shepherd-King

After the collection of Jesus' teaching parables in chapter 13, Matthew returns to his narrative story of Jesus' ministry. The narrative in chapter 14 picks up with continued hostility towards the ministry of Jesus, now from the threat of Herod who hears of Jesus' spreading fame.¹ Herod thinks that Jesus is John the Baptist back from the dead, and, to illustrate the threat Herod posed and Herod's resistance to the kingdom of God, Matthew goes on to recount the story of John's execution at the order of Herod. Because it is not yet time for his own death, we see Jesus withdraw from the hostilities. Nonetheless, Jesus continues to be followed by crowds in the densely populated region of Galilee.² These chapters go on to record miracles of healing that Jesus does for the people following him, interactions with the religious leadership of the day, and important confessions from the disciples as to the identity of Jesus.

Even as he tries to withdraw for rest and privacy, Jesus' interaction with the crowds in these chapters is not marked by annoyance but rather compassion.³ This compassion is demonstrated by his care for the crowds through healings and the multiplication of loaves and fishes to feed them. Jesus even responds to the requests of a Canaanite woman, even though Jesus makes clear that his ministry was meant to be directed towards the house of Israel.

This compassion of Jesus is set in stark contrast to the religious leadership of the day who seek out Jesus only to accuse him of wrongdoing. Though these religious leaders were meant to function as faithful shepherds of God's people, Jesus reveals that they are more like the evil shepherds of Ezekiel 34, while Jesus is presented by Matthew as the fulfillment of God's promise to rescue his scattered sheep.⁴

Three religious groups come up in these chapters: the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. The scribes had committed themselves to the study and transmission of the Jewish scriptures and thus were experts on Old Testament law and Jewish traditions. The Pharisees were primarily laymen who had devoted themselves to strict obedience to the law, in hopes that they might conserve the Jewish way of life and usher in the kingdom of God in the midst of Roman occupation. The Sadducees, a group usually at odds with the Pharisees, were a Jewish priestly class that had made political compromises with the Romans and even integrated Hellenism into their beliefs. These groups, particularly the Pharisees, had adopted the "tradition of the elders" mentioned in 15:2, which was an oral set of teachings applying Jewish law to specific situations. These oral traditions date back to at least the 5th century BC and were viewed by the Pharisees as having "very nearly equal" status with the Jewish scriptures.⁵ Yet in 15:3-6, Jesus accuses them of using these traditions to disregard the actual law of God.

¹ Note that this is Herod the Tetrarch, son of King Herod the Great.

² Galilee, a region that was a little more than one thousand square miles, was reported by Josephus, the Jewish historian, to have had a population of 15000 or more with more than 200 towns in the area.

³ See 14:14 and 15:32.

⁴ See Ezekiel 34:12.

⁵ D. A. Carson, "[Matthew](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 348.

In these chapters, we also read of the well-known miracle of Jesus walking on water in 14:22-33. Notice Jesus “makes” the disciples leave the crowd and cross the lake (v. 22). The Greek word for “make” here is a strong verb that suggests Jesus had to compel his disciples to leave. The disciples likely wanted to remain amidst the excitement of the crowds, but Jesus had a purpose for sending them on ahead. This purpose seems to be the revelation of his identity as the Son of God that is emphasized throughout this passage. When the disciples see Jesus approaching them on the water, they do not recognize him and are filled with fear. Notice Jesus’ response in verse 27: “Take heart, it is I.” The Greek of “it is I” is literally “I am.” A phrase used in the gospels by Jesus that hearkens back to the revelation of God in Exodus as “I am.” Finally, after Jesus’ miracle of walking on water and his saving of Peter, the disciples worship and exclaim: “Truly you are the Son of God.” This revelation of Jesus’ deity anticipates Peter’s climactic confession and Jesus’ promise in 16:13-20.

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Discussion⁶

- 1) Herod hears about Jesus and thinks he is John the Baptist (*Matt. 14:1–2*). Matthew has already shown similarities between John and Jesus (for example, *Matt. 3:2; 4:17*). In light of this, how does the story about John in *Matthew 14:1–12* anticipate what will happen to Jesus?
- 2) The scene of Jesus’ miraculous feeding recalls the nation of Israel wandering in the wilderness after the exodus and God’s gracious provision of manna (*Exodus 16*). The significance of 12 basketfuls may be that it recalls the 12 tribes of Israel. How do the disciples’ responses to Jesus in *Matthew 14:15* parallel Moses’ response to God in *Numbers 11:21–22*?
- 3) Jesus walks on the raging sea and declares to his terrified disciples, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (*Matt. 14:27*). “It is I” is *ego eimi* in Greek; literally, “I am”— a phrase that shows up first in God’s naming of himself in *Exodus 3:14* and subsequently in *Isaiah 41:4; 43:10*. Read those texts as well as *Isaiah 41:10* and *43:1–10* as you consider what Jesus is here declaring about himself.
- 4) When the Pharisees indignantly asked why Jesus’ disciples disregard one of their religious rules, Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites. Identify the reasons Jesus gives for calling them this (*Matt. 15:1–9*). According to Jesus’ teaching in the following section in *Matthew 15:10–20* (esp. 18–20), what do the Pharisees not understand?
- 5) Nearly all of Jesus’ ministry took place within the traditional borders of Israel in areas dominated by Jews. Yet *Matthew 15:21–39* presents Jesus traveling in Gentile territory. What do the three stories in this section show us about the response of Gentiles to him?
- 6) The descriptions of Jesus’ ministry throughout these chapters echo the Old Testament anticipation for God to come as a “Shepherd-King” who would perfectly lead and care for his people (see *Ezekiel 34:11-16*). In addition to teaching us about the divinity of Jesus, what does this image of Jesus as Shepherd-King teach us about the character of Jesus? How can we seek to rest in his compassionate care even today as we live by faith in him?

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer together, praying for each other’s needs and that the Spirit will grant us a deeper understanding of the goodness and authority of Christ and empower us for living as representative of his kingdom in this world.

⁶ Some questions adapted from *Knowing the Bible: Matthew* by Drew Hunter.