

The Compass

Week 3

OT Readings – Genesis 32:13-45:28

NT Readings - Matthew 11:7-14:36

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- The story of Jacob continues; however, in chapter 37 the narrative shifts focus to Jacob's son Joseph.
- Jacob's change of heart and character are revealed; he reconciles with his brother and there is a genuine humility in his outlook on life. At the end, looking back over his life, he will acknowledge God's presence and activity (Gen. 48:15).
- His remarkable encounter with God (Gen. 32:24-32) leads to his name change and marks a significant point in his life.¹ No longer "deceiver" he is Israel, "he who strives with God."²
- The Joseph narrative is one of the most engaging in the Bible. As you read, look for both Joseph's maturing, as he is shaped into what God intends, and God's role in the story.³

New Testament

- Following Gordon Fee's outline, two sections of Matthew are involved in this week's readings: Matt. 11:1-13:52 and Matt. 13:53-18:35.⁴ Remember that each section contains the storyline and a portion of Jesus teaching.
- Again and again we find Jesus in conflict with the religious leaders whose rigidity keep them from seeing their Messiah right in their midst. "Religiosity" is a danger for all of us - what might you learn from these conflicts about your own tendency toward being religious?
- Pay special attention to the many parables in this section. Especially important are the kingdom parables to be found in 13:31-33. The parable of the soils and its explanation (Matt. 13) give insight into how the parables work and their purpose.⁵

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Matt. 11:28-30. While God makes very few "autobiographical" statements in the Bible (see Exod. 34:6-7); this passage is one. We must never forget that Jesus was God among us in human form (Jn. 1:14, 14:7-9); what Jesus says and does tells us what God is like. In this passage we learn that He is not a harsh and demanding task-master seeking to "work us to exhaustion," but a gentle and humble leader who seeks to bring us into a place of rest. He desires to teach us; not to impose "rules and regulations" by which He can judge us (so many have just such a distorted view of God), but to develop a love relationship with us. Our obedient responsiveness to Him in this love relationship allows us to experience His peace and rest.⁶

Application: "What about me? How does this apply?"

Gen. 32:24-32. Jacob finds himself alone and is confronted by a "man" with whom he "wrestles" until dawn. He then discovers that he has had an encounter with God "face to face." God initiates this moment and comes to Jacob; but it is Jacob who grabs hold of God and refuses to let Him go until God blesses him (12:26).

What about you? Is your relationship with God quite casual, passive or do grab hold of God and seek Him until you really have come to know Him? Are you satisfied with your present relationship with God or are you "wrestling" passionately, persistently to know Him better?

Difficult Question of the Week

Question: “What is the *unpardonable sin*?” (Matt. 12:31-32)

This is one of the most often misunderstood and misinterpreted passages in the Bible. It often brings upon people, especially those of sensitive conscience, great fear and anxiety. How should we understand it?

The idea here is to *blaspheme* the Holy Spirit, not simply “speak” ill of Him. The context of this passage defines exactly what Jesus meant. Jesus has been casting out demons by the Holy Spirit’s power. The Pharisees, in their opposition to Him, have accused Him of exercising these demons with Satan’s power; thus, attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. For the Pharisees this is no mistaken notion or angry slip of the tongue, rather an intentioned and deliberate stand against Jesus’ work in the Holy Spirit’s power – hence a stand against the Holy Spirit Himself. The verses that follow (12:33-37) show that one’s decision for or against Jesus (12:30) comes from the heart and produces accompanying fruit in one’s life. In effect then, the “unpardonable sin” is to openly and knowingly “declare oneself against God.” (France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 483.).

Can we repent of this heart attitude and be forgiven? Yes! In fact, that’s what true repentance is – to turn from my resistance and rebellion against God, and with a humble heart surrender my life completely to Him (Rom. 5:1-11). So what then is the “unpardonable sin” that cannot be forgiven? It is to persist in our rebellion against God and never repent – such that we cross over the line into death without ever surrendering our life to God.⁷

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¹ He walks with a limp for the remainder of his life because of this moment with God; yet, more is touched than his body.

² The exact meaning of “Israel” is debated. God reveals Himself to Jacob again to affirm this new name and new place in relationship with God (Gen. 35:9f.).

³ While God is not often mentioned directly in the Joseph story, He is *always* there. Biblical narrative (story/history) always assumes God as one of the characters in the drama, in fact the most important One. It is “His-story.”

⁴ See Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart’s book *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Zondervan, 2002).

⁵ Obviously, those parables which Jesus explains help us to understand all the parables. Was it Jesus intent in teaching in parables to obscure the truth? I think, to the contrary, that the parables were intended to make the truth *clear*, especially to those who were not responding to the more direct ways He presented truth. Parables are “mini-stories;” like all stories, they communicate truth in powerful ways. Perhaps Jesus in His mercy was attempting to reach those who had refused to hear Him thus far. Gordon Fee says in reference to parables, “Jesus was not trying to be obtuse; he fully intended to be understood.” (Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 151. Zondervan, 3rd edition, 2003. This excellent book has a helpful chapter on how to understand parables.)

⁶ The yoke metaphor is intended to contrast the heavy burdens imposed by the religious leaders (Matt. 23:4, also Gal. 5:1) with the “easy” one given by Jesus to His disciples. This is not to discount the demands of discipleship (Matt. 16:24-27); rather to show that meeting such demands will release us into God’s rest for us. Obedience to God and His truth is how we conform our lives to our created design and purpose; unquestionably, if we live the way we were created we will find rest and peace. The heart of Jesus is revealed in this passage. His gentle and humble heart will lead us to experience true rest and peace as we learn and grow in our relationship with Him.

⁷ The Holy Spirit is “the hound of heaven” who pursues us with God’s love. He does this until we choose to either surrender to His love or resist Him and die without Him. It is important to understand that every time we encounter the Spirit, we either “soften” our hearts and respond in obedience to Him OR “harden” our hearts and resist. The danger is that we can so sear or callous our conscience that we will no longer hear Him, even if He shouting in our ear! Today is the day to immediately respond to His tender appeals!