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The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

September 3, 10, 17, 24 and October 1
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September 3, The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 16:21–28

In what follows, we weave together Matthew 16:13–16 and 16:21–28.

- In **16:13–16**, Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah.
- In **16:21–21**, Jesus predicts His coming passion, and His eventual return to life.
- In **16:22**, Peter rebukes Jesus, and says that the thought of Jesus giving up His life is totally unacceptable.
- In **16:23**, Jesus tells Peter that he is on the side of the devil!

In **16:24–26**, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to take up their cross and follow Him. Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who find life “for Jesus’ sake” (i.e., they devote themselves to following Jesus in life-long servanthood) will find it. They will find it by giving it away in service to others—full-time, in all that they think, do, and say. After all, people may gain possession of the whole world but forfeit their life in the process.

Much is to be gained by pondering the **prediction–confusion–clarification** elements in Mark’s three passion prediction narratives (listed in the previous section).

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus opens the eyes of a blind man in the vicinity of Bethsaida (8:22–26) *immediately before* He predicts His passion for the first time (8:27–38). And He touches his eyes *twice*! He opens the eyes of blind Bartimaeus (10:46–52) *immediately after* predicting His passion for a third time (10:32–45). Why did Jesus touch the first blind man *twice*? What is the message? The disciples understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but did not understand what being a disciple of Jesus would mean for them. Their eyes would be opened only after Jesus’ resurrection when they would “see” the Risen Lord in Galilee (Mark 16:1–8); note *see* in 16:7.

The question for us, God’s people today, is: “Although we believe in Jesus as forgiving Savior, do we understand what it means to follow Him as Servant Lord in all that we think, say, and do?”

The truths embedded in this and the next paragraph have been referred to numerous times in previous studies. In all four Gospels, every time Jesus predicts His coming passion in Jerusalem, He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.” The term is drawn from Daniel 7, especially 7:13. The message of Daniel 7, addressed to the Jewish people suffering under the Syrian ruler Antiochus I “Epiphanes,” during the period 168/167–165/164 BC, is that although they have suffered under a series of foreign powers (the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, and now Seleucids), the time is about to break in when they will be given domination and rule over the nations of the world **forever**. Jesus reverses that hope and calls His people **to devote life to serving each other and humanity at large forever**.

The term *gospel* is used four times in Matthew, eight times in Mark, but not at all in Luke or John. However, Paul uses it 72 times in his writings—and Christianity has by and large focused on Paul’s understanding of the term. However, the four Gospels use the term “Son of Man” 82 times—Matthew 30, Mark 14, Luke 25, and John 13. Indeed God’s people need to grapple with Jesus’ definition of the term, and its significance for their own faith walk.

In our confused world, the following two articles are well worth pondering.

The Mightiest Nation

(The following timeless column by Arthur Hoppe first appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle on May 27, 1973, and was reprinted on July 22, 1999.)

“Once upon a time there was a country that was very small, and, on the whole, very good. Its citizens were proud, independent, self-reliant, and generally prosperous. They believed in freedom and justice and equality. But, above all, they had faith. They had faith in their religion, their leaders, their country, and themselves.

“And, of course, they were ambitious. Being proud of their country, they wanted to make it bigger. First, they conquered the savage tribes that hemmed them in. Then they fought innumerable wars on land and sea with foreign powers to the east and west and south. They won almost all the battles they fought and conquered foreign lands. “It took many generations, but at last the good, little country was the richest and mightiest nation in the whole wide world—admired, respected, envied, and feared by one and all. ‘We must remain the mightiest nation,’ said its leaders, ‘so that we can ensure universal peace and make everyone as prosperous and decent and civilized as we are.’ “At first, the mightiest nation was as good as its word. It constructed highways and buildings and pipelines and hygienic facilities all over the world. And for awhile, it even kept the peace. But being the mightiest nation in the world, its leader was the mightiest man in the world. And, naturally, he acted like it. He surrounded himself with a palace guard of men chosen solely for their personal loyalty. He usurped the powers of the Senate, signing treaties, waging wars, and spending public funds as he saw fit. “When little countries far away rebelled, he sent troops without so much as a by-your-leave. And the mightiest nation became engaged in a series of long, costly, inconclusive campaigns in far away lands. So some disillusioned soldiers refused to obey orders and some sailors mutinied, even though the leader raised their pay. And in some places the mightiest nation hired mercenaries to do its fighting. And because it was the richest nation, it worshiped wealth and the things that wealth bought. But the rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer through unfair tax laws. And in the capital one in five were idle and on welfare. When the poor grumbled, they were entertained by highly paid athletes and the firing of expensive rockets into the air,

which sometimes fizzled. But the poor often rioted and looted and burned in their frustrated rage.

“Many citizens lost faith in their old religion and turned to Oriental mysticism. And the young, wearing long hair and sandals, became Jesus freaks. Bare-breasted dancers, lewd shows, and sex orgies were increasingly common. And the currency was debased again and again to meet the mounting debts. Worst of all, the citizens came to learn that their leaders were corrupt—that the respected palace guard was selling favors to the rich and sending spies among the people, creating fear and distrust. “So it was that the people lost faith. They lost faith in their leaders, their currency, their rockets, their postal system, their armies, their religion, their laws, their moral values, their country and, eventually, themselves. And, thus, in 476 AD, Rome fell to the barbarians and the Dark Ages settled over Western civilization.” **Moral:** *For what is a nation profited if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?*

How Long Do We Have?

(About the time the original thirteen colonies of the United States adopted their new constitution in 1787, Alexander Tyler, a Scottish history professor at the University of Edinburgh, had this to say about the fall of the Athenian Republic some 2,000 years earlier.)

A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government.

A democracy will continue to exist until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury.

From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.

The average age of the world’s greatest civilizations from the beginning of history has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, those nations always progressed through the following sequence:

1. From bondage to spiritual faith;
2. From spiritual faith to great courage;
3. From courage to liberty;
4. From liberty to abundance;
5. From abundance to complacency;
6. From complacency to apathy;
7. From apathy to dependence;
8. From dependence back into bondage.

We would do well to ponder the above two articles and their implications for today’s world.

September 10, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 18:15–20

This passage is part of Jesus’ fourth discourse in Matthew’s Gospel—a discourse that focuses on humility and forgiveness. When pondering the message of 18:15–20, it is important to give thought also to the message of the following passages:

- Luke 17:3

- 1 Corinthians 6:1–6
- Galatians 6:1
- James 5:19–20
- Leviticus 19:17

In earlier verses of ch. 18, Jesus defines true greatness (vv. 1–5); teaches about dealing with temptations to sin, vv. 6–9; and tells the parable of the Lost Sheep (how to deal with one who has strayed from Jesus' community).

In **18:15–20**, Jesus focuses on how his followers are to deal with one who sins yet remains within the community. The procedure is to be as follows:

- First, there is to be a private one-on-one correction (v. 15).
- If this fails, there is to be further correction before two or three witnesses (v. 16).
- If this makes no impact, the matter is to be brought before the assembled community. If the sinner refuses to respond positively to the correction of the community, he is to be expelled (v. 17), treated as though he is a *Gentile* or a *tax collector*—strong terms). The community's judgment will be ratified in Heaven, i.e. by God (v. 18).

The three-step process outlined above corresponds in some measure (although not completely) to that practiced by the Essenes within the Qumran community.

The section ends with a saying about how God responds positively to prayer, even to prayers offered by a very small number. After all, Jesus is always in the midst of any gathering, no matter how small.

In the four Gospels, the term *church* is used only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. In the latter verse, the reference is to the local congregation, not to the church-at-large.

As observant Jews avoided the company of Gentiles and tax collectors, so must a congregation of Christian disciples separate themselves from any arrogantly sinful members who refuse to repent when convicted of their sin by the whole church. Such persons are to be set outside the fellowship of the community.

The harsh language denigrating “Gentiles” and “tax collectors” probably reflects a stage of the Matthean church when it was composed of mainly Jewish Christians. That time had long since passed, but the principle of exclusion for such a sinner remained. Note also Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13.

The New Testament writings speak of the church as a community of *caring, sharing, servant people* whose concern is never to point a condemning finger at others, but to point others to Jesus as forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. Members are to show others the Jesus they want them to know, believe in, and follow. The New Testament writings alone (and not human traditions and customs) are to define sin. The goal of Jesus' brothers and sisters must be to *win* others, not to *whack* them.

**September 17, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 18:21–35
or John 3:13-17 (Holy Cross Day)**

Matthew 18:21–35

The focus of this final section of Matthew 18 is the forgiveness that the disciples are to manifest toward fellow disciples who sin against them. Embedded in this section is the parable of the unforgiving servant. In this parable, Jesus warns that His heavenly Father will give those who do not forgive the same treatment as that given to the unmerciful servant.

V. 21: Peter asks how often forgiveness is to be granted.

V. 22: Jesus answers that it is to be given without limit. Jesus' brothers and sisters are to forgive others for what they are and to focus on helping them become what Jesus wants them to be.

“Seventy times seven”: The Greek text in Matthew corresponds to the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Genesis 4:24. There is possibly an allusion in v. 22, by contrast, to the limitless *vengeance* of Lamech. However, what is demanded of Jesus' disciples is limitless *forgiveness*.

V. 23: This verse sets the stage for the parable that follows.

V. 24: The “ten thousand talents” referred to is a huge amount. In the Gospels, the term *talent* is referred to only here and in Matthew 25:14–30. The talent was a unit of coinage of high but varying value depending on the metal from which it was made (gold, silver, copper) and its place of origin.

V. 25: Because the debtor has no way of repaying what he owes the king, he and his wife, children, and property are to be sold in payment for the debt.

V. 26: The debtor makes an empty promise—given the size of the debt.

V. 27: The debtor's master has pity on him, releases him, and forgives him the debt.

V. 28–30: The debtor who has been forgiven so much now goes out and brutally demands that a fellow slave repay him a debt that amounted to a paltry sum—a hundred denarii. A denarius was the normal daily wage paid to a laborer. The difference between the two amounts is enormous and points to the absurdity of the conduct of Christians who have received the great forgiveness of God and yet refuse to forgive the relatively minor offenses done to them by others.

V. 31: The victim's fellow slaves see what has taken place and report the matter to their lord.

Vv. 32–34: The lord then rebukes the one who had owed him so much, and hands him over to be tortured until he repays the entire big debt (vv. 32–34). Since the debt is so great as to be unpayable, the punishment will be endless.

V. 35: The punch line surfaces in this verse. The Father's forgiveness, already given, will be withdrawn at the Final Judgment from those who have not imitated God's forgiveness by not forgiving others.

John 3:13–17

Vv. 1–2: John 3:1–21 outlines a conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of

the Jews who served on the Jewish governing council referred to as the Sanhedrin. As a Pharisee, he is a student of the Jewish scriptures and a teacher of the people. He does not come to Jesus by night because he is frightened of the reaction of his fellow rulers; in John's Gospel there has not, as yet, been any major clash between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. For a Rabbi, nighttime was the period for the serious study of Scripture. The Pharisees were laypeople whose jobs kept them busy during the day. In other words, here we have a leading theologian who represents Judaism coming to Jesus to talk theology. He calls Jesus a rabbi, but grants that Jesus has some special authority from God since His teaching is accompanied by signs. Judaism here faces One Who soon shows that He is more than a teacher; He is God's Savior and Messiah (3:15-16).

The Secret of Rebirth (vv. 3–8): Jesus does not speak about the Law, not even about His own Person—at least, not immediately. He points to the great gift that He brings: the new birth which is the only way of entering the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus completely misunderstands Jesus' words "being born from above." How can a physical birth be repeated? How can a person crawl back into his mother's womb? The idea is ridiculous! Human misunderstanding again gives Jesus the chance to reveal the truth, introduced (as often in John's Gospel) with the solemn formula, "Very truly"; see John 1:51 and 3:5, 11.

The new birth is not a physical event, even though it begins with the washing of water. It is a rebirth by the power of the Spirit—the Spirit who, as John the Baptist had prophesied, would come with the Messiah (1:33). Man as flesh has a human origin; he cannot change himself. It is only the Holy Spirit who can create new life in a person.

To be born anew thus means to be born from above, to become part of God's world that is above this world into which we are naturally born. How this new birth takes place in Baptism is a mystery that can be compared to the mystery of the wind. The Greek word for *Spirit* also means wind or breath. Jesus points to the wind in the treetops to show how powerless man is over the movement of the Spirit. We can see the wind and the Spirit at work, but we cannot dictate which way the wind should blow, or how the Spirit should work. The work of the Spirit is a gracious mystery.

The Mystery of the Son (vv. 9–15): New birth comes from above. Nicodemus cannot understand this—although he is a teacher of Israel—until he understands Who is speaking to him. Jesus can speak of heavenly things in earthly pictures only because He Himself is from above and has the Spirit in full measure (3:31–34). Once more, as in 2:22, we find a clear promise of Jesus' resurrection (v. 13). Jesus' ascension to the Father will be the final sign that Jesus is the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13) Who has come down to earth from heaven to be the Savior of God's people. But first He will be lifted up on a cross (v. 14).

The Israelites once looked to Moses' brass serpent erected in the wilderness, and were saved from snake bite. When Jesus has been raised up on the cross between heaven and earth, people will be able to look to Him in faith and be saved from far more than snake poison; see Numbers 21:9.

Vv. 16: There is probably no better-known or frequently quoted verse in the whole Bible than John 3:16. It gives us a full, yet beautifully simple, statement of the Gospel of salvation. It all goes back to the love of God for a world that He created. The world fell into sin, but God never gave up His love for sinners. He is not like an offended lover who reacts in anger when rejected or spurned. No, He continues to love and He acts to win back what He loves. A sinful world is won back not by threats, but by the supreme act of love, the sacrifice of God's own dear Son.

Paul expressed the Gospel-in-a-nutshell in the following words, “But God proves His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Faith in Christ means two things: accepting Christ as both the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The two aspects cannot be separated, for only God’s Son could remove the guilt of the world of sinners and give Eternal Life, which cannot be destroyed by physical death and the grave.

The Crisis of Christ (v. 17): God did not send His Son as a judge, seeking revenge, demanding God’s rights against rebels. He came as our Savior. But His appearance in history has meant a new and final crisis for humanity. The Greek word *krisis* means judgment, and judgment means separating truth from falsehood, innocence from guilt, faith from unbelief, light from darkness, life from death. “What do you think of Jesus Christ?” is the key question of history, which leads to the division between believers and unbelievers.

September 24, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 20:1–16

The Parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard is found only in Matthew. The storyline focuses on a landowner’s surprising generosity and points to the equality of all disciples in relation to the “reward” of inheriting eternal life. Immediately following the parable, Jesus predicts His coming passion for the third time (20:17–19). This third passion prediction sets the stage for the request of the mother of James and John, who comes seeking a special status for her two sons (20:20–28). The passage about two uncomprehending disciples and their mother is designed to be read in close connection with the narrative that follows in which Jesus heals two blind men (20:29–34).

The parable is bracketed by Jesus’ words on the shocking reversal in store for the first and the last; see 19:30 and 20:16. It follows up on Peter’s anxious question (19:27), “We have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” Behind Peter’s question is the thought, “What then will we, the *first twelve disciples*, receive—and what will I, the *first among the twelve*, get as a reward?”

Standing where it does in Matthew’s Gospel, the parable is part of Jesus’ response to Peter’s outburst and is directed at church leaders of the earliest generation and their nervous successors, who are anxious about rewards for their efforts and are vying for privileged positions. The parable is an excellent prelude to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (ch. 21) and His final days in that city.

V. 1: The landowner is not an enormously wealthy absentee landlord, but an independent grower with a *vineyard* (a symbol of God’s people, Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 12:10). The vineyard is too large for him to work entirely on his own. He walks to the village square at about six in the morning to hire laborers. Poor agricultural workers showed up in the market place each morning hoping to be hired—hoping to exchange their energy and ability for a piece of silver to keep their families fed, housed, and clothed.

V. 2: The landowner contracts with some laborers for a denarius (the regular day’s wage) per day. A denarius was the minimum daily income required to sustain a small family.

Vv. 3–5: Anxious about the harvest, the owner returns to the square to hire additional hands at 9 a.m., midday, and 3 p.m. He promises to pay whatever is right.

Vv. 6–7: It is astonishing that late in the day, at 5 o’clock in the evening, the landowner sends still more workers into the vineyard. Although one could question why he does this at such a late hour, the parable itself focuses on the exact number of hours worked and on the hope of payment cherished by those peasants as they compare work hours. The elaborate, but somewhat artificial, details build a

pattern of expectation.

V. 8: At quitting time, around 6 in the evening, the workers line up in an order that is the absolute reverse of anything like seniority related to work hours. The landowner's manager, acting on his master's instructions, pays out their wages beginning with the last hired up to the first hired.

Vv. 9–10: When those who had worked for only one hour each receive a denarius, the others possibly cheer the landowner's generosity, expecting that they will receive proportionately more. But each of them also receives a denarius.

Vv. 11–12: When those hired first, who have borne the burden of the day and scorching heat, see that they receive no more than those hired near the close of the day, they grumble against the landowner.

Vv. 13–14: One vocal laborer is pictured as representing all those who had been hired at the beginning of the day—and speaks up as Peter had done (19:27). To that one (and through him to all his companions) the owner responds, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong." He explains to the man that he is giving him (and to all whom he hired early in the morning) precisely what they had agreed on.

V. 15: As to his generosity toward latecomers, the owner protests that he has the right to do as he pleases with his property. Then he asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" The sentence literally reads, "Is your eye evil (jealous or greedy, cf. 6:22–23) because I am good?" (cf. 19:16).

V. 16: Jesus is not announcing a set of rules to guide the economies of the nations until doomsday. He is vividly describing two contrasting patterns of human conduct. On the one hand, behavior is totally determined by a web of contractual relationships where everything is precisely weighed, recorded, calculated, and balanced. But the parable contrasts such civilized calculations with shocking and undeserved generosity, with an unbounded and energetic goodness that simply reaches out in blessing. The landowner's actions are based on goodness and generosity. The laborer's response is based on greed and envy!

Although in Jesus' day, some Jewish rabbis taught that the most righteous will receive the most privileged place (at the Seventh Level, with the best sofas and best food) in the life to come, Jesus teaches that those welcomed into His Eternal Home will dwell and dine at the same level. To Him alone be the glory!

October 1, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 21:23–32

Matthew 21:23–27 describes the first of five controversies (21:23–22:46) between Jesus and the religious leaders of Judaism, presented in the form of questions and answers.

V. 23, Most likely, the reference to *these things* pertains to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, His attack on the Temple's "salvation marketing system," and His healing actions there (21:1–14).

Vv. 24–25a: Jesus responds to their question with a counter-question—a practice that was common in rabbinical debate. His question relates to the source of John the Baptist's authority. Was John's authority of divine or human origin?

Vv. 25b–27b: The religious leaders know full well that Jesus has cornered them! If they respond that

John's authority was of *heavenly* origin, Jesus will say to them, "Then why did you not believe him?" If they say that John's authority was of *human* origin, the crowds will respond in anger, for they regarded John as a prophet. So they show themselves incapable of speaking with authority, with the result that Jesus refuses to discuss with them *the source of His own authority*.

Vv. 28–30: The parable that Jesus tells in these verses could point merely to the difference between saying and doing—a theme of great importance in Matthew's Gospel. However, it is given a more specific application by the addition of vv. 31–32. The two sons represent, respectively, the religious leaders and the religious outcasts who followed John's call to repentance. The religious leaders condemn themselves by the answer they give to Jesus' question.

V. 31: Jesus states, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Most likely the meaning is, "They enter. You do not!"

V. 32: Several interpretations are possible: John himself was righteous, that he taught righteousness to others, or that he played an important role in relation to God's plan of salvation.