

Lessons from Matthew 15-28

Application of Chapter 15

The paramount importance of not only a biblically-based, but also a heart-based spirituality from which our outward actions spring, because we care most about what God thinks rather than just what other people think.

For our worship to be acceptable to God, it must be “in spirit” as well as “in truth” (John 4:23–24), a coherence of inward and outward religion as the prophets repeatedly insist (see, e.g., Isa 29:13; Jer 7:3–11; Mic 6:6–8).

The key ingredient from start to finish in following Jesus is faith, itself a gift (Heb 12:1–2), illustrated best in the Gospels not by the Jewish followers of Jesus, but by Gentiles (Matt 8:10; 15:28). In every difficulty, a prayer for mercy, such as the Canaanite woman expressed, is the way forward. “Why should the sons and daughters of God be reluctant to pray, when prayer is the key in the hand of faith to unlock heaven’s storehouse, where are treasured the boundless resources of Omnipotence?”

If Jesus reigns in our hearts, we will have compassion on everyone irrespective of their differences from us. We will mingle with them because we desire their good, showing sympathy for them and ministering to their needs with the aim of winning their confidence and trust so that they will accept our invitation to join us in following Jesus.

Application of Chapter 16

Jesus’ reply to well-educated skeptics is a reminder that knowledge by itself, even a knowledge of the Scriptures, is not enough; we should also see the big picture as presented in prophecy, type, and their fulfillment.

Doubt and skepticism—as expressed in the demand for a sign—may, like leaven, work invisibly in the heart and will eventually control what a person thinks, says, and does. Even worse, its influence may taint the minds of others, blinding them to the truth and, through them, spread doubt and unbelief still further.

Like the disciples who worried that they didn’t bring enough bread, often we worry and fret over things that don’t matter nearly as much as other things to which we give little or no attention; we “strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel!” (Matt 23:24). We may, for example, be so preoccupied with physical needs that spiritual needs are underestimated or even completely overlooked (Matt 6:25–34).

Since spiritual things, which by their nature are not physical or tangible (e.g., Matt 16:6; John 3:3–8), must necessarily be explained in metaphorical terms, the Holy Spirit is needed for spiritual discernment (cf. 1 Cor 2:13–14), and the Bible is to be its own interpreter when seeking the meaning of words, phrases, and images (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

Unfortunately, sometimes major theological disagreements are ignored or deliberately set aside in order to advance political agendas within the church, such as was done by the Pharisees and Sadducees when they united against Jesus. This type of activity may hinder our unity and mission.

The closer and longer we walk with Jesus, the more clearly we will understand His teachings and be equipped to share them with others kindly, clearly, and accurately,

opening the way for people to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven and heirs of eternal life (Matt 16:17–19; 19:28–29).

Peter's sudden reversal from speaking the truth of the Father to urging Satan's will upon Jesus warns us to remain His humble, teachable, and correctable followers (cf. Jas 4:6–10).

It would be well for us to contemplate how we may become more “mindful of the things of God” rather than “the things of men,” and what it would mean to lose one's life for Jesus' sake which the church must be built is emphasized by Jesus' use of the demonstrative pronoun this Rock.

Application of Chapter 17

The disciples lost the blessing they might have received by sleeping through much of what transpired on the mount of transfiguration. “Failing to watch and pray, they had not received that which God desired to give them,—a knowledge of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”

While Peter's enthusiastic suggestion to build tabernacles for the three glorious figures may amuse us, God Himself interrupted it, urging the disciples to listen rather than speak. This reminds us that frequently, and certainly in such a rapturous experience of divine glory, silence is golden (Prov 17:27–28).

It is not the amount of faith we have but how we submit to situations that will grow our faith that determines the extent to which belief will be followed by appropriate action. “Earnest, persevering supplication to God in faith—faith that leads to entire dependence upon God, and unreserved consecration to His work—can alone avail to bring me the Holy Spirit's aid in the battle against principalities and powers.”

Not only the expression of doubt, but even just a lapse of faith on our part may make it more difficult for others to believe in God and the Bible.

Cultural expectations and/or a self-focus can blind us to some of the most important truths God may be trying to teach us, both as individuals and as a church.

Neither Jesus nor any Bible writer justifies the nonpayment of taxes, but urges cooperation with government officials to the extent that it can be done without violating any biblical principle (Matt 22:21; Rom 13:6–7; cf. 1 Pet 2:13–17).

Application of Chapter 18

The disciples' desire for position was rooted in pride and selfishness, rather than the love of God and service for Him. It reflects not the principles of God's kingdom, but the same lust for power that led to strife in heaven. Conflict will result wherever this spirit is seen.

Humility, service, and faith are childlike qualities that make one great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus grounds the counsel of Matthew 18:15–17 in Scripture (quoting Deut 19:15) as the basis for the examination of wrongdoing within the church. Such was Jesus' standard method for discerning and explaining God's will and established the hermeneutical practice for the apostles and the other New Testament writers. It should also guide our interpretation of Scripture.

It should be remembered that even those who have been removed (or who removed themselves) from church membership are not thereby cut off from the mercy and love of God, nor should they be cut off from our love and sympathy. To the contrary, they need it even more.

Since we all have been freely forgiven through faith in Christ by virtue of His atoning death for sin, His resurrection, and His mediatorial ministry in heaven, we are liberated to forgive others (cf. Matt 10:8). Having been forgiven much and accepted that forgiveness, we are enabled to love much (Luke 7:47).

Application of Chapter 19

Since God makes the husband and wife one through the process of marriage, no human being has the right to separate them through divorce (cf. 1 Cor 7:10–11), apart from the one biblically sanctioned exception—the case of sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9).

There is no biblical basis for sexual relations outside of marriage, nor for same-sex marriages, both of which would constitute sin against God’s creative design and intent.

The future tense of “the two shall become one flesh” describes a process of growing together spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually as well as physically, so that sex by itself cannot constitute marriage, but is the physical consummation of the oneness implicit in God’s blessing of the marital union.

In a divorce there are no winners; damage to all involved is inevitable and inescapable. This is especially true for children of divorced parents, which may be one reason God hates it (Mal 2:16)—because it could cause “one of these little ones who believe . . . to stumble” (Matt 18:6).

With greater light comes greater responsibility, so it should be no surprise that the standards of morality for disciples of the heavenly kingdom are higher than those that pertained in earlier periods of biblical history. But the new covenant also includes a new creation and the power of the Holy Spirit that make complete obedience possible.

The gift of celibacy mentioned by Jesus, though possessed by only a few who might otherwise enter marriage as husband and wife, provides a way, through God’s blessing, of enjoying fulfilled and meaningful lives as single persons serving the Lord. It may also resonate with those who struggle with either same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria.

No one is unimportant to Jesus. He helped even those whom others despised (Matt 15:28) or ignored (Luke 7:14–15), and every child, as potentially a citizen of heaven, should be encouraged in the things of the kingdom of God by their parents through regular family worship and prayer.

Like the rich young man, Jesus calls upon all who believe in Him to choose between clinging to “treasure” built up on earth and enjoying the more lasting heavenly treasure (Matt 6:19–21), which can be experienced now by following Jesus and learning from Him. It is a call to faith in and reliance upon Jesus rather than trusting in one’s wealth for security. Unfortunately, the more a person has, the harder it is for them to do that.

The principle of salvation by faith through God’s grace and power alone is illustrated repeatedly in Scripture: Abraham having a son through his barren wife Sarah, Israel being delivered from slavery in Egypt, Mary having a son despite being a virgin, people being

healed by Jesus with a touch or a word—all these examples and more point to the unlimited possibilities open to those who have faith.

Application of Chapter 20

As with the challenge given to the rich young man, the parable of the workers in the vineyard challenges our scale of values and our attitude toward the heavenly reward. “He who grudges the reward to another forgets that he himself is saved by grace alone. . . . It is not the length of time we labor but our willingness and fidelity in the work that makes it acceptable to God.”

The desire of James and John for self-exaltation is like that of Lucifer, which led to the rise of sin in the beginning (Isa 14:12–14). But the kingdom of heaven is characterized by self-sacrificing love and the desire to bless others.

While suffering for Christ is never welcome or pleasant, the experience can draw us into closer fellowship with Him and intensify our appreciation of His sacrifice for us (Phil 1:29; 3:10). “Of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor.”

Rather than trying to take justice into our own hands, the Bible urges us to trust in the “God of justice” and wait patiently for Him (Isa 30:18), because only He can bring peace and establish “justice in the earth” (Isa 42:4; cf. Zech 9:10).

The spirit of heaven is the spirit of service (cf. Matt 4:11). Jesus calls upon us to live counterculturally in today’s world, which is so permeated with self-serving and fixated on status, wealth, and influence.

Jesus asks nothing of His followers that He Himself has not already exemplified in His own experience (Phil 2:5–8; cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

Persevering faith, like that of the two blind men, that no opposition can quench, is an important quality for followers of Jesus. “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33; cf. 2 Tim 3:12).

Application of Chapter 21

Just as Jesus waited for the right time to fulfill the purpose of His life, setting the closing events in motion by His triumphal entry, so we should wait for the right time and way of accomplishing God’s purposes in our life. “To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven” (Eccl 3:1).

Also like Jesus, we should avoid controversy and conflict whenever possible without compromising principle, but speak up and not remain silent when biblical truth is threatened.

The action of Jesus to purify the temple illustrates the importance of having a quiet time and place for prayer and communion with God, separate from the business of the day. It also illustrates His ability to purify our hearts from worldly principles and replace them with the heavenly principles embodied in His teaching and example.

Jesus’ promise that our petitions offered in faith will be granted must be understood in relation to other biblical principles regarding prayer: that we ask in Jesus’ name and according to His will (John 13:13–14; 1 John 5:14–15), and “keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

Like the first son of the parable, regardless of what our former ways may have been, God's grace enables us to open our hearts to repentance and the transformation of heart and life through faith and acceptance of the gospel.

Jesus wept at their rejection of the only message that could save them and their city (Luke 19:41; cf. Matt 23:37). Here He presents two parables to the Jewish leaders as final warnings, because He cares about them and desperately wants to save Israel from ruin. They are also warnings to us not to ignore, resist, or reject the appeals God makes to us personally through the Scriptures and through His Spirit.

Application of Chapter 22

In the parable of the Wedding Feast the king's invitation was as wide as imaginable but only a few came. Of those who did come, not all prepared properly for the great event. This echoes warnings of Jesus (e.g., Matt 7:13–14), and the reality of a judgment to come based on our response to the invitation (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 22:12).

Sometimes it is argued that taxes are not obligatory, but Jesus is clear that they are and so is Paul (Rom 13:6; cf. Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13).

Jesus' statement to "render . . . to God the things that are God's," is a reminder that all our abilities, talents, and resources we have received. As David said, "all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You" (1 Chr 29:14).

By returning to God a tithe or ten percent of our financial resources, we acknowledge His ownership of all we have, that we are stewards of what He has entrusted to us. In addition, freewill offerings show our gratitude to God for all He has done for us, including His granting us the "power to get wealth" (Deut 8:18).

We should recognize that our own understanding is finite and not limit God's word to what we are willing to believe and practice, nor reject biblical truths that our minds consider impossible.

Application of Chapter 23

Many times it is easier to say what should be done than to actually do it. Similarly, we may evaluate what others say and do more carefully (and strictly) than we do our own practice, whereas the example of Jesus suggests we be more merciful toward others and more careful about what we say and do since these are things, through God's grace, we may change.

Only God/Christ and His Word are to be the final authority for the Christian's faith and practice. Such honorific religious titles ascribed to human beings (as distinct from their roles or occupation) are liable to be misconstrued as giving such individuals undue authority or influence over one's conscience and tend to undermine the principle of brotherly love and unity which should characterize the church.

Unlike worldly wisdom, biblical wisdom teaches humility as a sign of true greatness because it reveals that one's life has been touched by the grace of God (Prov 3:34), surrendered to His will, and aware of the need to walk humbly before Him (Mic 6:8).

Making humble service a habit results in a keener awareness of the needs of others and a deeper appreciation of Jesus, the model Servant (Matt 20:28).

The sign of a good teacher is the ability to make complicated things clear but, unfortunately, sometimes the opposite happens: things the Bible makes clear become clouded and murky through technical distinctions, numerous qualifications, or elaborate theological discussions.

The human tendency is to focus on making sure what people see on the outside looks good, whereas what God sees treasured up in our hearts matters far more (Matt 6:21; 12:35; cf. Luke 16:15; Heb 4:13). Equally important to consider is whether we will have God's blessing on what we do, or if we are determined to push ahead regardless of the warning signs He may send.

Ignoring God's Word or creating avenues of interpretation to relegate unwelcome scriptures to irrelevance is to embark on a perilous path that invites divine retribution and ultimate condemnation in the judgment.

Application of Chapter 24

Sometimes it is better to humbly listen and learn, especially when God is speaking to us through His Word. Otherwise, we may miss the message He has for us.

Protection from deception, satanic influence, and false ideas requires wisdom from God, gained primarily through a Spirit-guided study of the Scriptures (Matt 22:29; John 16:13).

While some societies offer comparative freedom of religious expression and safety from reprisals, this is never guaranteed in the Bible. As biblical principles become increasingly unpopular, it is even more important to find ways to express these principles convincingly and to have the courage to voice one's convictions with love and wisdom rather than to compromise in order to fit in with the spirit of the times.

Jesus never suggests that the whole world will be converted, but that the gospel message will be given to all the world as a witness, just as the healed leper was a witness to the priests (Matt 8:4)—possibly part of the reason for "a great many" of them eventually becoming followers of Jesus (Acts 6:7). Similarly, what we say and, even more importantly, how we say it can make an important impact for the kingdom of heaven.

The prophecies regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and by Rome (recall the preceding comments on Matt 24:15) constitute a serious warning to God's people today to avoid every form of sin and abomination, especially in light of the fact that one of end-time Babylon's most prominent epithets is "THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev 17:5).

Miracles are not always a sure sign of God's working but must be tested by whether the message accompanying them is in accordance with the Bible or not (Deut 13:1–4).

With the words, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matt 24:35), Jesus underscores the absolute and inviolable nature of the prophetic word. Prophecy is one of the surest indications of God's existence and the truthfulness of the Bible (Isa 46:9–10; 2 Pet 1:19–21). As Jesus also affirmed, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Thus, we are warned against any suggestion that parts of God's word can be safely ignored.

Jesus says quite clearly, "The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" and therefore urges us to "be ready" (Matt 24:44). We should keep in mind that not only were the antediluvians surprised by the flood despite the preaching of Noah, Jesus' disciples

were also surprised by His suffering and death even though He had clearly warned them three times what was about to happen. It behooves us, then, to learn the lesson from their experience and take Jesus' prediction here more seriously.

In the final parable of Matthew 24, Jesus makes clear that the way to be ready for His return is to be always faithful as His followers. The servant is wise because he is faithful to his master.

Application of Chapter 25

Planning ahead will make a difference not only in this life but also in the life to come.

We are to live each day, not merely for the present, but with eternity in view.

The foolish five, thinking the oil they had was enough, relied on what they considered minimally necessary, whereas the wise planned also for the unexpected.

Preparation and readiness are related, the first being a necessary prerequisite for the second.

All three parables teach that so-called "little things" actually matter a lot; how one relates to them can be a barometer of one's character because they are often undervalued.

The parable of the talents teaches that diligence is a virtue (cf. Rom 12:11; Gal 6:9). It is commended in Scripture as an important expression of wisdom (Prov 4:23; 6:6–8; 10:4; 12:24, 27; 13:4; 14:23; 21:5), while slothfulness is unsparingly condemned (Prov 18:9; 21:25).

Those who follow Jesus will want to serve Him faithfully with every gift and talent entrusted to them. There is no limitation from God's side, only our willingness to be used by Him to accomplish heaven's purposes.

Unfortunately, all who are lost will discover too late their misplaced priorities, whether it was wealth wasted on selfish pursuits and pleasures or failure to use their talents for the kingdom of heaven. It would be well for each one of us to consider from time to time how our life might be measured by the impartial heavenly Judge so as to make life course adjustments now, while we still have the opportunity to do so (2 Cor 13:5).

In the end, the parable of the sheep and the goats emphasizes the importance of "disinterested benevolence"—that is, finding joy and contentment in giving of ourselves to help others without expecting anything in return. Jesus is the "perfect pattern. His life was characterized by disinterested benevolence."¹¹ This quality will also characterize His "sheep," who follow Him and are guided by the Holy Spirit to relieve the poor and needy among us.

Application of Chapter 26

In place of the deliverance from bondage commemorated by the Passover, Jesus, by instituting the emblems of the Lord's Supper, establishes the commemoration of the greater deliverance from sin accomplished by His death.

Just as Jesus' giving to the disciples the emblems of the bread and the cup provided the opportunity for them to accept and personalize the messianic meaning of these elements, so participation in the communion service in obedience to Jesus' command, "do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19), signifies one's personal acceptance of Jesus' death

and resurrection and a public expression of faith that Jesus lives and is coming again (Matt 26:29).

Just as the disciples eating from the one communion bread and drinking from the one cup symbolized their unity as one spiritual family (Matt 26:26–27), the widespread Adventist practice of eating the communion bread together and drinking at the same time from the communion cup symbolizes our unity as a church family.

To “watch” means to be ready for danger (24:43) and alert against temptation (1 Pet 5:8). It is the opposite of “sleep,” which refers metaphorically to inattentiveness when spiritual vigilance is needed (Matt 25:5; 1 Thess 5:6; cf. Rom 13:11). The same admonition appears in connection with readiness for the second advent (24:42; 25:13; cf. Rev 16:15).

Jesus’ humble submission to His Father’s will is a lesson and an example for us to surrender our life to God’s will day by day (cf. Matt 16:24–25).

Jesus’ sympathetic words regarding His sleepy disciples, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41), is more generally applicable in our own battle with temptation. It is also a warning not to allow human weakness to conquer by trusting to one’s own strength. Spiritual battles cannot be won with carnal weapons (2 Cor 10:4–6) but, by persevering in prayer and reaching heavenward for divine power, deliverance from temptation is certain (Matt 6:13; cf. 1 Cor 10:13; 2 Pet 2:9).

Jesus never condoned violence, as the warning “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52) underscores. Rather, He taught His followers to “Love your enemies” (Matt 5:44). Violence only begets more violence. Rather than “Might makes right,” Jesus’ example shows that “Right makes might.” Similarly, God’s last-day remnant are warned against using violent means to defend themselves (Rev 13:10) and are to show the same patient endurance and faith exemplified by Jesus (Rev 14:12).

Jesus’ silence toward His accusers denied them the opportunity to further twist His words or use them against Him. Similarly in legal proceedings today, the best self-defense is silence and the right to remain silent is recognized in many countries around the world.

Peter’s progressive denial of Jesus and descent into deceit and demoralization illustrate that each wrong step prepares the way for another, more serious, misstep, and that it is always better to turn back from a wrong path than to pursue it further in hopes it may improve.

Application of Chapter 27

Jesus’s silence in response to unjust accusations provides a model for us of patient trust in God under difficult circumstances (cf. 1 Pet 2:20–23).

Judas’s sad end illustrates how Satan works on those who submit to his will: after his purposes are served, he often quickly abandons them to their own fate.

The willingness of Israel’s leaders and Pilate to condemn an innocent man to death in order to maintain their respected positions reveals a profound moral blindness and the deceitfulness of the human heart (Jer 17:9; cf. Prov 12:5).

The crowd’s readiness to be influenced by the Jewish leaders, without sufficient regard for the moral weight and lasting significance of their decision, cautions against hasty decisions that may “seem right.”

That the first witnesses to the empty tomb were women is a reminder that God uses both women and men to proclaim the good news. That two of these women were also mothers deserves to be highlighted in an era when motherhood is often relegated to a lesser role by modern societal norms. The important place Scripture accords to those who raise godly men and women for the kingdom of heaven should not be overlooked.

It is impossible for human minds to fully grasp the nature of the suffering Jesus endured in being separated from and forsaken by the Father, an experience unique in the history of the universe.

Application of Chapter 28

It is not easy to answer the question of the content, extent, and timing of the instruction given to new converts to Christianity in the apostolic church (usually called "catechesis," from the Greek verb *katecheo*, "to teach"). Historical evidence indicates that from the second to the fifth centuries Christian catechesis took place before baptism. Once infant baptism was popularized, a shift took place and baptism preceded catechesis. Let's look at a few New Testament passages for answers.

1. The Gospel Commission—Matthew 28:19, 20: Jesus commanded the disciples to "go and make disciples . . . , baptizing them . . . , and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you" (NIV). Since "teaching" is last on the list, it is sometimes concluded that the catechesis was given after baptism.

But the text is not as clear as some believe. The relation between the two participles—"baptizing," "teaching," and the main verb, "make disciples"—is not clear in Greek. Is making disciples explained in terms of baptizing and then teaching, or should the participles be taken as imperatives, listing what the Lord expects from the disciples without emphasizing the specific sequence?

Based on Greek grammar, the first possibility is very unlikely. The second has the support of Greek grammar. Because of the ambiguity of the passage one cannot be dogmatic, but even if we accept that there is an implicit sequence, then making disciples would imply that some prebaptismal instruction was given to new converts and that after baptism instruction was continued. The question is not whether catechesis preceded baptism but how much instruction was given.

2. Church Practice in Acts: After Peter's sermon at Pentecost 3,000 were baptized "that day" (Acts 2:41, NIV). The instruction they needed was given through a sermon and "those who accepted his message were baptized."

Philip "proclaimed [literally "was proclaiming," suggesting progressive action in the past] the Christ" in Samaria and many were baptized. His message included the good news of God's kingdom and the name of Jesus (Acts 8:5, 12).

Obviously some instruction was given before baptism. Philip also explained the Scripture to the Ethiopian, beginning with Isaiah 53, before baptism (verse 35). Paul baptized the jailer and his household after speaking "the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house" (Acts 16:32, 33). After informing him that he had to believe in the Lord Jesus, Paul instructed him, and then baptized him.

3. Content of the Catechesis: Among the most important topics mentioned, in the apostolic speeches in Acts, we find the good news of Jesus Christ (8:35), His death and resurrection

(3:15), His exaltation and mediation (2:33; 5:31), and His Lordship (2:36). Other doctrines mentioned are repentance (2:38; 3:19), forgiveness (13:38), justification (13:39), worship of the true God (17:29), final judgment (17:31; cf. Rom. 2:16), general resurrection (24:15; 17:18), second coming of Christ (3:20, 21), the kingdom of God (8:12), and the Holy Spirit (2:38).

This impressive list indicates that instruction was given to unbelievers before they were baptized. The amount of catechesis probably depended on the background of the individual.

4. Implications for Today: If baptism means the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one (Rom. 6:4), it is simply impossible to baptize someone without explaining the practical implications of a Christian life.

This is not just a matter of sharing present truth; it is a matter of honesty. Baptism joins people to the church and calls them to stand for truth. The least we can do is ascertain whether they understand our mission and the biblical truth we proclaim.