



As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

- *Matthew 9:9*

Who is Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? If one says 'yes' to following, does anything change? Does a 'yes' impact individual lives? Communities? The world? Over the next six Sundays leading up to Easter, we are going to explore what the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – might teach us in response to these questions. With Jesus as our guide, we'll examine our own lives and the invitation each of us receives to be a follower.

This Lenten sermon series is designed for both Circle gatherings and for individual use as a daily Lenten devotional. As a Circle, when you gather you can walk through the daily readings or pick and choose readings and

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questions for your group conversations. As an individual, you'll find a Scripture, a devotional reflection, and a question for each day for your Lenten journey.

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FEB 28 TENSION

MATTHEW 23:1-39

(Parallels Disciple Bible Study Week 19: Mounting Controversy)

A gap exists between what we hope for and what is. A gap exists between the world as God intended it to be, and the world as it is today. A gap exists between how we live and how Jesus calls us to live. So how do we navigate the gap and live in the tension it creates?

Followers of Jesus aren't afraid to name, and face, the tensions of living a Christ-centered life.

DAILY QUESTIONS

MAR 1-6 TENSION

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| Monday | Read Matthew 2:1-18. Who or what in the world today demands your allegiance and threatens your commitment to Jesus? |
| Tuesday | Read Matthew 12:1-14. How do your values inform what routines and traditions are important and where change is needed? |
| Wednesday | Read Matthew 16:21-28. What does it mean to you to take up one's cross and follow Jesus? |
| Thursday | Read Matthew 18:1-9. How do the teachings of Jesus inform your understanding of success? |
| Friday | Read Matthew 20:1-16. How do the teachings of Jesus inform the tensions we experience in our economic and political realities today? |
| Saturday | Read Matthew 23:1-39. What tensions do you experience that expose the gap between life as it is and the life God calls you to live? |

FaithFit Lenten Challenge!

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Spend 15 minutes each day this week in prayer and Bible study. Read the daily Scripture and devotion, answer the question for the day, and pray how you can answer the invitation of Jesus to follow and grow as a follower of Jesus.

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TENSION

SERMON ON FEB 28, 2021

Choose a question to get started!

- **What are you most likely to do when you're stressed?**
- **What causes the most tension in your life?**

MONDAY

Read Matthew 2:1-18.

At Christmas, we give great attention to the story of Jesus' birth, the peaceful manger scene, the angels and shepherds who come to visit. We give less attention to what Matthew says happens next. Moving from the serene images that we have associated with the nativity, the next story can be jarring. Herod the Great was king of Judea at the time of the birth of Jesus, but he always felt his claim as king was in jeopardy. In order to strengthen his rule, he led an incredible building campaign, including an impressive reconstruction of the Temple. The people, particularly the Jewish leaders, were impressed. Yet still uncertain that his rule was secure, Herod took more drastic measures to protect his power, executing his first-born son, one of his wives, two sons by her, and his brother-in-law. Now, Matthew tells us, Herod is threatened by this infant prophesied to be a king, so he asks the magi who have come seeking the child to return and tell him where to find this baby. The magi have a choice to make - show allegiance to Herod and the empire and be comfortable and compensated but put the child in danger, or risk Herod's wrath and put their own lives in danger while returning home another way. As Matthew tells us, they return another way, and the family of Jesus become refugees, fleeing to Egypt to save his life as Herod orders all the children under two, in and around Bethlehem, to be killed. Someone or something is always asking for, or even demanding, our allegiance and commitment. And as much as we want following Jesus to make life easier, the way of Jesus can challenge our commitments, our lifestyles, and our society as it threatens those who hold

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power over others, those who demand total allegiance, those who have status and privilege. In that *tension*, we decide where we will offer our commitment and allegiance.

- **Who or what in the world today demands your allegiance and threatens your commitment to Jesus?**

TUESDAY

Read Matthew 12:1-14.

When is it time to make a change, and when do you need to hold onto traditions or habits in your life? How do you know when something you've always done a certain way no longer holds the same value, or may be preventing you from important new experiences? We don't typically like change or the tension that comes with it, but the world is always changing around us. In this past year, the pandemic has disrupted our lives, upending so many of our routines and traditions. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus engages the Pharisees in a debate about "Sabbath-keeping", a routine practice of the time, grounded in Old Testament teaching. You might notice that as Jesus responds to those who question what he and his followers are doing on the Sabbath, he doesn't abolish the practice and tradition of "Sabbath-keeping". Instead, teaching from the full context of the Bible, Jesus invites the Pharisees to reimagine the practice and its purpose, to embrace a change in their interpretation of "Sabbath-keeping" for the good of serving others. As he teaches, Jesus names the values - feeding and healing others - that are the criteria for this change. In the months ahead, we're going to be searching for a "new normal", figuring out which routines and traditions we need and which have meaning for us, both personally and communally. In the tension of these times and decisions ahead, the values of our faith can be our guide.

- **How do your values inform what routines and traditions are important and where change is needed?**

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WEDNESDAY

Read Matthew 16:21-28.

We tend to be obsessed with winning in our culture. We make a clear distinction between winners and losers. We honor winners and jeer at losers. We attribute great traits to winners and character flaws to losers. So we can relate to Peter as he responds to Jesus' announcement that he will suffer and die. Peter hears this news and says, "Never, Lord!" We can imagine Peter thinking, "No, Jesus, you're not going to die. You're too powerful. You're not going to lose to the leaders in Jerusalem." Winning, for Peter, is defeating the powers of the empire by force. Winners are powerful. Losers are weak. But this, Jesus says, is a human understanding of winning and losing, of defining success and power. Jesus has been offered this way of exerting his power before, by Satan. And to Satan, Jesus said, "Get away from me." Now Peter is saying the same thing, encouraging Jesus to win by force and might. And we, the reader, notice that Jesus invokes Satan as he responds to Peter, but he says something different this time. Jesus says, "Get behind me." This is what disciples do to follow; they fall in line behind the teacher and leader. Jesus is about to show his followers another way to victory, a way that looks to others like losing, a way of humility, servanthood, and ultimately, sacrifice. Jesus will redefine what it means to win. And Jesus invites his followers to get behind him and follow in this way.

- **What does it mean to you to take up one's cross and follow Jesus?**

THURSDAY

Read Matthew 18:1-9.

What does success look like? If you peruse a bookstore (or maybe today we should say peruse an online list of best nonfiction books), you'd be led to

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believe the path to success is an important question to us. You'll find all kinds of bestselling books on success, getting ahead, making money, leading successful organizations. Perhaps you've read some of these books. What do you think Jesus would say if you asked him the question of what success is? For the disciples, success seems to have been placement in God's kingdom. They ask Jesus, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" As they looked at the culture of the Roman empire, they likely expected an answer about achievement, service, status, or power, not so different from our world today. So imagine their surprise when Jesus doesn't just answer their question, but challenges its very premise. Jesus told them, essentially, "You won't even experience the kingdom of heaven with a question like that, worrying about status and standing" (*Matthew 18:3, Pastor Brian paraphrase*). Ouch! He then uses the example of a child to demonstrate who will enter God's kingdom. Children didn't really have social standing at the time. Boys were raised to help provide economically for the family; girls to provide care and support. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus thus implies, isn't about seeking status, advantage, or superiority. It is marked by vulnerability, humility, and care for, as opposed to competition with, others.

- **How do the teachings of Jesus inform your understanding of success?**

FRIDAY

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

If you work hard, there's a reward. Most of us would agree with this statement. Reward for labor is a part of our cultural understanding. Hard work has benefits. If you work hard, you have a better chance of getting the grade, the promotion, respect of your supervisor, a raise. So what do we do with a parable of Jesus that says the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who paid everyone the same regardless of whether they worked a full day or a half day? This can't be fair. We identify with the workers who raise a

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complaint. In response, Jesus teaches that the economy of God's kingdom is about more than our human conception of what is fair. The economy of God's kingdom ensures that all have enough to live. The economy of God's kingdom is based not on earnings, but on generosity. Dr. Jeanine Brown, professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary in Minnesota, writes, "God's deep generosity toward others can actually trip us up if we think of the kingdom in terms of limited amounts of grace being distributed based on 'deservedness'." Matthew's Gospel challenges systems of privilege where some are valued more than others, and highlights that God's kingdom should not be characterized by the haves and have nots, but by an abundance where all are provided for in the generosity of God's grace.

- **How do the teachings of Jesus inform the tensions we experience in our economic and political realities today?**

SATURDAY

Read Matthew 23:1-39.

We don't like tension, and that probably applies to how we read the Bible. When Jesus says, "You are the light of the world," we want to imagine Jesus is talking to us. But when Jesus says, "You brood of vipers" or "You hypocrites", tense words, we're quick to think this applies to the Pharisees, and *not* to us. However, if we read the Bible this way and avoid any tension, we might miss the greater lessons that Jesus has for us. In Matthew 23, Jesus is talking *about* the Pharisees, but he isn't talking *to* them. He's addressing his followers, and he's explaining what authentic teaching and authentic faith look like, and what they don't look like. Authentic teaching combines right belief with right action. Authentic faith isn't showy. Authentic faith isn't concerned about status or recognition. Authentic faith is following Jesus and humbling oneself to serve others. Authentic faith is lived daily, expressed in justice and mercy. Tension exists when there is a gap between the way the world is and the way the God intends the world to be, or a gap between how we live and how Jesus calls us to live. If we're

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willing to face that gap, we can embrace the tension as an invitation to look at where God is pulling us, how God's desire for us is different than the current reality. Followers of Jesus aren't afraid to name and face the tensions of living a Christ-centered life.

- **What tensions do you experience that expose the gap between life as it is and the life God calls you to live?**