

The Gospel of Matthew

Stories of the End

Interpreting the Text:

1. Contemporary readers often wonder how we can understand Jesus' eschatological (concerning the 'end times') language, especially in the Olivet Discourse (chapters 24 and 25). During his ministry, Jesus insists that the end is imminent, but it hasn't come yet. What might this have meant for those who heard these messages from Jesus given their current world? What might this have meant for readers of Matthew's gospel following the destruction of the second temple?
2. In what ways does Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem fulfill prophecies from the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isa. 62:11 and Zech. 9:9)? What is the ancient significance of him riding a donkey instead of a more powerful animal, like a war horse?
3. Reflect on the ways that violent passages about slavery, like the one in 24:45-51, have been used throughout history. How can scholarly interpretation of these teachings responsibly honor that history?

Applying the Text:

1. Jesus' double-love commandment (combining Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18) is an important guiding principle for Christians today. How does this play out in practical terms in your life? What does it mean to you to "love God and love neighbor" simultaneously in your life?
2. Jesus' condemnations of the Jewish leadership in chapter 23 can be troublesome, not least because interpretation of this passage has fueled anti-Judaism over the centuries. Does this contradict the teaching in 5:44 to love one's enemies? How does Jesus' animosity in 23:1-36 cohere with the loving images and hope expressed in 23:37-39? Should we read these passages as critiques of established churches and/or Christian leaders today?
3. What do you make of the harsh language of judgment in chapter 25? To what do you think the "eternal fire" (25:41) and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30) refer? Does God decide beforehand who will be "sheep" and who will be "goats," or does this depend on how we treat those in need (25:31-46)?

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