



A Spiritual Dashboard

Studies in the Gospel of Matthew

Oak Grove Church of the Brethren
Winter/Spring 2019

A Spiritual Dashboard

Learning how to pay attention

Over the past six years, I've helped our three children learn to drive. Teaching another person to do something that I largely take for granted was an interesting experience because, when you break it down, we really do a lot of different things when we drive: maintain control of the car; have a sense of how to get where we're going; watch for other cars, pedestrians, and the occasional animal that darts in front of us; keep an awareness of how the vehicle is operating; and check our mirrors, to name a few.

Looking back, I would say that I realized four significant principles to driving:

- learning to drive isn't easy;
- there are many things to be aware of while you are driving;
- it is easy to be overwhelmed by all these things;
- you must pay attention to them anyway.

These four points are the inspiration for the cover art on this booklet. Michael Craighead has provided a wonderful artistic interpretation of our worship theme. But look carefully. We might be tempted to look out the dashboard and envision the journey or quest that awaits us. This has been our worship emphasis this past fall. But now we want to give attention to the items on the dashboard. The various instruments, gauges, indicators, and sensors provide important information about how our vehicle is operating. Some of these, like the odometer and fuel gauge, help us understand the condition of our car in the present moment. GPS tells us where we are and how to get where we're going. Warning indicators, like the check engine light and the fuel gauge (again!), suggest how the car may (or may not) operate in the future: check this now, or you could be headed for trouble later. We need to monitor the gauges and indicators, even as we give significant attention to what we see out the windshield.

Just for fun, I asked Marc Wilson what gauges, indicators, and warning lights he would include on a dashboard of his own design. As you might imagine, Marc's list is a little different from most. His list includes: road speed, engine

rpm (including “red line” warning), coolant temperature, transmission oil temperature, engine oil temperature, air/fuel ratio (lambda), ambient temperature, tire pressures and temperatures, brake temperatures, exhaust temperature, fuel pressure and fuel level.

Whichever items we have on our dashboard, we should understand why they are important. The reason is simple: quoting Marc, we want “to predict problems before there are failures.”

A spiritual dashboard

What if we could design a dashboard that gave us an indication of our spiritual health? What would we monitor? What practices, beliefs, relationships, and admonitions would we represent on a spiritual dashboard so that we can both maintain a strong faith with Christ and the church and predict problems before there are failures?

That’s what this Bible reading guide is designed to help us do. Between Christmas and Easter, sermons and worship emphases will continue to be taken from the Narrative Lectionary, focusing exclusively on the Gospel of Matthew. Winter Bible Study will be a six-week study of the Sermon on the Mount, and I anticipate a Lenten study on Matthew 18. As we proceed, we want to be on the lookout for one thing:

**How does this passage of Scripture
help me follow Jesus?**

This Bible reading guide is part of this process. There are two ways that this guide is different from the one in the fall: first, each week I offer a minimal amount of commentary on the text, along with a few questions. Second, rather than reading larger sections of the Bible, I suggest that we read the Gospel of Matthew three times between now and Easter, one chapter per day. If possible, pick a new translation of the Bible each time you start over.

Some questions to get us started

If we’re going to create a spiritual dashboard, we need a starting point. Have you ever thought about the ways you follow Jesus, and how those

specific faith practices help strengthen your faith? Pause for a few moments and make a list. What faith practices are a regular part of your life? How often do you participate in these? How do they help you maintain your faith? Which ones provide comfort and/or encouragement? Which ones provide challenge and stimulate growth?

Faith practices that are a regular part of my life:

As you think about that list (and I encourage you to keep thinking about it as we move forward) consider a second question: how can you tell if you are becoming complacent in your spiritual life? What warning indicators will you add to your spiritual dashboard? That might be a harder question to answer, but take some time to wrestle with that here:

How can I tell when I'm becoming spiritually complacent?

You'll notice that this devotional booklet begins with Matthew 2; that's because we encountered Matthew 1 at the end of 2018. You may wish to go back and review that chapter. Pay attention to the names of the genealogy and the specific risks required of Joseph to fill the role God had for him. How would you have responded if you were he?

With this list in mind, let's get started on our spiritual dashboard!

Pastor Tim

WEEK 1

DEC. 31 – JAN. 6

The things we fear (and don't fear) in our day
Matthew 2:1-23

CHRISTMAS SCHEDULES BEING WHAT THEY ARE, the wise men get added to our Nativity scenes without receiving the same level of attention given to other characters. When we do think about them, we generally focus on the gifts they bring and not much else. But their presence in Jesus' story—and the shocking tragedy that their appearance unintentionally causes—deserves our attention. It is a story that has been repeated throughout history all too often.

Matthew chapter 2 should be understood as a single unit—so be sure to keep reading after the wise men head for home; it is only by wrestling with verses we would rather avoid that we begin to understand the disruption Jesus' presence on earth can cause. Not everyone is pleased by Jesus' birth; notice that after the wise men first meet Herod, every subsequent action is driven by fear.

If we had a “fear indicator” on our spiritual dashboard, what would cause it to come on?



As you read Matthew chapter 2, consider these questions:

- Why was Herod afraid?
- Why would “all Jerusalem” also been afraid?
- What sorts of decisions have you made (or not made) because of fear?
- What do people fear in our day? Think of your own fears; then think about how fear impacts other persons and decisions as well.

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 1-6

WEEK 2

JANUARY 7 - 13

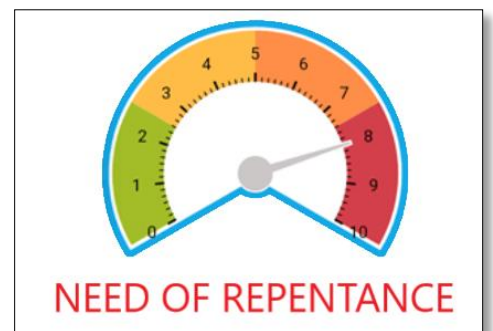
Baptism and the Kingdom of God

Matthew 3:1-17

DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM? Why did you choose to be baptized? Was it because you were a certain age and the church was having a membership class? Did you come to baptism out of a sense of spiritual struggle, or was it a decision made from careful thought and reflection?

How has your life been different because of your baptism?

Understanding what baptism represents is crucial to properly knowing how to structure our lives. In Matthew 3, John the Baptist does not simply offer a better way to live. The proclamation “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” can never be anything less than life-altering. The kingdom of God is like an embassy: an institution that represents one nation inside another nation. The invitation to repentance is a challenge for us to choose which kingdom has our ultimate loyalty.



The Church of the Brethren understands baptism in three significant ways:

- a public sign of conversion and a commitment to discipleship;
- a covenant with the church family to share this journey together;
- ordination for ministry.

Remember your own baptism as you read Matthew 3. As you have followed Jesus, how have you lived out the Brethren understanding of baptism? And just how, exactly, would we represent a need for repentance on our spiritual dashboard? How do we measure things like this?

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 7-13

WEEK 3

JANUARY 14 - 20

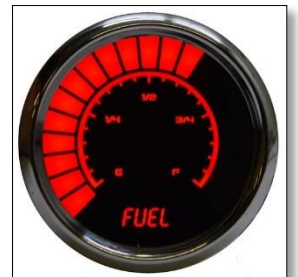
No longer an admirer

Matthew 4:1-17

IF WE'RE PAYING ATTENTION, we might wish we'd had the information of Matthew 4 before making a spiritual commitment. It would have been nice to have a sense of the cost of discipleship ahead of time, so that we might consider this before coming to baptism.

This is one reason why when the old Brethren practiced "adult baptism" they really meant "adult." They rejected the infant baptism of their day largely because infants cannot comprehend the costliness of our faith. When one is old enough to make such a decision is something the old Brethren used to consider carefully. They tended to think such a decision should come in early adulthood. We typically consider a faith decision something to be made as a child or young teen.

Jesus' temptations help us consider how we will live when being an admirer of Jesus isn't enough. In those times, do we trust Jesus methods, or do we give in to our own impatience—or desire for comfort—and seek another way? Our "trust level" might be something helpful to add to our spiritual dashboard. How full of trust is your faith right now?



Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 14-20

WEEK 4
JANUARY 21 - 27

Quite the group of followers
Matthew 5:1-20

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS IN CHAPTER 4 help us wrestle with the difference between being an admirer and being a disciple. Matthew chapters 5-7 show us what a disciple looks like.

My personal opinion is that the categories of people mentioned in the Beatitudes (5:1-12) are a description of the "crowds" that Jesus saw in verse 1. This is an unlikely group of people with whom to work. What kind of church is filled with the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, and peacemakers? If we can imagine it, a church through whom Jesus can accomplish great things!

We will devote the next several weeks to the Sermon on the Mount (three in worship, six in winter Bible study). This gives us an opportunity to ask some tough questions about how we see ourselves as Jesus' disciples. Questions like:

- Do I want to be part of a church filled with people described in the Beatitudes? Am I one of those persons?
- Does Jesus really think it is possible to live without lust?
- How would we ever be able to run the world if we do not resist evildoers?

Matthew 2-4 have been preparing us for what comes in Matthew 5-7: what is the character of our discipleship?

And if you're interested in some more reading on the Sermon on the Mount, I highly recommend *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* by Oswald Chambers.

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 21-27

Wednesday night Bible Study, January 23
Matthew 5:1-16

WEEK 5

JAN. 28 – FEB. 3

An audience of one
Matthew 6:7-21

THE LORD'S PRAYER has rightly earned a significant place in our heart. It's regular use in our worship service provides both great meaning in our ongoing growth as a disciple and an important connection to Christians throughout time and place. When we pray these words, we are sharing a prayer that has shaped the church from its very beginning.

There are two significant ways we can use the Lord's Prayer. The first is as a pattern to be followed. This is what we are doing when we pray these words in unison each Sunday—using these very words as our entire prayer.

The second way is to use the Lord's Prayer as a structure for our prayers. Each phrase gives us an entire category to fill with our specific prayers. What does it mean, for instance, to pray "hallowed be your name?" How do we pray that God's kingdom would come in my life?



Notice also that the Lord's Prayer is set within the larger context of Matthew 6, where Jesus teaches us to live for an audience of one. We don't give offerings, pray, fast, or accumulate possessions so that God or others will notice us. Our spiritual disciplines are intended for allowing God the opportunity to shape our lives as a disciple.

As we create our spiritual dashboard, what will we add from Matthew 6? How about the "fasten seatbelt" indicator, as a reminder to slow down and spend time with God?

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 28; 1-3
(If you are able, use a different Bible translation
when you start over in Matthew)

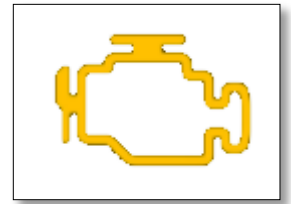
Wednesday night Bible Study, January 30
Matthew 5:17-48

WEEK 6
FEBRUARY 4-10

It's not my place to judge?
Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29

THIS WEEK'S SCRIPTURE gives us a confusing set of spiritual health indicators. On the one hand, Matthew 7:1-5 seems to confirm a phrase we hear and say often: "It's not my place to judge." But on the other hand, Jesus teaches us to make careful decisions about our spiritual life—find the "narrow gate" and build our "house on rock"—with a strong description of the consequences of walking on the other path and building on different foundations. Is there any connection between these two seemingly unrelated ideas?

Perhaps it is this: what is our responsibility when we see another member of the church straying from the faith? Do we have one? We've already seen that our baptism includes a commitment to one another. Might it be that "taking the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (after we've "taken the log out of our own eye" first, of course) is one of the most spiritually important things we could do for one another, and that our saying "it's not my place to judge" is Biblically incorrect?



When the spiritual "check engine light" comes on within the congregation, how do we help one another discern their sin and come back into right relationship with Christ and the church? How do we live out our baptismal vows when things aren't going so well?

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 4-10

Wednesday night Bible Study, February 6
Matthew 6:1-18

WEEK 7

FEBRUARY 11-17

Getting down in the weeds

Matthew 13:24-43

The “Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat” is another example of Jesus telling us that not everything we see is approved by God. There is evil in the world. To make matters even more challenging, the difference between what is good and what is evil isn’t always so easy to distinguish. The wheat and the weeds in the parable look very similar when growing in the field.

As you consider the parables in these verses, make a list of the things in the world that you classify as evil. Take your time with this, and think it through carefully:

What is our response to evil? The workers in the parable wanted to uproot the weeds, but the landowner said, “no.” The ultimate response to evil is a responsibility that belongs to God.

But that begs an important question: what, exactly, is our response to the evil we see around us?

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 11-17

Wednesday night Bible Study, February 13
Matthew 6:19-34

WEEK 8
FEBRUARY 18-24

A “seafood” dinner
Matthew 14:13-33

These verses contain two very famous stories: feeding the 5,000 (which is misnamed, because the women and children aren’t counted in the total) and Peter walking on water. What do you remember about these stories? Make a list here:

Did you include the word “doubt” on that list? Doubt is an obvious characteristic of Peter’s experience of walking—and then sinking—on the water. But did you notice how much doubt there is in the feeding of the 5,000? There’s simply not enough food—until there is.

Last week’s Scriptures helped us wrestle with the presence of evil. When you consider such things, do you doubt that our discipleship is a sufficient response to that evil? When confronted with a legitimate problem, are we tempted to abandon Jesus’ ways of doing things in favor of something more pragmatic? Could it be that we need a “doubt warning light” on our spiritual dashboard? How do these two stories help us trust that Jesus knows what he is doing?



Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 18-24

Wednesday night Bible Study, February 20
Matthew 7:1-13

WEEK 9

FEB. 25 – MAR. 3

The character of the Kingdom
Matthew 16:24 – 17:8

Matthew 16:24-26 raises issues similar to those we encountered in Matthew 3. The old Brethren practiced believers' baptism (as opposed to infant baptism) because they understood that being a disciple of Jesus came with a cost.

What has following Jesus cost you?

Weekly Bible reading: Matthew 25-28, 1-3
(If you are able, use a different Bible translation
when you start over in Matthew)

Wednesday night Bible Study, February 27
Matthew 7:14-29

**Part 2 of our Bible Reading
Guide will be published in
mid-February**