



## Week 2: Matthew 5-16

### Study Guide for the week of Jan. 5 - Jan. 11

#### Personal reflection / journaling exercise

This week, reflect on Matt 13:1-23.

Gardeners know that soil is rarely what they wish it would be, so they get to work to pull weeds, dig out rocks, and add compost to prepare it for seeds. In this parable, Jesus compares the state of our heart to the soil in a farmer's field. People sometimes feel frustrated that the "soil" of their heart is hard or rocky or weedy. Instead, ask yourself what you need to do to partner with God, the Great Gardener, to improve the soil.

Is your heart hard, like a path beaten into the dirt that doesn't allow the rain to penetrate and water the soil? If so, what do you need to do to learn more about God and his character to soften your heart? List those things that could help (regular prayer, Bible reading, meeting with a small group or spiritual friend, taking a class, serving others) and commit to filling yourself with things of God so there is no room for Satan to deceive you.

Is your heart shallow, like soil that's filled with rocks that don't allow for roots to reach down deep? If so, what can you do to deepen and grow your faith? List those things that could help and commit to maturing in your faith so you may stand firm when the storms of life rage.

Is your heart crowded out with the weeds of worry, scarcity, fear, "me-ism," or all the other "-isms" that would choke life from you? If so, what can you do to weed out those things that would choke life from you? List those things that could help you commit to making the pursuit of God and his Kingdom your priority, so the fruit God has created you to produce crowds out the weeds.

#### Discussion starters

1. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), Jesus teaches about contrasts between life in the Kingdom and life in the world. Identify and list as many contrasts as you can. Which contrasts surprise you? Which do you struggle with? Which are not problems in your life?
2. The Christian Church in North America and Western Europe is dying, while it's growing in areas where it's persecuted. Jesus said those who are persecuted for his sake will be blessed (Matt 5:11-12). Juvenal (1st century AD) wrote that "luxury is more ruthless than war." What connections (if any) are there between Jesus' teaching and Juvenal's observation? What could that mean for us as a church in the Des Moines metro area? For us as individuals?
3. As Jesus' disciples, we are called to engage the world with both wisdom and vulnerability (Matt 10:16). Which characteristic is easiest for you? Most difficult? What do you need to do to maintain a balance between wisdom and vulnerability?
4. What are your burdens today? Since Jesus invites us to let him take the greatest share of our burdens (Matt 11:28-30), how are you letting him do the heaviest lifting / pulling?

(over)

5. Herod had John the Baptist beheaded partly in response to peer pressure – he feared being embarrassed in front of other people more than he feared killing an innocent man. How do you react to peer pressure, marketing, unhealthy competition, and the fear of embarrassment? What triggers of embarrassment can you identify? What are better responses in these situations?

## **Bible verse to memorize: Matthew 11:28**

### **Serving Opportunity**

Often the best time to reach out to someone is when they need help. Jesus understood this so when he sent his disciples out, he told them to preach the good news *and* to heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons (Matt 10:7-8). Is there anyone you know who is hurting, frightened, confused, or dead to the joy of God? Reach out to them today: a simple note of encouragement to a co-worker, a shared cup of coffee with a teen, a meal shared with someone struggling financially – all help others see and *experience* the good news, not just *hear* it.