Walk | Read | Pray | Join | Commit

Matthew's Gospel Connect Group Resources: **Jesus – A Life**
Matthew Chapters 23-25

The aim of this session is to explore what systems and rules we might have put in place that, though once helpful, have now become a hinderance.

COLLECT
For this you'll need paper, pens and a blindfold. Ask one person in your group to be blindfolded. Then ask everyone to take turns to direct, in as much detail as possible, the blindfolded person towards drawing an object of their choice.
This is to introduce the theme of attempting to complete a tricky task under impossible circumstances.

CHALLENGE
Christianity is all about life with Jesus Christ, it isn't about a rule book, or a code of 'how to live'. In Matthew 23, Jesus makes his opinion on the Pharisees – who prioritise rules and codes – abundantly clear. Although it may be important to live wisely in the world this isn't the primary way to know God. It can be too easy to set up morality as the measuring stick to determine who is in or out. ***Are there times in your life when your or other people's actions have made you question God's goodness? Are there times in your life when you've written people off because of how they've acted or behaved? Talk about those times.***

Faith is inherited in that it is given, we have the choice whether or not to act upon it now. The parables of Matthew 25 stand as a stark warning to those who receive faith but do not respond to it. ***Are there elements of your faith, things you want to do or decisions you know you need to make now? What are they? How can you respond to God's call?***

Throughout chapters 23, 24 and 25, Jesus is tearing down a broken system and telling his followers that faith in him is really what it's all about. Following Jesus and going against the systems of the world will come at a cost (24:9), but within Jesus is eternal life.
Were there any passages that you found particularly challenging within these chapters? Are there patterns or ways of thinking in your life you need to 'tear down'? Are there people in your life who don't know that Jesus loves them? How could you let them know?

CONNECT
God loves each and every member of your group and he wants nothing to stand in the way of them getting to know him. Take a moment to silently reflect on how you each have responded to these chapters, whether God has identified any systems or rules that you've put in place in an attempt to 'know' him, but have become a constraint to your relationship with him. Offer this up to God, asking him to remove any 'heavy, cumbersome loads' you are carrying.

Leave 15/20 minutes to pray for one another by laying on hands, asking Jesus to be the centre of our focus, to be the lamp to our feet, to be the source of our riches.

CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF CHAPTERS 23-25 – relevant and helpful background information [*You may choose to read this as a whole group, or just use it as preparation to inform and facilitate group discussion.]*

Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry has been quite hard hitting at times, but in these chapters we see Jesus laying down his most significant challenges yet, particularly for the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Matthew is beginning to convey a sense that Jesus knows something is about to happen (his trail, crucifixion & death and subsequent resurrection), so he is deliberately ramps up the tension of these passages.

Jesus has constantly hinted his ministry would come to its climax in Jerusalem. Now he's here, he proclaims judgement on two of the bedrocks of the Jewish world at the time: the teachers of the law & the Pharisees; and the Temple. Jesus is aiming criticism at structures fundamental to the Jewish people.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were comparable to a political entity in their day. Deep in their understanding of their national identity is a sense that they are set apart by God to be a blessing to the whole world. In order to be a blessing, the Pharisees believed that the nation needed to be free – yet they were living under Roman occupation. This wasn't a new problem in the history of Judaism; for much of their history they'd lived in constant threat of, or under occupation from, foreign powers, the story of which was reflected in their scriptures. A hunger to be 'free from oppressors' had been etched into their collective identity.

To deal with, this the Pharisees embarked on outlining a system to help God's people keep to the laws of the Torah. By holding to the law, they would usher in the return of the Kingdom of God, overthrow any occupying powers and set the Jewish people free once again. To enforce the law and make it accessible, the Pharisees set up a whole other rule book. However, this process held a flaw; they prioritised the law to a point that was impossible for people to keep, commoner and Pharisee alike. Jesus is clear in his criticism towards this system the Pharisees and teachers of the law had put in place: see Matt 23:4.

For a brilliant illustration of how Jesus unpacked the Kingdom of God over and against this view of how the Pharisees had been envisaging it, check out the Bible Project's video: https://thebibleproject.com/explore/gospel-kingdom/

How was Jesus going to deal with these issues of freedom from the oppressors and an impossible system for living in line with God? Jesus wasn't going to keep people happy, as we read on he was going to tear down the Pharisaic laws and the temple. There is a warning that there would be something drastic just around the corner (Matt 25:1-35), and perhaps in the distant future too.

Chapter 25 gives us three stories of how to live in this 'new' system: Jesus fulfils the aim of the old ways by giving his life, he fulfils the promise that the Jewish people were waiting for, and it doesn't stop with the Jews; it's a message for the whole world.