

*Preaching the Gospel of Matthew:
Proclaiming God's Presence*

Stanley P. Saunders
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Stanley P. Saunders, Associate Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, has written a helpful exegetical/homiletical commentary for those who want to preach from Matthew's Gospel. According to the traditional view, Matthew's goal is to point out how Jesus is the Messiah who was prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. But, according to Saunders, the two-sided goal of the Gospel of Matthew is to point out how Jesus is the defining expression of God's presence and to draw attention to the differences between human powers and God's power.

Saunders has structured his commentary simply: "I have followed primarily Matthew's scheme of alternating narratives and discourses, while reminding readers here and there of other structural factors at work" (xv-xvi). Saunders believes that Matthew attempts to train readers to wrestle with interpretive problems as he presents "unresolved (and sometimes unresolvable) tensions . . . Faith is nurtured in the tensions, not the certainties" (xvi). Some might respond that faith is nurtured by the certainties and can be nurtured in the "tensions."

Saunders' philosophy of exegesis reveals his approach to the text. "We usually think that the goal of exegesis is to uncover the meaning(s) in a text. But 'meaning' is discovered more in the dialogues that transpire between interpreters, their communities and worlds, the text, the worlds of the text, and the tradition. Making meaning is always messy" (xvi). There are those who hold to a philosophy of exegesis which sees the locus of meaning in the divine Author's intent as discovered in the objective text instead of in the human readers' subjective response to the text.

With regard to interpreting the parables, Saunders does not hold to one overall central truth or one point linked to each main character. Rather, the parables "often feature images that may be understood in multiple ways. Matthew wants us not to settle on just one of these as the 'right way' to hear the parables, but to grapple with the parables' many facets and discover the diverse ways they may speak to or even entrap us" (xvi).

Matthew's Gospel, according to Saunders, is an ongoing polemic against human power. After noting that the Jewish leaders are the most prominent opponents of God's Rule, Saunders asserts that the "kingdom of heaven" is "God's alternative to the empire of Rome. . . . Matthew's story of Jesus thus contests Rome's exercise of power and construction of reality, including its imperial theology" (xvii-xviii).

Saunders' discussion of each passage in the Gospel of Matthew is divided into two sections. "Exploring the text" analyzes the main features and issues emerging from Matthew's text. "Preaching and teaching the Word" identifies important questions,

themes, and topics which challenge the reader to engage the passage for preaching and teaching.

The “Exploring the text” section contains some perceptive observations on Matthew’s text. For example, when commenting on the genealogy in chapter 1, Saunders notes, “Matthew uses a passive voice construction to break the heretofore consistent use of the active voice of the verb ‘to beget’: ‘Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, from who was begotten Jesus, the one called Christ’ (Matt. 1:16). The shift to the passive voice signals that Jesus breaks the mold and suggests God’s agency in Jesus’ birth” (4).

Saunders poses some stimulating questions for the interpreter of the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-23). “Is it important that the failures outweigh the success stories three to one? Does it matter that the farmer appears to be profligate in scattering seeds and apparently does not cultivate or tend the crop until it is time for the harvest? Is the emphasis more on the success that occurs despite the obstacles and hazards, or on the plight of the seeds that do not produce as they should? Is success merely an outcome of location? What makes some soil good?” (123).

Exegetically, some readers will resonate with Saunders’ running emphasis upon political, economic, and social justice. Others will see it as an imposition upon the text or at least an overemphasis. Theologically, Saunders does not view Israel and the Church as distinct entities. Instead, he stresses their continuity. “Jesus has just renamed Peter as the foundation stone for the renewed gathering of the congregation of Israel” (163).

Many readers will be surprised by Saunders' categorical assertion with regard to the rapture of the Church. "The images in 24:40-41 are often read today in support of dispensational theories of a 'rapture,' in which the elect are suddenly lifted from the earth, 'leaving behind' loved ones, friends, and coworkers. Matthew does not develop any clear notion of this kind of 'rapture' (nor does Paul or any other New Testament writer)" (250).

Matthew employs a "literary tactic," according to Saunders, to solve a "problem" with regard to the chronology of events in chapter 27. "But Matthew also creates a problem, which must be resolved by literary/temporal sleight of hand. Jesus himself has not yet been raised, so the resurrection of saints is out of sequence. Matthew addresses the problem with the clarification in 27:53 that the saints really didn't appear until after Jesus was raised, even though the account suggests that their resurrection coincides with his death. Neither God nor the evangelist is bound to our modern, linear conceptions of time" (290). If Matthew is not bound to linear conceptions of time, why the need to resort to "sleight of hand"?

The "Preaching and teaching the Word" section contains preaching possibilities which are the most useful feature of this commentary. With penetrating questions on the Lord's Prayer, Saunders helps the preacher apply the text to the audience. "What kind of community can pray this prayer with integrity? How does our public recitation of Jesus' prayer implicate us in the realities the prayer invokes? . . . How might the principle of acting in hiddenness, seen only by God, shape our religious practices today,

especially in conjunction with Jesus' earlier call to be salt and light in the world? Can our practices be at once both hidden and revealing?" (50).

In Matthew 13:53-58, Jesus teaches in His hometown synagogue and becomes the source of offense. Saunders' insights are instructive. "Jesus is not our homeboy. Part of his offence lies in the fact that his mercy is not reserved just for insiders - whether they are Jesus' own kin and neighbors or the self-righteous. Are we willing to endure a prophet who is not impressed by our goodness and unwilling to be made our captive?" (139).

Wise application is made from Matthew 16:5-12. "The church's calling entails not only discerning the times rightly, but living in them accordingly. We should regard with suspicion any supposed signs of divine power that do not require our repentance and transformation. We conform our lives to the sign of Jonah, the cross, which makes all of us missionaries" (159).

Based on Matthew 21:23-32, Saunders clarifies the preacher's responsibilities. "One of the preacher's primary tasks is to provide language to help people make sense of the signs of God's power they see around them but cannot yet name. A second is to evoke the imagination - the sight - that makes this discernment possible. A third task, perhaps the most important, is to call forth the practices that incarnate the good news of God's empire" (219).

Saunders derives a balanced and relevant eschatological perspective from the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). "Jesus' call to watchful waiting and readiness seems to stand in tension with Matthew's claim that the risen Jesus is already with us in

mission in the world (18:20; 28:18-20), but the warning to watchfulness and the promise of presence work together toward the same end: a community of disciples living on the edge of history, no longer captive to the times of this world. The followers of Jesus live in the certitude of Christ's coming and presence, not in angst over his absence or delay. What does this certainty mean in the lives of congregations? How can we cultivate greater awareness of the time in which we live? What disciplines do we need in order to be ready?" (254).

Key groups, words, and concepts appear in boldface type throughout the commentary section of this volume. They are defined in the glossary section at the end of the book. There are a number of superb commentaries available on the Gospel of Matthew. Far less common are exegetical/homiletical resources filled with practical ideas for the homiletician. This volume is not without its deficiencies but its preaching values make it a worthy addition to the preacher's library.