

Worshiping the King

Matthew 2:1-12

27 Sep 09

Let's take a look at Matthew chapter two verses one through 12 as I just read the passage for us. It says, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.' After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way."

Now there's few passages in all the Bible that have been the subject of as many different interpretations as this one we're looking at today. Few passages have received as much attention as this particular passage. This passage is referenced on Christmas cards. It's the subject of songs like, We Three Kings, which if you read that song and read this passage, well I'll let you do that. Typically people have gotten all wrapped up in the identity of these magi. Legend has it that there were three of them. And that's based on nothing more than the fact that three particular gifts are mentioned here. But in the legend there's not only three of them but they have names- Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. Much speculation too has been given to the star that they star. Was it an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn? Was it a comet? Was it a supernova? I used to have a Chevy Nova!

Additionally there has been much conjecture regarding the three gifts given. I mean, do they carry some specific symbolic meaning, like gold because He was a king? Incense because He's God? Myrrh because He's going to die? Well, that's what you'll get from We Three Kings. But is that what it was all about? Really all of this fascination with the details is totally off the mark. Truth is we really don't know much about these magi. We don't know where they were from exactly. The text says that they were from the east, that's pretty vague. We don't know how

many there were, we don't know what their names were. The star was obviously a supernatural event because of what we're told in verse nine about the movement of the star. But the star isn't the center of the story. In fact it's just matter-of-factly reported. Also, to assign any particular specific symbolic meaning to the gifts that are mentioned here is unwarranted.

So what is the point of this passage? What is Matthew telling us here? Why does he include this account in his gospel? Well, I want you to remember that we saw in chapter one that Matthew worked hard to show us that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Promised One. He gave us a detailed and memorable genealogy to show us that Jesus was from the royal line of David. And the virgin birth answers all the questions that might have been raised by that genealogy. It frees Him from all the contamination of sin. And here as we come to chapter two you see in verse one that we're told that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, and Luke two gives great significance to the fact that He was born in Bethlehem, that Joseph and Mary had to go there because a census was being taken and since they were of the family of David they had to do to the city of David, Bethlehem, and that's where He was born. Matthew is showing us that Jesus is God in the flesh. He is the son of David. He is the Messiah king. And as such He deserves royal honor. And here we see Him receiving it in chapter two. Even in His infancy He is acknowledged as the king of the Jews. But you have to notice that the acknowledgement and the honor is not coming from the Jews. It was coming from the gentile Magi which is very interesting especially since we need to remember that Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience. He's proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah but in this gospel Matthew will show how for the most part the Jews rejected Jesus. And this is a warning for his readers not to do the same thing. That's the warning for you and me as well.

The point of this passage is that Jesus is the king and He's not just the king of the Jews, but He's the king of kings, He's the king of the world and He deserves our worship. In fact, worship is the theme of the passage. And in this passage we see three different examples of worshipping the king. Three different examples of worshipping the king. Two wrong ways to worship Him, one right way. Let's look at those three examples of worshipping the king as we see it here presented in this passage.

And the first wrong way is worshipping the King hypocritically. Worshipping the king hypocritically. The example of that is Herod. We're told in verse one that these things happened in the days of Herod the king. The magi come looking for the one called the king of the Jews whose been recently born, so they naturally came to the capital city of Jerusalem. And the thrust of verses one and two is that these Magi came into town and they're asking everybody everywhere, hey, where is He whose been born the king of the Jews? The idea there at the end of verse one where it says they are saying where is He, is that they kept saying that. They kept asking everybody. Well, word of that got to Herod and verse three tells us that he was troubled. "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."

So these Magi come in to town, they're asking where is He whose been born king of the Jews. Herod the king hears about this and he is troubled. Who is he? Who is Herod? Well this Herod needs to be distinguished from other Herods you read about in the New Testament. This Herod is known as Herod the Great. He was appointed the king of Judea by Rome in 40 B.C. Herod was not a Jew, he was an Idumean which meant he was an Edomite by background. But he married a lady named Mariamne who was a Jew from a descendant of a regal family, a significant family, in Israel. And Herod was extremely talented in many ways. He was very capable in a number of ways among other things he was a master builder. Seen in the palace he built in Caesarea on the seashore there. Or the palace he built on the mountain top of Masada. And his reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He was a master builder. But Herod was also extremely cruel and insanely jealous.

For example, he named the man called Aristobulus, brother, who was the brother of Mariamne to the position of high priest. But when Aristobulus started becoming very popular with the people Herod had him drowned in the Jordan River and then pretended to cry at his funeral. Eventually Herod had Mariamne killed and at least two of his sons. When Herod was about to die, he had hundreds of Jewish leaders taken in to custody with the order that they be executed at the moment that he died because he knew nobody would cry for him at his death but he wanted people crying when he died. By the way, he died in 4 B.C. so our calendars aren't quite right. Jesus was born in 5 or 4 B.C.

So now you can understand a little bit. These Magi come into town proclaiming that a genuine descendent of David, a rightful heir to throne, has been born and that greatly frightened and troubled, upset, this jealous man named Herod. So why was the whole city troubled? It wasn't because they wouldn't like to see Herod replaced as king. It wasn't because they wouldn't like to see the Messiah come. But they knew that Herod was liable to do anything when he got troubled. He might just start killing people randomly. So they're troubled because he's troubled.

And Herod isn't going to take the news lightly. Notice what he does. He takes the word of the Magi seriously regarding the birth of the Messiah. He knows that a Messiah has been prophesied. And he knows that apparently this king wasn't born in Jerusalem. So where is He to be born? Where does he turn to for the answers? He turns to the Bible for the answer. He knows that scripture speaks about this coming Messiah. So he turns to the Bible guys to get the answer. You see that happening in verses four through six. "Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him 'in Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet.'" And then they quote the prophesy. And take note of this. Herod believes what the Bible says. And he sends the Magi off to Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. You see that happening in verses seven and eight. But look at what he does first. Verse seven says "Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared." He meets with the magi secretly. We're told that specifically. He meets with them secretly. He doesn't want the priests and the scribes in on this conversation because they priests and the scribes knew Herod all too well, and he didn't

want them alerting the magi to what kind of guy Herod was. So he meets with them secretly. He feigns an interest in their specialty. Magi were known as astrologers, they're into the stars. He talked to them about the stars, he talks to them about this star that they saw. He wants to know the exact time that they saw this star. And why does he want to know that? Because that will give him an indication as to when this child was born. And that becomes the basis for Herod killing all of the boys up to two years old in Bethlehem which we'll see when we get to verse 16. And that tells us that Herod's statement contained here, in verse eight, is totally hypocritical. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me," so that I may have Him eliminated. That's not what he said, but that's what he was thinking. What he said was "so that I too may come and worship Him."

That's hypocritical humility. That's hypocritical worship. Hypocritical worship is going through the motions of worshiping Jesus as king. It's mouthing the words of Jesus as king, and it could even include a recognition of the teaching of scripture, but in the heart the hypocritical worshiper cannot tolerate anyone else being worshiped as king other than themselves. Herod doesn't want any rivals. He will worship himself as king and nobody else. The hypocritical humility of this kind of a worshiper simply avails for their own pride. And that reality will come out when that person is threatened or slighted in any way. Just like it did in Herod. Anger, rage, even cruelty comes about when this person is threatened or challenged in any way. The person may claim to be a worshiper of the king, but just threaten them, challenge them and watch out for the angry response, because in their hearts they are king. No matter what they say about Jesus, Their worship of Jesus is strictly hypocritical. The hypocritical worshiper is more interested in saving their throne than in saving their soul. The hypocritical worshiper is more interested in saving their throne than in saving their soul. Perhaps there are some Herod's here today, some hypocritical worshipers.

Well, that's not the only wrong way to worship the king that we see presented here. There's a second way. You can worship the king indifferently. Now that's seen in the example of the priests and the scribes. We saw in verse four that Herod called together the chief priests and scribes. Well, who are these guys? Chief priest was really a pretty large group. It would include the current high priest and his family. It would also include any living past high priests and there could be a number of them because in this day the position of high priest, it wasn't being done Biblically, it was a political deal. And just like Herod could appoint somebody as chief priest, he could do that any time he wanted to. So it included a living past high priest. It also included the leading priest in charge of organizing all of the temple priests. So it's a pretty large group. The scribes, those were the scholars of the Old Testament. They were the guys that taught the Old Testament. And because much of their civil law was also based on the Old Testament and the interpretation of the Old Testament, a lot of these scribes were also lawyers.

Two different groups, and different in a number of ways. The priests were made up primarily of the Sadducees, a particular sect of the Jews. The Sadducees, they were the liberal sect of the Jews at that time. The scribes were mostly Pharisees who were the conservative guys. Herod was

unloved by both of them. And he may have consulted together. In fact, he may have even talked to the two groups separately to avoid being tricked by them. He wanted to have these two groups who really didn't like each other very much, and they didn't like him either, he figured if you got them all together you'd get a straight answer. So Herod assembles this group and asks for where the Messiah will be born and they answer without any hesitation. It's going to be Bethlehem. And then they quote from Micah chapter five verse two, that's what you have recorded in verse six. But they knew more than just the answer to this Bible question. They say some significant things about the scripture, what they think about the scripture as they give their answer. Verse five, it says "For this is what has been written." Or it stands written. That's a reference to the authoritative nature of the scriptures. The word of God speaks with authority. It's been written. It stands written. This is an authoritative statement. They believed what the Bible said was authoritative. And why did they think that? Well, because they said for this has been written by, or through, the prophet. They recognized that the prophet wasn't the ultimate source of this message, God was. It came through the prophet. From God, through the prophet. That's a statement of their belief in the inspiration of scripture. These guys believe in the inspiration and the authority of scripture. Some pretty significant statements regarding these guys. They believe in the inspiration of scripture. They believe in the authority of scripture. They diligently studied the scriptures. They knew what the scripture said without hesitation. Yet they were indifferent to it. They showed no interest in the announcement made by the magi. They apparently did nothing. They give Herod the answer but that was all they did. Their failure to act wasn't due to any ignorance. It was due to indifference. They wouldn't even go five miles down to Bethlehem to check it out. The response of the priest and the scribes is a strong warning to us, us who believe in the inspiration and the authority of the Bible. Who even study it, who even know what it says. We can do all of that and still be indifferent or apathetic in our response to it. We can rest in our Bible knowledge, not the Messiah.

One writer said this, "The scribes should be a warning to all religious teachers in the pulpit, the Sunday school, the family. They told others where to find the Savior, but did not go to Him themselves." You see what he is saying, these scribes, they told others where to go find the Savior. They didn't go to Him themselves. That can be true of you or me who believe in the inspiration, the authority, the scriptures, who study the scriptures, who know what the scripture says, who tell others what the scriptures say. Perhaps there are some priests and scribes here today. Doctrinally orthodox, but your worship is indifferent. You satisfied with knowing the truth without ever pursuing the One who is the truth. This just reminds us that a formal knowledge of scripture does not in and of itself lead a person into knowing Jesus. There will be many orthodox believers in Hell. While their worship was orthodox on the outside, it was indifferent on the inside. That's an example of a wrong way to worship the king. Some worship Him hypocritically, some worship Him indifferently.

There is a right way. And that is to worship the king passionately. And the example of that is our friends the magi who worshiped the king passionately. The magi historically came into existence

during the reign of the Medo-Persians. They were of Medo-Persian descent. Typically they were experts in religion and science, particularly astrology. They were advisers to kings. In fact they are mentioned several times in the book of Daniel as advisers. They were part of the group of the adviser, part of the cabinet to the king. And it is possible that because of the influence of Daniel in Babylon, and because even after the exile to Babylon and the Jews were able to go back to Israel, many of them stayed in Babylon because of the teaching of Daniel, the influence of Daniel and Babylon and the ongoing Jewish presence there in Babylon, that that's where magi could have learned about the coming of the King of the Jews.

At this time that this happened, most magi were advisers to the kings of the Parthians who were the enemies of Rome. So as we think about the magi who came to worship Jesus, I want you to notice several elements about their worship that provides an overall picture of what it means to worship Jesus the right way, to worship Him as the king, and that is to worship him passionately. I mean, let me point out several features of their worship.

First of all, it involved sacrifice. Verse one says that these magi came from the east. Very probably, Babylon. So they traveled at least 600 miles. How far did you go to get to church today? These guys went at least 600 miles. And they went into enemy territory. Why did they do that? To worship the king. That's why. They traveled at least 600 miles into enemy territory for the purpose of worshipping the king. They undertook a long, dangerous journey to worship the king. I would suggest to you that that represents a major sacrifice. And that sacrifice represents a kind of passion that quite frankly might put us to shame. Put us to shame when we think about the effort we put into worshipping the king. Their worship involved real sacrifice. True passionate worship always involves the sacrifice of self because we're worshipping the king. Their worship was marked by sacrifice.

Secondly it was marked by a high view of Christ. They come verse two says asking, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" The magi, they see Jesus as a king. In fact, they recognize Him as king from His birth. They are talking about what He is, not what He is going to become. They didn't come to worship the One who will be King of the Jews, they came to worship the One who is the King of the Jews. The represents an extraordinary high view of Christ. They see Christ as a king. They see Christ as a ruler. They see Christ as sovereign. Much of Christianity today suffers from a low view of Christ. Consequently even though worship might be filled by an outward emotion, it's really shallow because it's focused more on our experience than it is on the majesty of Christ Himself. These magi, they knew who Christ was. And they came a long way and they risked their lives to worship Him. They had a high view of Christ. And the kind of worship that's fed by a high view of Christ is a passionate worship.

Now that's seen in a third element of their worship and that is that they were rejoicing. Verses nine and ten, "After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Being sacrificial and having a high

view of Christ doesn't mean that worship is meant to be somber and subdued. Notice what it says about these men in verse 10 there. And notice that it doesn't just say they rejoiced, I mean wouldn't that be enough? They saw the star and they rejoiced. Doesn't say just that they rejoiced. Nor does it just say they rejoiced with joy, which would have added a little punch to the idea that they are really rejoicing. But it doesn't say that. Nor does it even say they rejoiced exceedingly with joy which would have been enough, you would think, to get the idea that these guys are really rejoicing. But it doesn't say that. It says they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. So do you get the point? Matthew is piling up superlatives to emphasize the extent of the sheer exhilaration that they felt as they came close to Christ. What it's telling us is that they are absolutely overwhelmed with joy. Passionate worship is characterized by overflowing joy because it is focused on Christ. We too often focus on ourselves. We too often focus on our circumstance and that affects the way we worship. I don't think it matters how tired these guys were and they were probably pretty tired after their journey. I think that as they approached Bethlehem, they know that they are getting close to seeing Christ. I think they're wide awake. Pretty hard to rejoice like they're rejoicing when you're kind of dozing. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Those who worship the king passionately do it with sacrifice, they do it with a high view of Christ, and they do it with great rejoicing.

A fourth mark of their worship is humility. Verse 11, "After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him." Boy that's an amazing picture. That's a picture you don't see on your Christmas cards. You might see these guys kneeling. That's not what they were doing. They were on their face. These powerful and influential men fall on their face and worship a child. They prostrate themselves before Him. That's a sign of submission, a sign of honor, a sign of worship. I was once visiting Tyler Hopkins when he was in South Africa and he told me about visiting a pastor in a village, kind of a remote village. And he was visiting with this pastor in his living room and the man's wife came into the room and immediately fell on her face to the ground in honor of her husband. Tyler and I thought that was way cool. That's honor. That's submission. Will you notice something here in this text? Matthew goes out of his way to say that when they come into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother. But, all of their worship is directed towards the Child. None of it is directed to Mary. Just thought you might want to take note of that. Those who recognize Jesus as king, they respond to Him in humility. And you see people falling on their faces before Christ all through the New Testament. Every time they get a glimpse of who He is, they're on their face. For example, in Luke chapter five, Jesus is at the Sea of Galilee, the disciples were there, you know they were fisherman. Jesus uses Peter's boat to teach people who were on the shore there. After he's done, He says to Peter, put it out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch. And Simon said, or Peter said, Master we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I'll do as you say and let down the nets. When they had done this they enclosed a great quantity of fish and their nets began to break. So they signal to their partners in the other boat to come and help them and they came and filled both of the boats so that they began to sink. Verse eight. Luke 5:8, "But when Simon Peter saw that, [when he sees what's happening] he fell down at

Jesus' feet, saying, 'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" He recognized who was in the boat with him. The holy king of the universe and Peter didn't deserve to be in the same boat. And he fell on his face in the boat at the feet of Jesus. That's humility. He says, I'm a sinner, you're holy, I don't deserve to be in the same boat with you.

What about you and me? How do we respond to Christ? We live in such a proud culture that knows so little about real humility. But if you know Christ as king you can't respond hypocritically or indifferently. You respond passionately, throwing yourself down before Him. And just in case you're wondering, I'm not suggesting that wives throw themselves down before their husbands. Throw yourself down before Christ. He's the king. Worship Him in humility like they did.

A fifth thing we notice about the worship of these magi, the passionate worship of these magi, is their giving. The end of verse 11 says, "They open their treasures and they presented to Him gift of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." In that culture bringing gifts was extremely important when you were approaching a superior. I mean, you just didn't do it without coming with a gift. And these magi recognized Christ as a superior and they give the best. They give the best. They gave the gold, the most precious metal. They gave frankincense, which was a costly, beautiful smelling incense that was usually reserved for very special occasions. They gave myrrh which was also a costly perfume. These are luxury gifts. These are gifts fitting for a king. And they're given as an expression of their worship. They came to worship the king. They want to worship the king. They found the king and as a part of their worship they gave to Him. And they gave the very best. Giving is an act of worship. In fact it's a very tangible expression of our worship. And so we could ask ourselves, do our gifts reflect a passionate worship for the king, or do they more likely represent a bad tip to a local waitress? Does your giving, does my giving, does our giving represent the fact that we are worshiping the king and we are giving Him the very best? We're giving Him an appropriate gift because He's the king. Passionate worship does that.

Another mark of their worship is seen in verse 12 and that's obedience. Obedience says, "And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way." Pretty simple, huh? God told them what to do, and guess what? They did it. They obeyed. Pretty hard to convince somebody that you're passionately worshiping the king when you don't obey Him. And take note of the fact that this is the second revelation given by God through a dream that we have recorded here in Matthew's gospel, and we'll see more as we go along. We're not receiving revelation through dreams from God today because we have His full and final revelation. And there is enough there to keep me busy for the rest of my life. Obeying what He has said, and I show my worship through my obedience, by hearing His word and doing it. That is a mark of passionate worship. The magi, they worship the king passionately. You see it in their sacrifice, the high view of Christ that they express, their rejoicing, their humility, their giving, their obedience. Everything that you see them doing reflects a passionate worship of the king. Matthew is showing us that Jesus is the King Messiah. He established that clearly in chapter one, in chapter two he shows us Jesus being recognized as the king. But not by

the people you would have expected. This passage is written as a warning. It's written as a rebuke to the Jews who didn't receive their king while these gentiles did. And it is mercifully recorded here to help those who have been misled or deceived.

Three kinds of worshipers are presented in this text. Those who worship hypocritically, seen in Herod. Those who worship indifferently, seen in the priests and the scribes. Those who worship passionately, exemplified by the magi. The only one acceptable is passionately. So, which one describes you? Please think carefully about your response to that. Because you might tell yourself, well, I don't worship hypocritically. I don't think I worship indifferently. Okay, but can you honestly say that you worship passionately? Because if you can't say that you worship passionately then how do you worship? Indifferently? Or hypocritically? And this is a perfect time to examine your own heart as we come to the Lord's table. Because here at the Lord's table we remember that this king left His throne in heaven in order to come to earth and die for sinners. Are you a passionate worshiper of this king? Then now's a time to humbly come before Him and rejoice exceedingly with great joy for the sacrifice He's made on your behalf. If you're a hypocritical or indifferent worshiper, now's the time to change that before it's too late, quite frankly. It needs to change because there will come a time when it will be too late to change. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to humble yourself before Christ and to thank Him for mercifully bringing you to this place here today where you can hear these words and perhaps have your eyes open to the truth about yourself and about the king. Don't miss this opportunity. Don't be like Herod and the religious leaders who did miss their opportunity. Be like the magi. Follow after Christ passionately. That's the only right response to who He is. He is king. The only right response is to worship Him passionately. Let's all just go to the Lord and just for a minute or two you talk to the Lord yourself and examine your own heart and make things right between you and the Lord if that needs to be. And then I'll pray and then the men will come and serve us.

Lord we thank You for Your word today that so clearly reveals to us Jesus the king, and warns us, mercifully warns us to examine our response to this king to see if we're responding to Him appropriately. Lord, I pray for each one of us here that we might be honest with ourselves and honest with You in this regard. Lord, if there are any who are here who worship You hypocritically, who may mouth the words, who may look to the Bible, who may say some right things, but in their heart it's all about themselves. Or Lord, those here today who might worship you indifferently. They know all of the data but they respond to it with apathy. Lord, I pray today would be the day that would be a change for them, that they would see Jesus as the king and that they would see Jesus calling out to them to come to Him and recognize Him as king. And to receive from Him what they can't receive anywhere else. And in understanding who He is and what He's done, how can we respond to Him any other way than with our whole hearts, with all of our strength, to worship passionately the One who is the king? Lord, I pray that as we partake of these elements that it might be a real time of rejoicing exceedingly with great joy as we humble ourselves and recognize that we are sinners, we are unworthy, but the king has granted

us a pardon because He paid our penalty in our place. May we just be overwhelmed by that truth today. And we pray it in His name. Amen.