

Matthew 19-21 Chapter Study

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We are now in the third section of Matthew's Gospel -

III. JESUS' JUDEAN MINISTRY 19-20

A. *Beyond The Jordan* 19:1-20:16

1. Jesus teaches on marriage & divorce 19:1-9

1 Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, *that* He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

This refers to the slender sliver of land on the eastern bank of the Jordan river.

While rather warm, it is a rich, lush area and was used extensively by the people of Jerusalem as a resort area.

2 And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.

While Jesus had taken short trips south to Jerusalem during the previous 3 years of His ministry, this is the final trip – He will *not* be returning to Galilee again.

His fame had filled this region & now that He's among them, even though the official word from the leaders in Jerusalem was to shun Him, the curious cannot help but go & check out the wonder-worker from Galilee.

Besides, this was just a great area to be in.

3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?"

The Pharisees were ever angling to trap Jesus & find some way to condemn Him as either a law-breaker, or cause Him to run afoul of the Romans by painting Him as a dangerous insurrectionist.

You can just imagine the various meetings they held as they sat and debated on what questions they could ask that would expose Him as either *uneducated* or *contrary* to the Law of Moses.

They thought this question about divorce would result in Him being impaled on the horns of a dilemma that would lead to further trouble for him – here's why . . .

Divorce was a hot-potato issue in that day with two main schools of thought, each based on positions articulated by two well-known & respected Jewish scholars –one ultra-liberal and the other ultra-conservative.

Rabbi Hillel was the liberal who said that a man could divorce his wife for virtually *any* reason whatsoever.

Rabbi Shammai was the conservative who said that divorce was limited to two strict conditions: *adultery & sterility*.

You can probably guess which view was the more popular of the day.

The Pharisees hoped to get Jesus caught up in controversy, and so show the common people that He *wasn't* really all that different – that He had no better answer to the current doctrinal controversy & impasse over divorce.

Think of it this way – the controversy that grips our nation is abortion, with one side advocating pro-life while the other calls themselves pro-choice.

While you have dedicated proponents on both sides, the majority of the public is less sure of their position.

The prevailing attitude seems to be a general uneasiness with the idea of killing an unborn child, BUT – and then a long list of *exceptions* are brought forth.

It's like people are waiting for someone to step forward with an authoritative word that will settle the issue once & for all.

But in terms of political debate and social controversy, if you want to button-hole someone & put them in a convenient political category, all you have to do is ask if they're pro-life or pro-choice!

As soon as you pick one or the other, you immediately have a whole group of people who while up to that point maybe were undecided about you and open to what you had to say, but now they are against you because you've taken a stand they disagree with.

This is what the Pharisees were trying to do with Jesus; embroil Him in controversy & so mire Him in a social debate it would blunt His effectiveness.

While marriage was a precious & sacred thing in Jewish *religion*, the *practice* of divorce had become fatally easy in Jesus' day.

Divorce was founded on Deuteronomy 24:1 which says - “[If] a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house . . .” then they are divorced. The bill of divorcement was a simple, one-sentence statement that the husband dismissed his wife. ^[1]

The debate over Jewish divorce came from the phrase in Deut. 24:1 “if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her.” The question was—how is the phrase *some uncleanness* to be interpreted?

On this point the Jewish Rabbis were violently divided, and it was *here* the Pharisees hoped to involve him.

Rabbi Shammai and his followers held that by “uncleanness” Moses meant *fornication*, alone, and that for no other cause could a wife be put away.

Rabbi Hillel and his followers held the meaning of “uncleanness” in the widest possible way; equating it as *anything* that would raise a feeling of dislike in the husband.

They said a man could divorce his wife if she put too much or too little salt in his food, if she twirled her hair or went out of the house without first putting it up.

If she spoke with another man in the street or if she spoke disrespectfully of his parents; if she was argued with him and raised her voice so that it was heard next door, he could hand her a piece of paper that said, “I divorce you,” and that was the end of the marriage.

One of Hillel's major disciples, Rabbi Akiba went so far as to say that the phrase “*if she finds no favor in his eyes*” meant that a man could divorce his wife if he found a woman whom he liked better and considered more beautiful, because then, in a relative way, his wife would be less attractive,

and so become unclean to him.

To complete the picture of divorce in Jesus' day, we need to know that there were two cases in which divorce was *compulsory*! Adultery & sterility.

If adultery occurred, the offended spouse, according to the rabbis, *had* to divorce. And if after ten years of marriage there were no children, again,

the couple had to divorce. [2]

When the Pharisees put this question to Jesus, it was with all this interpretive baggage & an entire culture which was polarized into two camps with widely differing ideas. Which side would Jesus take?

Neither! Jesus sided neither with Shammai *nor* with Hillel – He sided with the Word of God, which they had badly misinterpreted & ignored.

4 And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ ? ⁶ So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

The question of the Pharisees, in fact the whole controversy on divorce in Jesus' day rested on what Moses wrote in Deut. 24:1.

Jesus answers them, not by interpreting Deut. 24 but by going back to the very beginning and the passage which first defined marriage – Genesis 2.

God gave the prescription for marriage *there* at the creation when we read that man was created as male and female, so that they might be brought together in a singular commitment in which they, as two individuals are joined into an *essential oneness* that is unbreakable.

God intends marriage to be a lifelong commitment & relationship in which a man & woman experience oneness with each other in every level & dimension of their being; body, soul, & spirit.

And Jesus makes it crystal clear – what God intends and endorses in the oneness of a husband and wife, **NO ONE** is to work contrary to!

This response stunned the Pharisees; they just couldn't process it against what they thought Deut 24 said. So they grilled Him -

7 They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?”

They're tipping their hand here – and from this we can see evidence they thought there were certain cases in which divorce was *compulsory*.

But the law never **DEMANDED** divorce, and Jesus now makes that clear . . .

8 He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

Jesus shows them Moses' instructions in Deut 24 have to be interpreted & understood against the higher principle of marriage laid down in Genesis 2:24.

Marriage is a covenant of companionship. The only violation of the marriage covenant that *might* sever the God-ordained bond of marriage is sexual immorality – adultery.

Jesus is saying that Rabbi Hillel's liberal view that divorce was permissible in virtually any case is simply & wholly wrong!

But Rabbi Shammai is wrong as well because while he was correct that uncleanness in Deut 24:1 refers only to sexual immorality, he was wrong in saying that such immorality *required* divorce.

Jesus says that divorce is a *concession*, not a requirement – a concession for those whose hearts cannot let go of the pain & hurt inflicted through infidelity.

Over the years, I've talked with several people whose mates cheated on them and faced the tough decision of staying married or getting divorced.

A handful of them were utterly committed to their marriage and no matter what their spouse did, they refused to divorce.

They had come to the place where for them, it was an issue of faithfulness to the vow they made on their wedding day – and even if their erring spouse *never* forsook their sin and adultery, they were going to remain committed to the marriage.

That was an issue of personal conviction they and they alone bore and they knew it.

Others are so deeply wounded, so hurt by the infidelity that all trust in their spouse is utterly destroyed.

Their hearts could never be restored to their mate.

But most men and women whose mates commit adultery, while deeply hurt, want to work toward healing and restoration, and are willing to go through a process of reconciliation – seeing if their heart can indeed reinvest trust.

The crucial issue, as Jesus makes clear here, *is the heart*.

Divorce is *permissible*, not compulsory, only in the event of sexual immorality, and only when the offended spouse's heart is unable to let go of the hurt of the offense and so be reconciled to the offender.

Then Jesus speaks to the situation of his day, and any culture that takes a liberal and easy attitude toward divorce when he says in v. 9 –

Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

In God's eyes, there is only one legitimate reason for divorce – adultery, sexual infidelity.

If a couple separates for any other reason, & even uses the social means of the day to formalize their divorce, in God's eyes, **THEY ARE STILL MARRIED!!!**

Therefore, if they go out and marry someone *else*, they are **THEN** committing adultery, because in God's eyes, they are still married to their first mate.

Jesus said this because in His day, men & women were divorcing & remarrying with abandon!

Despite the much touted Jewish high view of marriage & family, the fact of the matter was, serial divorce & remarriage was a common practice.

God was grieved over the casual way people were treating the sacred blessing He intended for marriage and Jesus wanted them to understand that just because a man wrote his wife a bill of divorce, that did not mean in God's eyes they were in fact divorced.

This is something God's people would do well to heed today since attitudes toward marriage, divorce & remarriage today are even more liberal and messed up than they were in Jesus' day.

I've talked with a few people who though the last phrase of v. 9 stood alone -

“Whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

They thought this meant marrying ANY divorced woman was committing adultery.

The grammar of the verse does not allow this interpretation.

The last phrase is connected to the previous half of the sentence. In other words – divorce sought for the case of adultery severs the bonds of marriage, not just for the husband, but for the wife as well.

Understand? If not, let me make it clear this way, since this is what the grammar of the Greek language *means*. V. 9 is properly *interpreted* this way -

Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and [except for sexual immorality] whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

Now – to the people of Jesus' day, He's just come off as sounding even more conservative, more strict than Rabbi Shammai!!!

Jesus was concerned with elevating Marriage to the place of sacredness intended by God but forgotten by the people.

He meant to elevate the woman & wife in the home & marriage to a place God originally intended for her, but denied by the men of day.

A wife was to be cherished as a vital part of husband's life and heart, not treated as an object to be used – which is the way women of that day were esteemed by men.

This radically new perspective on marriage not only knocked the Pharisees backward, it stunned Jesus' own disciples . . .

2. Jesus teaches on celibacy 19:10-12

10 His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with *his* wife, it is better not to marry.”

Now, understand this in light of the popular views on marriage and divorce.

When a guy grew tired of his wife, he could ditch her and take another!

Jesus has just said, “No – Following me means obeying God, and God intends marriage to be to one woman, for life! And that life is a mutual sharing where the wife isn't some object you use, but you are to become one with her and she with you!”

To this the disciples respond with a classic reaction – “Well forget marriage then!”

More than anything this gives us a peek into how women & marriage were esteemed by men in that culture.

If marriage is a lifelong covenant of oneness – they conclude it would better not to marry.

Jesus then replies to this remark -

11 But He said to them, “All cannot accept this saying,
What saying? What the disciple had just said - that it would be better not to marry
–remaining single is preferable to such life-long marriage.

**11 But He said to them, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those
to whom it has been given: 12 For there are eunuchs who were
born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who
were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have
made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He
who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”**

Jesus’ words here must be understood in their proper context, which He Himself
set when He quoted Genesis 2.

Vs. 1-11 teach us that it is God’s general will that men and women marry, and that
they do so in a single, exclusive, covenant of companionship for all of life.
God looked at the first man, and even before sin came, said it was not good
that he was alone.

The remedy was a mate of flesh & bone, a companion comparable to him.

The relationship between them God sanctioned was marriage.

So marriage is God’s general will for men & women.

But there are exceptions as Jesus makes clear here. Some men and women will
be called to live a life of committed singleness & celibacy.

He said that a few people are just born to remain single.

Their desire of companionship is fully satisfied in regular friendships and their
sexual drives and needs are of such a nature that they never really present
any stress on or challenge to their morality.

For such a person, a marriage would only be a burden & they would make a
really poor spouse because their need for relational intimacy is non-
existent.

Some people have been made eunuchs by men.

Jesus is referring to the common practice of the ancient world in which the
guards who protected the harem and were closest to the king’s throne were
eunuch’s.

The sexual urge of such men and driving ambition that might endanger the
king has been removed by surgical procedure.

The final class of people Jesus mentions who are called to remain single, are those
whose desire for companionship is consumed and satisfied by their whole-
hearted pursuit of God and serving Him.

Jesus ends with – “He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*” meaning – if
celibacy is what the Lord has appointed you to, be faithful. If not, don’t sweat
it!

How do you know if you’re called to marriage or celibacy?

Simple – do you long for romantic companionship; does the longing for
physical intimacy create tension within you? If so, then God’s will for you
is marriage.

On the other hand, if you’re *content* being single and find your greatest sense
of satisfaction simply in pursuing God and serving Him, then you’re

probably called to remain celibate.

3. Jesus blesses children 19:13-15

13 Then little children were brought to Him that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But Jesus said, **“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”** ¹⁵ And He laid *His* hands on them and departed from there.

This is just a tender and touching scene.

Have you ever watched little children around adults – it’s a kick!

There are some adults, that for some strange reason, little children just cower away from, while others are mobbed by kids.

Watch the line waiting to sit on Santa’s lap at the mall sometime – hilarious!

Jesus was the kind of man whom the children weren’t intimidated by.

Here He was, the Creator & Sustainer of the entire Universe, yet little kids sat in His lap and nestled in His arms while He blessed them tenderly!

When the parents first started bringing their children, the disciples, acting as Jesus’ officials and assistants tried to shoo them away.

But Jesus rebuked the rebukers and turned it into a lesson – His kingdom was not like the kingdoms of man which are all worried about decorum and building honor and filling themselves with worldly marks of power.

His kingdom is filled with the joy and simplicity of children.

It’s not a stuffy formality – it’s a joyous paradise of blessing!

Can you pick up and play with a little child and *not* smile, *not* feel a powerful surge of simply joy?

4. A crucial lesson on the nature of salvation 19:16-20:16

a. 19:16-22 the rich young ruler’s question

Since we looked at this passage on Sunday, we’ll just read it tonight and leave it to you to get the CD or tape if you weren’t here.

16 Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” ¹⁷ So He said to him, **“Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”** ¹⁸ He said to Him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “**‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’** ¹⁹ **‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’**” ²⁰ The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, **“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”** ²² But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

As we saw Sunday, this rich young ruler’s whole idea of eternal life was messed up.

For him, salvation was something you merited by living a good and moral life.

Eternal life was a reward God handed out to those who were good enough, a prize that elevated you into the upper tier of humanity.

Just as he'd been successful in this life in this earth, he wanted to make sure that he could take it with him and have the best heaven had to offer just as he'd had the best on earth.

While the rich young ruler thought he was doing really well in God's eyes, Jesus showed him that in fact, he hadn't even kept the very first commandment –the God he worshipped was not the Lord of Heaven but a god of gold, of earthly wealth and possessions.

b. 19:23-26 salvation is the work of God, not man

As Jesus watched the rich young ruler walk away sorrowfully, he turned to His followers -

23 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When His disciples heard *it*, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” 26 But Jesus looked at *them* and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Jesus uses an illustration here that has been badly abused over time.

Some teacher somewhere once said that there was a tiny gate in the walls of Jerusalem called the “eye of the needle.”

The only way a camel could get through it was by unpacking it, taking off its saddle, making it kneel down on the ground, then pushing it through.

Here's the problem – there was no such gate! And Jesus never meant for such an interpretation to be used on this.

He's not saying it's **JUST hard** for a rich man to enter heaven – He's saying it's **impossible** for him to get to heaven by his own works, by the route the rich young ruler's just tried to make for himself.

It would be easier to pass a camel through the eye of a sewing needle.

Now, you can do that, I supposed, but you have to grind him up real fine!

Camel smoothie! And then you need a really small funnel.

The disciples were blown away by this, because they were in the same frame of mind as the RYR! They too thought that deeds of merit earned eternal life.

So if you were rich, you could give away more, and so accrue a bigger reward.

Also, by being rich, you didn't have to work like other men and had more time for acts of charity – wealth brought privilege and more opportunity, they thought, to do good.

So – if the **rich** found it so hard to enter heaven, then who's got a chance?

Jesus made it clear – if they thought eternal life was a reward to be given out as a reward for their work – it was impossible!

But what's impossible for man, is totally possible with God!

And that's the point Jesus wants to make.

As His followers, they must understand that salvation, eternal life is not a reward God gives for **our** work, but for Christ's Work!

We don't do the work and so earn eternal life. Jesus does the work and the reward God returns Him, is giving *US* eternal life!

When *Seabiscuit* ran against *Man O' War* and won, who took the purse? His owner – Charles Howard. The horse did the work, but another received the prize – and so it is for us.

Jesus did the work, we get the prize He won – eternal life!

c. 19:27-20:16 salvation's reward

1) 19:27 Peter's question

27 Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?"

Peter is still thinking in terms of merit and he's responding to what Jesus has just said to the RYR.

Jesus called him to sell all and come and follow Him. Peter says, "We did! What do we get?"

2) 19:28-30 Jesus' answer

28 So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Though Peter's question was prompted from the misguided idea that eternal life is *earned*, Jesus knew he would come to see that God *gives* salvation as a *gift*.

It would take the cross and the resurrection before these things would become clear to Peter and the other disciples.

But to his questions about what the disciples' reward will be, Jesus says they will have a unique place in the coming Kingdom.

When He finally takes His throne and establishes the Kingdom on earth, they will sit on 12 thrones, assisting Him in the administration of the Millennial Reign.

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

While the 12 disciples will have a unique place assigned to them in the coming Kingdom, all those in every age who define their lives by their relationship with Jesus rather than worldly success will partake of a glorious eternal reward.

But again, this reward is not a return on our work – it's the reward won by Christ, and given to us.

Jesus' point here in response to Peter's question is that what we'll gain in heaven will far outstrip anything we've given up here for the sake or cause of Christ.

By a 'hundredfold' Jesus is not speaking literally – who needs or wants a hundred mothers or a hundred wives or a hundred children?

He means that the state of our existence in glory will be just that –

GLORIOUS beyond words!

CHAPTER 20

3) 20:1-16 a parable on the reward of salvation

Now Jesus tells a parable about the reward of eternal life.

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’ ⁸ “So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ ⁹ And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ ¹³ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take *what is yours* and go your way. I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

As we’ve seen in the RYR and the disciples, the popular idea of eternal life in Jesus’ day was that people would sit in various levels of privilege and status in heaven.

But the real glory and blessing of eternal life is an intimate relationship with God, and Jesus tells a parable to get this truth across to them.

He tells of a landowner who hires a bunch of day laborers.

The first group he hires at dawn. The next group he hires at 9 am, then another group at Noon. Finally, he selects another group at 5:00 in the evening.

When they’re done with the days’ work, they all come before the paymaster to get their wages and the guys who were there at dawn and working all day saw the guys hired last get a denarius – the same amount they had been told they would get.

But since these guys had only worked for a short time, they guys first hired thought for sure that meant they would get more – but when they got paid, it too was a denarius.

This upset them and they went to the owner to ask why they’d been treated unfairly.

The owner asked if they hadn't been paid what was promised.

They agreed, but said it didn't seem fair since those who'd worked a far shorter time had received the same as those who'd worked all day.

Jesus' point here is that salvation, eternal life, is not about varying levels of reward according to how much one's invested.

Will there be rewards for faithfulness in heaven – yes! But that is not the point or subject of this parable.

The one lesson Jesus is seeking to impart is that eternal life is the same for all, whether a person has been a Christian and walked faithfully with Christ for 80 years or they receive Him on their death bed.

Both will receive the same basic reward – because it's not a reward for their merit but Christ's!

So – someone might ask – if that's the case, why not live like a devil all your life, and right before you croak, repent?

Couple reasons –

1) Such a last minute prayer would be totally insincere and God would not be fooled. He doesn't listen to the words alone, He looks at the heart. Can the person who thinks that way – that they will repent on their deathbed -know for certain that they'll be able to be genuinely sincere and repentant?

Can they be sure they will even have the moment to repent?

2) Living obediently before God is the best way to live – truly!

God's commands aren't heavy burdens meant to suppress life and enjoyment but to maximize it.

The man or woman who obeys God will be spared a lot of grief and pain because they will avoid the sin which generates it.

Sin, while enticing and presenting itself as fun and pleasurable, always, always, always works death and destruction – **ALWAYS!**

Jesus ends the parable with –

16 So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

Here's where Jesus moves into the crucial point of the parable and the lesson He's been teaching them about how eternal life is obtained.

Peter had asked what the disciples would get in return for giving up all to follow Jesus.

Jesus assured them would be rewarded - but that God does not reward as man expects.

This is the essence of God's *grace*; He rewards & blesses according to His will & pleasure, not according to what we deserve.

The system of law is easy to figure out: you get what you deserve.

But the system of grace is foreign to us: God deals with us according to who *He is*, not according to who *we are* or what *we've done*.

In the parable, the landowner did not treat anyone *unfairly*, though he was more *generous* to some than others.

We can be assured God will never, ever be unfair to us, though He may - for His own purpose & pleasure - bestow greater blessing on someone else

who seems less deserving.
God's grace always operates *righteously*. He never does anything *unfair* in grace.

God will never be *less* than fair, but He reserves the right to be *more* than fair according to the pleasure & riches of His grace.

Grace does not give us *more* blessing than we deserve - it gives blessing *completely apart* from the principle of deserving.

To answer Peter, the disciples could expect to be rewarded, but not on the basis of what they'd done – rather on what Christ would do.

And since such reward would come to them *in the form of a gift* since they hadn't earned it, they shouldn't be surprised if, when the gifts are distributed, God gives others unexpected gifts.

Friends, when we get to heaven, no one will look at another's gift and be envious or ask why they got what they got when we got what we got.

The most amazing thing is that we are there at all!

B. On The Road Up To Jerusalem 20:17-34

1. Jesus foretells His death & resurrection 20:17-19

17 Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ¹⁸ **“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”**

At this point, Jesus takes the disciples across the Jordan and they begin the trek on the main road that leads from the river, past the major city of Jericho, and up through the canyon that leads to Jerusalem which sits on the apex of the central mountain ridge of Israel.

All roads went “up” to Jerusalem because of it's elevation.

Jesus wants them to know that this is it – the final journey.

He will soon be betrayed into the hands of His enemies who will trump up charges to condemn & execute Him.

But not to worry – He will rise from the dead on the third day.

In light of Jesus' solemn words here, what happens next is a bit surprising, and one more evidence that the disciples really did not get what Jesus was saying about what was coming.

2. “Kingdom greatness” 20:20-28

a. 20:20-24 a conspiracy to secure plum positions in the coming kingdom

20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, **“What do you wish?”** She said to Him, **“Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”**

This question is asked on the presumption that Jesus *is* the Messiah and that He's

about to establish His Kingdom.

James & John were the sons of Zebedee, and it seems they put their mother up to this.

We can assume that from the fact that when Jesus answered her, He addressed *them*.

22 But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

Meaning a baptism of pain and suffering.

They said to Him, “We are able.”

See, Jesus is speaking to James & John. They’d put their mother up to going to Jesus and asking this request.

They probably thought, “Jesus is so respectful of women, and specially the elderly. Let’s get Mom to go and ask a favor of Jesus – to give us *the* plum positions in His royal court when He finally takes possession of the Messianic Kingdom!”

So once she asked, Jesus knew the real source of the request & turned to the boys to ask them if they understood what it was they were asking for.

His kingdom was very different from what they were envisioning and it would only be entered through the greatest sacrifice.

Were they ready for such an adventure? They said they were.

23 So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

Though James & John did not at all understand what they were asking or what was coming, Jesus knew the day would soon come when it would all become clear to them and they would indeed experience great suffering for His name’s sake.

James ended up being the first of the Apostles to be martyred, and John was the last of the Apostle to die, but only after a very long life in which he suffered greatly for the cause of Christ, including being dunked in a vat of boiling oil and left on the rock prison island of Patmos for years.

But their request over assignments in the coming Kingdom was not something entrusted to Jesus. That was something the Father alone would do.

24 And when the ten heard *it*, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.

When the other 10 disciples heard about this sneaky little attempt of the brothers to grab a special place of favor, it stirred up all kinds of envy and strife among them.

Jesus used this turmoil among His followers to impart a crucial lesson -

b. 20:25-28 greatness defined

25 But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your

servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Since this is my text for this coming Sunday, I'll leave further comment till then.

3. Blind men healed 20:29-34

29 Now as they went out of Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. ³⁰ And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!”

The words Matthew uses to describe their cries indicate there was a desperation to them.

They were making such a ruckus that -

31 Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!”

When the crowd tried to silence them, they just cried out the louder.

They people who tried to quiet them may have been concerned about the titles the blind men were using of Jesus!

They called him “Lord, Son of David.” These were titles reserved for the Messiah and it was this very acclamation that had raised so much trouble for Jesus among the nation’s leaders in Jerusalem just a few miles away.

This took place near Jericho and there’s a good reason why Matthew mentions that.

You see, Herod had built a rich resort palace at Jericho and there was an important Roman fort there guarding the highway junction not far away.

The main east-west road from the Jordan, by Jericho and up to Jerusalem intersected the north-south highway that linked Galilee and Judea. This was a route that saw a lot of commercial traffic so the Romans had an important fortification there to protect the road.

Jericho was the eastern gateway to Jerusalem and what happened there was carried quickly to the ears of both the Jewish and Roman officials.

Jericho also stood on the edge of the wilderness, which is where most of the would-be messiahs fled and raised their supporting armies so they could attack the fat-cat establishment in Jerusalem.

Jericho had seen it’s fair share of Roman & Jewish troops that had been sent out to squelch these would be rebels.

When the people heard these two men using Messianic titles for Jesus, they panicked! They feared the Romans would catch wind & send out a couple squads to impose martial law yet again.

32 So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

Now, hello! Isn’t it obvious? They’re blind!

Listen, Jesus is not being dense here – He knows what they need and what He will do – but this is crucial – while they have shown earnestness and have addressed him using the right titles, they still have not made specific their

request of the Lord.

Jesus wants them to tell Him what it is they want Him to do!

James 4:2 says that we have not because we ask not!

Just as these blind men, God knows our need, and He knows what He will do – but He still wants us to ask and to ask specifically!

That way, when He answers, it will bolster our faith and renew our sense of dependence on Him.

33 They said to Him, “Lord, that our eyes may be opened.” 34 So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him.

They didn't just get a goody from God and go away, they used their healing to good effect, they followed Him.

God knows what is needed in our lives to ensure we stay close to and dependent on him.

For these two men, being healed of blindness would deepen and develop their spiritual lives.

For the Apostle Paul, his physical affliction increased his dependence on the Lord and actually empowered his effectiveness.

God wants us to make our requests *specific*, so He invited these two men to say what they wanted Him to do for them.

God wants us to be specific – and if we need healing, then to ask specifically.

But know this, God knows our deepest issues & desires and what will happen when he answers a particular way.

What do you want more – to be healed of some physical affliction, or to be closer to God?

God knows that while now we might say, “I want to be healed of my physical affliction,” the time will come when being closer to Him is absolutely the all-consuming passion of our lives.

Little Mary's parents gave her an allowance, but they saved it for her and kept it hidden so she could not get to it.

Every so often, Mary would see some thing she wanted on TV or would hear the ice cream man coming down the street, and she would plead with her parents for some of her money – but they always declined, saying that they were helping her save it.

All Mary could see was that the other kids were buying ice cream and enjoying new toys.

But the ice cream was quickly eaten and forgotten as were the countless cheap little toys that either quickly broke or were passed over for some new fancy or childhood fad.

Then, one day when Mary was 17, she came home from school to find a brand new car in the driveway.

She ran in to the house to find her parents waiting in the living room with a set of keys they handed her, saying, “Honey, all that money we kept for you over the years, was enough to buy a car. Thanks for being patient!”

Does mature Mary now regret all the uneaten ice cream and missed toys?

Hardly!

When we have some great need, we think meeting that need is the thing that God needs to do.

He sees from a much more mature and far-reaching, and comprehensive perspective.

We ought to ask God and ask specifically, but like little children, we must take the answer God gives us with humble cheerfulness, trusting that Father Knows Best!

[1] *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily Study Bible, Rev. ed. (Mt 19:10). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

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