

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 67, Chapters 19 and 20

In Matthew chapter 19 we find the story of the rich man who asked Yeshua how he could obtain eternal life. We find this same story in Mark and Luke as well, with only minor differences. Let's re-read it.

#### **RE-READ MATTHEW 19:16 - 22**

Now turn your Bibles just a few pages to Mark chapter 10 and we'll read Mark's version.

#### **READ MARK 10:17 - 22**

Luke's version is nearly word for word of Mark's so we won't go to the Gospel of Luke. Mark adds an element of emotion that isn't there in Matthew ("Yeshua looking at him felt love for him...") but otherwise is nearly the same. We discussed this story last week and will complete it today, so I'll briefly review.

To a modern Christian when we read the words "what must I do to obtain eternal life" we have a definite idea of what that means because our Church doctrines have taught us to think in that way. Generally, it means that by placing our trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, after our physical death our souls and at some point our transformed bodies will have a pleasant eternal afterlife living in perfect harmony with God (and this, of course, is true). We must be careful, however, not to read that doctrinal understanding back into this passage because that cannot be what this young man who approached Yeshua was thinking. For one reason, the knowledge that Yeshua is the Messiah was at this moment a closely guarded secret among the 12 Disciples at the order of their Master. For another, the idea

that Yeshua would go to the cross, and in His death atonement for them would be made, and this would lead to eternal life in God's presence, was nowhere yet presented nor was it present in mainstream Jewish tradition. In fact, there's no evidence that at this point this is what the 12 Disciples were thinking about the outcome of their Master being the Messiah. Thus this rich young man had to have been thinking in different terms, perhaps along the lines of some undefined means of living beyond a normal life span that also involved taking his wealth and status with him. So he was merely seeking an answer to a burning question from a wise holy man; it was not that he considered that in some way Jesus would be the facilitator or be part of this man's eternal life.

So, Yeshua answers the man's question in a rather straightforward way, well within the Jewish context and way of thinking of the times, by telling him to obey the commandments of the Torah. He specifically names the commandments of the second tablet; that is the commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai that had to do with interpersonal human relationships. While not included in Matthew's Gospel, Mark's and Luke's say that the young man responded that he had obeyed these commandments since he was a boy, inferring that even before the age of accountability he was Torah observant to a fault (at least he was in his own mind). Since the young man believed that he had kept the commandments perfectly, then he asks what else he must do and Yeshua answers that he should sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

The thing is, in Jewish culture almsgiving (charity) was considered to be a high virtue, and the wealthy were expected to be very visible alms givers. In a sense by giving alms then this was seen as an act of generosity that made it OK (righteous) for a man to be wealthy in the midst of so many impoverished people. So Yeshua sort of raised the bar on that Jewish Tradition by saying that if the man was going to pursue eternal life through perfect obedience to the commandments then to love his neighbor perfectly meant to sell his wealth and give it all to the needy. But there's another sense we need to view this statement that doesn't try to find a way around what is obvious: the man asked how to obtain eternal life and Jesus essentially says he should obey The Law of Moses. If that doesn't startle you a little, then you're not paying attention. The first part of obtaining eternal life, according to Christ, was obeying The Law and specifically doing good deeds in accordance with the 10 Commandments (the dreaded "working your way to Heaven" scenario that is so off-putting to evangelical Christianity). Even when Yeshua continues that to more perfectly obey the commandments in the spirit intended the rich man should give away everything

he has accumulated, this still amounts to works and deeds to gain eternal life. What gives?

Well, if we stopped here, this would indeed be confusing. Where does God's free grace enter into the equation? It comes only when Yeshua finishes His conversation with the words: "then come and follow Me". As much as Christian doctrine implies that Christ's ONLY response to the rich man inquiring about eternal life (that we should pay any attention to) was "follow Me", that isn't at all what He said about it, is it? So there are 2 parts to gaining eternal life in Christ's response to the rich man. Not either/or, but both. First: obey the Commandments of God... especially in the doing of good deeds... and second: follow Christ. All the New Testament writers wrote, and Yeshua taught, in the context of obeying the Law of Moses as the necessary beginning of the route to eternal life; but it was not the completion of it. Christ was that completion. The most prominent branches of the Church have for centuries separated those two requirements Yeshua has just laid out for eternal life, and then discarding the first... obeying the Law. The doctrine became that ONLY following Christ is how we obtain eternal life with God, and if we include works and obedience to the Law as part of that requirement it makes us "legalists" who are trying to "work our way to Heaven". The irony is that following Christ includes obedience to the Torah as He clearly stated in Matthew 5:17 - 19 and again here in Matthew 19:17. The New Testament writers urge us to understand that doing what the Torah says to do...taking concrete action, doing good works and deeds... is mandatory for Yehoveh worshippers.

Paul writes often about this subject but probably Romans 2 and 3 are his most detailed. I urge you to fully read those 2 chapters and also to go to TorahClass.com for the Romans study. But here are just a couple of verses to ponder.

**CJB Romans 2:7-8 <sup>7</sup> To those who seek glory, honor and immortality by perseverance in doing good, he will pay back eternal life. <sup>8</sup> But to those who are self-seeking, who disobey the truth and obey evil, he will pay back wrath and anger.**

**CJB Romans 2:13 <sup>13</sup> For it is not merely the hearers of Torah whom God considers righteous; rather, it is the doers of what Torah says who will be made righteous in God's sight**

The King James Version puts it this way:

**KJV Romans 2:13** *(For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified).*

Jesus's biological brother James also speaks on the subject.

**CJB James 2:17-20** <sup>17</sup> *Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.* <sup>18</sup> *But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!* <sup>19</sup> *You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too- the thought makes them shudder with fear!* <sup>20</sup> *But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren?*

**CJB James 2:24** <sup>24</sup> *You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone.*

These New Testament authors are teaching what Yeshua was teaching the rich man. Good works from following the Law are important and the inauguration of one's faith journey; but following Him was the necessary culmination of the road to eternal life. One apart from the other is incomplete.

The rich man in our story did the first requirement but in denying Christ erected a road block to eternal life. Christ told him to first sell his wealth and give it to the poor; and then to follow Him. The rich man could not bring himself to give wholehearted obedience to Jesus because of what it meant he would have to give up: his material wealth. So does this mean that people that have more than they need are to give it away? Is wealth itself a sign of not following Christ? Have we encountered a command of Christ for all of His followers to take vows of poverty? Is the call a requirement to renounce the material in order to take up the cross? Countless have taken it this way including many Early Church Fathers such as Origen, Cyprian, and of sainted folks such as Francis of Assisi. Although the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls didn't do so to follow Christ, they did disavow material possessions and share all that they had. Yet by no means are we to take Yeshua's conversation with this one wealthy man as an all-encompassing proverb about wealth. Clearly, Yeshua knew that the obstacle that stood between this particular rich man and true eternal life was his familiar and secure wealth. Most of us that have said "yes" to Christ had some sort of

obstacle that we had to overcome, or perhaps give up, and it will be that way for nearly everyone who has yet to accept God's great gift to us. Perhaps it is wealth, but more often it is something else.

Even so, then as now material possessions (and especially if one has **great** wealth) can be a serious obstacle to our faith, often not only because of the false security it seems to bring us but to the high cost we paid to obtain it and continue to pay to maintain it. Open your Bibles again and we'll re-read the remainder of Matthew chapter 19.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 19:23 - end**

So in reference to the rich man's decision NOT to follow Christ because it would have meant giving up his wealth, Yeshua turns to His disciples and gives them a saying that we've all heard countless times: "I tell you that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God". First, let me dispel a belief that I had taught as true up until a few years ago but have since learned otherwise: that there was a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem called The Eye of the Needle where folks could enter after dark, and this is what Jesus was referring to. It turns out that, after much investigation, there is no good basis for such a belief. There is no ancient literature (Jewish or otherwise) that mentions it and no physical or archeological evidence to support it. There is no long-held Jewish tradition about such a gate. Rather it is meant similarly to Yeshua's comment that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains. It is a metaphor whereby the tiniest is compared to the largest. That is, a camel was the largest land animal indigenous to the Middle East, and of course, the eye of a sewing needle was extremely small by design. So, says Yeshua, for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven was as difficult as the largest land animal to pass through the tiny hole of a needle... it was a memorable absurdity. But what was His point? All Yeshua is doing is summarizing to His disciples the outcome of the conversation He just had with the rich man who walked away; a conversation the disciples had witnessed. The wealthy are more likely to cling to their wealth than to trust in Yeshua and the unknown journey such trust brings with it. But please notice: Yeshua was speaking about degree of difficulty; not that wealth of itself barred a man from the Kingdom nor that no wealthy man would ever be able to trust in Him.

The astonished disciples exclaim: "then who can be saved"? Here's the picture that is being drawn. The wealthy were the privileged and of course held the

highest societal status. They were catered to, bowed down to, and given the best seats at banquets and even in the Synagogues. This was the Jewish aristocracy whereby the aristocrats were above all others, and the poor mainly existed to serve them. So if a wealthy aristocrat can only rarely find a way into the Kingdom, "who can?", thought the disciples. Jewish Tradition was that abundance and wealth was an unmistakable sign of divine favor. Deuteronomy 28 seems to teach that abundance was indeed a sign of Heavenly blessing.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Deuteronomy 28:1** ***"If you listen closely to what ADONAI your God says, observing and obeying all his mitzvot which I am giving you today, ADONAI your God will raise you high above all the nations on earth; <sup>2</sup> and all the following blessings will be yours in abundance- if you will do what ADONAI your God says:***

And the next 12 verses go on to list the incredible blessings of abundance that God will bestow on those who obey Him. So then if it was nearly impossible for a rich man who was blessed by God to be saved, how could a poor person who didn't enjoy such a position with God have any hope whatsoever? To which Yeshua at first validates their fear. He says: humanly this **is** impossible. Remember: Yeshua's response at the moment is not if a rich man can enter the Kingdom, but rather the disciples' thought of "then who can ?" Obviously, they were thinking about their own ability to have eternal life. And to paraphrase, His answer is: no one. Yet there is hope. Jesus concludes that thought with: but with God everything is possible. Let me be clear: Christ is not saying that God's attribute of omnipotence somehow assures all Jews, or all humans for that matter, of salvation.

Here we encounter the word "saved". The Greek is **sozo**. It means to be rescued from destruction or to be kept safe. But again, do not read into the disciple's words the standard Christian meaning that to be saved means to have our sins forgiven (which of course is true). By no means were the Disciples thinking in those terms. For them, the Kingdom of Heaven was a place of safety and security on earth, and so they wanted in... badly. For them, that was salvation. And since Yeshua had just told the rich man to divest himself of everything as a prerequisite to entering the Kingdom (which was also in some undefined way connected to eternal life), then Peter asks: "if we who have left everything (as you just instructed) and followed you (the very thing the rich man refused to do), then what will we have?" That is, what is the outcome of our allegiance to Yeshua? What is our reward for going all-in? Yeshua goes on to answer employing an End

Times scenario by bringing in Daniel's Son of Man sitting on His throne.

I cannot say it strongly enough. Yeshua is now projecting something well into their future whether the disciples understood that or not. And from His teaching perhaps we can learn something about the order of End Times events. He says that when He sits on His throne it will be in age of a regenerated (a re-created) world, and at that same time the 12 disciples will also sit on their thrones as judges over the tribes of Israel. This means "judges" in the sense of the Judges of old as a ruling class, not judging in the sense of declaring people guilty and condemning them. Therefore this likely is not speaking about something that happens even in the era of the Millennial Kingdom but rather what follows when the earth is destroyed and re-created.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Revelation 21:1** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there. <sup>2</sup> Also I saw the holy city, New Yerushalayim, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "See! God's Sh'khinah is with mankind, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and he himself, God-with-them, will be their God.*

A few more verses down in Revelation 21 we read of God and Yeshua seated on thrones, and of the city of Jerusalem having 12 gates each with a name of one of the 12 tribes upon it. This may be inferring the existence of the 12 disciples as the 12 judges over the 12 tribes sitting on their thrones as Yeshua has just promised, since this is taking place inside the Israelite city of Jerusalem.

So the answer Jesus gives to Peter is that the 12 disciples who gave up everything to follow Yeshua will, in the end, be rewarded with more than is even imaginable in this present age, on this present earth. Yet Yeshua tempers that by saying that everyone (not only the 12 disciples) that has left everything and (if necessary) everyone behind to follow Christ will receive 100 times more (with "100 times more" being a figure of speech not as a precise number of multiplication).

Perhaps one the most wondrous things that we as God worshippers, Jesus followers, and students of the Holy Word ought to take from Christ's promises to His disciples and to His Jewish followers is that Israel has a future. Even a **glorious** future throughout eternity. The Prophets speak of it as well although

for 1700 years the Church has said that God has transferred that glorious future from Israel to the gentile Church. My brothers and sisters, God is **not** done with Israel and He has **not** turned their blessings over to the gentile Church as some propose. In his Gospel, Matthew sees the Kingdom of Heaven as mainly about 2 things: Messiah Yeshua and the restoration of Israel. In academic terms, the Gospel of Matthew presents an Israel-centric worldview. The question for us is: does Matthew see what he has recorded on one level or two? That is, does He see Jesus and a regenerated Israel as a reborn physical, tangible Golden Era of Israel with its Jewish King Messiah (another King David) that was the centuries-old Jewish hope and expectation? Or does Matthew see it as something that happens well into the future, at the End Times? Or does he see it as both? My opinion is that Matthew mainly has the traditional Jewish worldview that was earthbound and Israel-centric, but he was honest and obedient enough to write down, through divine inspiration, things he didn't understand and couldn't comprehend in the 1st century. Things that we, today, have a better understanding of because more time and history have passed.

The final words of this chapter once again foresee one of the interesting paradigms about the Kingdom of Heaven that Yeshua has been teaching: a reversal of fortunes. The economic and social dynamics of today will not remain the same in the Kingdom. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the first in the present age will be last in the Kingdom and the last in present age will be first in the Kingdom. Those who enter the Kingdom of Heaven with nothing because they gave it all up to be there, will be rewarded with the highest status. Those with the most status on earth (the first) but choose to put their faith in the security of their wealth and power will be reduced to the last ... in this case, the last will be left on the outside of the Kingdom, looking in.

Let's move on to chapter 20.

### **READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 20 all**

The chapter opens with a truly fascinating Parable. And as usual, the Parable is about trying to explain to the Jewish people listening to Yeshua what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. So He concocts a purely fictional story to teach them. Yet fictional or not Parables often dealt in matters of everyday life, as does this one.

Jesus sets His Parable in the backdrop of agriculture; something familiar that



everyone following Him around would understand. However for us of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to understand, I will need to explain some of the nuances that needed no explanation for His audience because it was common knowledge so it was left unsaid. A farmer was usually a landowner, and therefore a well-to-do man (not wealthy necessarily, but certainly something that the majority of Jews would have strived for). This farmer had a vineyard and it is implied that the grapes needed to be harvested because he was urgently hiring more workers as the day went on. Grapes had a very short timeframe to be picked. A day too soon or a day too late and not only would the yield be lessened but the grape quality suffered and so didn't bring as good a price at market.

A vineyard was a familiar symbol for Israel that can be found in various places in the Old Testament such as Isaiah 5 and Jeremiah 12. This would have been apparent to Christ's followers and so they would have understood that Israel as the vineyard was at the heart of the Parable.

The farmer went and found some workers around daybreak and offered them a denarius to harvest his crop. This was the standard wage for a day laborer; it wasn't considered too little or too much but fair. Around 3 hours later he must have needed more workers so he went back to the market-square. He saw some men standing around doing nothing and told them to go to the vineyard. He didn't say how much he'd pay... only that it would be fair. At this point, any listener would think that it would be a bit less than the denarius he was paying the first group because the 2<sup>nd</sup> group would be working fewer hours. 3 more hours pass and the farmer repeats the process, and then does it yet again in mid-afternoon. Finally, with only an hour of daylight left for harvesting, he goes yet again to the market-square, finds more men that had been standing around all day doing nothing, and says essentially "why aren't you working?" They answered "because no one hired us". So he hires them and sends them out to his vineyard.

For a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, some of the description about the men standing around doing nothing makes it sound as if they are lazy, not too interested in working, and had to be sort of coaxed to go to the farmer's vineyard; but that is not the case. Farmers didn't have full-time crews of men to work for them, and the average common laborer didn't have a steady job. Rather these men that occupied the lowest rung of the economic ladder would go to a customary place and wait all day long in hopes of someone coming along to hire them for the day. Generally speaking, if they didn't get some work, their families would either eat very poorly or not at all that evening. Even if they didn't work a full day, and so

got substantially less money, it was better than nothing. So in hiring some workers even if only for an hour or two, those workers might get enough to feed their families 1 sparse meal.

Another nuance that would have pricked the ears of the Jewish listeners is that it was the farmer himself doing the hiring. A landowner usually had a house steward that would go do such a mundane task as hiring some unskilled workers to labor in the fields for a few hours. Instead in Yeshua's Parable, this farmer took a personal interest and did the choosing and hiring himself.

In verse 8 the day ends and it's time to pay the workers. In this case, the farmer that hired the workers gives his steward the task of doling out the pay although the farmer comes, too, to observe. He also instructs his steward that he is to pay the last ones to be hired first, and the first to be hired were to be paid last. Lo and behold the men that had worked for only about an hour got paid a denarius... a full day's pay! And as the men got paid, in reverse order of their hiring, it finally came to the field workers that had been hired early in the morning and so had labored all day long. Since they had to wait while all the others got paid before them, they were upset that they got paid exactly the same for their many hours of toil as those who barely worked at all. It seemed totally unfair to them and they grumbled to their employer about it.

I imagine that Yeshua's listeners probably identified with the grumbling laborers that had worked all day long, and now exhausted saw the ones that had hardly worked up a sweat get paid exactly the same! These angry laborers say that they've worked all day in the hot sun and now the farmer has recompensed them equally with the ones that had not. Another nuance: whereas most English Bible translations speak of the men working in the "hot sun" or in "the heat" in fact the Greek word is **kauson**. It means not only a scorching heat, an extreme heat, but is Greek for the Hebrew **chamsin**. Literally, it means east wind but it is actually akin to what they call in Southern California Santana winds that can cause a lot of discomfort and damage. They blow in off the dry desert very hot with near-zero humidity; invariably full of gritty dust you can feel in your teeth. So it's not as though the vineyard workers in the Parable were merely working on a typical hot summer day; they had been subjected to a brutal adverse weather condition that would challenge anyone's stamina.

This additional information about the cruel weather merely heightens the matter of fairness; the first being put on an equal footing with the last. Some would call it

unjust. The farmer responds to the grumblers with no sympathy or understanding at all by saying: didn't I give you what I said I would? What's unfair about that? That I chose to give the last workers hired the same amount as I paid you is none of your business. Is this not my vineyard and my money and I have the right to choose to be generous to whomever I decide?

Jesus's Parable ends with words: " Thus the last ones will be first and first last". So now we've had a few examples of the greatest becoming the least and the first the last in order to describe the coming dramatic change that will happen when the Kingdom of Heaven manifests fully. The question I put before all of you is this: was the farmer fair and just? Don't those workers have a legitimate perspective? Is it fair and just to make the last first and the first last and everyone put onto an equal footing no matter how little or much they had toiled in the farmer's vineyard? I can tell you that if we are honest with ourselves we'll say no: it was not fair. Fast forwarding to modern times, if a person doing an equal task as you, with equal education as you, and equal skill as you, and working right alongside you got just as much pay as you when they only worked one-8<sup>th</sup> as much time as you and so produced only 1/8<sup>th</sup> as much work, would you find that fair? Of course you wouldn't. As humans we're instinctively making those sorts of relative comparisons among ourselves. Fairness may be in the eye of the beholder, but by whatever standard it might be in our own eyes, we all seek it and don't like it when our standard isn't met. No doubt that would have been the same conclusion of those 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews that heard this Parable directly from Yeshua's mouth. In fact, the Parable was designed to draw its listeners in and then shock them because of what that farmer did.

So since a Parable has only one moral to it, what's the moral of this one? It is that in the Kingdom of Heaven, God's idea of fairness will rule the day and our idea of fairness will be overturned. A reversal of standards and status will occur. The Kingdom of Heaven will operate upside down from what we're used to in this present age. Which means that in many ways the farmer, the owner of the vineyard, who is meant to represent the king of the Kingdom of Heaven (who is God) has a standard for justness and fairness that is the opposite of the way humans and this world naturally evaluates it. So it is in this sense that the last will be first, and the first last in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now we could probably take the more conventional Christian approach and make this Parable into a dozen or more allegories to make each the several elements within this story have important meanings. And many of those allegories might

actually express something good and true. But that doesn't mean that any of them bring to light the crucial point Jesus was making or how His 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jewish public understood it and so how we are to understand it. When we can finally comprehend that the **reversal** of the present age human standard of fairness and justice, along with status and worth, will be the divinely enforced standard for the Kingdom of Heaven is the point that Yeshua has been making, then indeed we can reasonably draw some assumptions about what this might look like, but we must do so very carefully so as not to inject something into that assumption that is entirely off-point because we're approaching this through 21<sup>st</sup> century, gentile lenses.

I can do no better than to quote a comment that Brad Young, Professor of Biblical Studies at Oral Roberts University, made about this particular Parable to demonstrate how far off the mark such an allegorical approach to interpreting it can be. He said this:

***In modern Parable interpretation, the story of the Fair Employer is usually viewed as an illustration of the message of grace in Christianity, which must be contrasted to a theology of works in Judaism. The Gospel Parable portrays salvation by grace, whereas its Jewish counterparts refer to merit through works. The grumblers are to be identified with the Jewish leaders.....***

I'd have to say that this more or less sums up the interpretation of this Parable that I had been taught all my life until I undertook to immerse myself in a Hebrew Heritage approach to serious Bible study, setting aside centuries of manmade doctrines, traditions, and taboos in order to make room for God's Word to speak for itself. The rather broadly accepted interpretation within Christianity of this Parable that Brad Young rightly exposes misses the point of the Parable so badly because of a Church insistence to impose doctrines and traditions upon it that in no way reflect the mindset of the Jewish Christ or the realities of His 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish listeners. Not unlike the sticky problem Jesus was dealing with in His day that Jewish Law and tradition had so engulfed and overwhelmed biblical truth and teaching that the Messianic expectations of the Jewish people, and the standards they thought to live their lives by, and their mindset of what God and His Kingdom must be like had veered so very far off the mark that they were in grave danger of trusting in a false self-righteousness instead of in their divine Messiah, which was only going to lead towards a great disappointment if not their eternal destruction.

I want to stress this as much as possible to end this lesson because if you are Believer, get ready: Christ has been informing us that the way the Kingdom of Heaven is eventually going to operate is going to be shockingly unconventional from the way the world, the Church, and humanity in general operates today. Many of our current definitions of fairness and justice that seems so right and normal in our own eyes will be overturned when the Kingdom of Heaven achieves its fullness. Adjusting ourselves to God's Kingdom standard and not His to ours is going to be our challenge, and perhaps it would be wise to begin that process, as much as is possible, right now.

We'll return to chapter 20 next week when the scene changes drastically as Christ begins His final journey to Jerusalem to face the trials that await Him.