

Matthew 19:16-20:16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew 19 verse 16 to chapter 20 verse 16. And behold, a man came up to him, saying, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

And he said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments. He said to him, Which ones? And Jesus said, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness.

Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All these I have kept. What do I still lack? Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.

When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved?

[1 : 22] But Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter said in reply, See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?

Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, You who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And anyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

[2 : 27] And to them he said, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You go into the vineyard too.

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.

Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.

[3 : 37] I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last.

The end of Matthew chapter 19 to the beginning of chapter 20 focuses upon Jesus' response to a young man asking what good thing he must do to obtain eternal life.

This man is a rich man, and he turns out to be unwilling to follow Christ at the expense of his riches. Peter Lighthouse has observed that this passage is divided in two sections, one beginning and ending with a reference to eternal life.

In verse 16 the young man asks about what he must do to have eternal life, and in verse 29 we are told that they will inherit eternal life.

The second part involves a discussion of the first being last and the last first. It begins with the statement in verse 30 of chapter 19, but many who are first will be last and the last first, and then it ends with the statement in verse 16 of chapter 20, so the last will be first and the first last.

[4 : 53] Note that there is a reversal of the order there. In the first one it's the first will be last and the last first, and in the second it's the last will be first and the first last.

It brackets that whole section, it bookends it and stresses its unity. The first half focuses upon wealth and rewards, and the second half continues some of those themes to a degree.

The first begins with Jesus questioning why the young man asks him about what is good, saying that no one is good but God alone, and then the complaining workers are asked, literally, is your I bad because I am good?

In both cases someone is being identified as good. The parable answers in many respects the earlier question, and addresses the issue of wealth. Many people have misread Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler.

The idea for many is that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law. He's driving the man to despair of his righteousness, of his good deeds, and to get him to come to Christ for hope of salvation.

[6 : 00] But this is not actually how the story goes. We would need to read a very great deal into the passage to see this particular connection. Rather, Jesus teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into eternal life.

The twist is the way that this is understood. Jesus' initial response to the question is, if you would enter life, keep the commandments. And then Jesus responds to the follow-up question, which ones, by highlighting the second table of the law in particular.

You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself. The young man's response is not to despair of his righteousness.

Rather, he says, Jesus' response to this is not so much a suggestion that it is impossible to keep the law, but a challenge to a different kind of law-keeping.

Jesus did not mention a few key commandments the first time around. He didn't mention commandments 1 to 4, and he didn't mention commandment 10. He didn't mention the commandments concerned with loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and he didn't mention the law concerning covetousness.

[7 : 13] What does the man lack? Whatever he lacks, it would seem to rest with those other commandments that were not mentioned. Jesus' statement to him should be seen against the background of those commandments.

What must he do? He must sell what he possesses and give it to the poor, and he must go and follow Christ. The first instruction is one that fulfills the 10th commandment.

How do you fulfill the commandment not to covet? Well, in the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 26, that commandment is fleshed out, and it's fulfilled not just in the negative act of not desiring or envying something that belongs to someone else.

Rather, it's fulfilled in something deeper than that. It's fulfilled in the act of celebrating what God has given to you, being thankful, of showing charity and generosity to others, and of expressing contentment with what you have.

And what Jesus is suggesting to the young man here is even more radical. It's expressed in being willing to give up what you possess, giving it in charity to others, and having contentment in that fact.

[8 : 24] And then he calls him to follow him. Now that commandment should be seen over against the other great commandment, the greatest commandment of all, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

What does it look like to fulfill that commandment? Well, it looks like following Christ, relating to him as your Lord and Master. As Jesus teaches throughout the book of Matthew, the law is fulfilled in a deeper level by this following of him, by this obedience to him, and by forms of practice that are not just negative practices of avoidance, of not actually killing, and not actually committing adultery, but positive ones of resisting and establishing different forms of positive alternatives.

It's seen in the way that rather than just avoiding covetousness, the rich man fulfills the law concerning covetousness by being prepared to give up what he has, by giving to others in charity.

It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding murdering the person he's angry with, reconciles with them. It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding stealing, gives and shows generosity.

As this rich young man leaves, Jesus expresses once again the danger of riches, those things that weigh us down, that tie us to something that prevents us from serving and following our true master.

[9 : 55] You cannot serve both God and mammon. If you find yourself devoted to riches, you will find yourself unable to follow Christ as he calls you to.

This makes us uncomfortable, and it really should. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us. Now, Christ does not ask this more generally. However, if he did, we would have to submit.

Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom, and Jesus teaches this in no uncertain terms. Wealth is something that can master us, and we, living very prosperous lives for the most part, should be very fearful.

It's something that we can become enthralled by. It's something that can dictate the course of our lives, our values, our commitments. Even if we are poor, this can be something that drives our concern.

That is something that prevents us from throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into the service of our saviour. It is only with great difficulty that those with riches can enter the kingdom of heaven.

[10:58] As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. If you want your heart to be invested in the kingdom of God, then invest your treasure there as well.

Be someone who's committed to that. Now, this is exactly what Jesus is teaching the rich young ruler. Invest his money in serving the poor. And he will find, as he invests his money in serving the poor, that that's where his heart will go.

But as long as that treasure lies elsewhere, as long as that treasure is caught within the affairs of this world, that is where his heart will be. And until he deals with that primary location of his heart, by relocating his treasure, he will not be able to enter the kingdom of God.

After Jesus has taught this, Peter pipes up and, speaking for the rest of the disciples, draws attention to the fact that they have given up everything. What is their reward going to be? They have done pretty much what the rich young ruler was asked to do.

And what is their reward? Jesus makes clear that there is a reward for them. They will sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. The 12 will exert authority within the kingdom.

[12:10] Now, Judas is among them at this point, but it's referring to the 12 as a group. And Jesus extends the statement to say that everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for his name's sake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life.

Here Jesus presents something of an answer to the original question of the rich young ruler. And it's seen in an act of renunciation. People must give up to enter the kingdom.

They must give up all these things that they were formally attached to. And that act of surrender is something that will lead to them inheriting eternal life. This is a terrifying teaching for us, but it should not be sugarcoated.

We are called to renounce things, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to be those who are willing to be stripped of all our possessions, our attachments, in order to enter into the kingdom.

This does not mean that we will be permanently bereft of these things. They may be returned to us, but they may be returned to us only after we have surrendered them, only after we have given them into God's hands.

[13:19] Those who want to save their lives will have to lose them. And following on from this discussion of rewards, Jesus goes into a parable, a parable bracketed in statements about the first being last and the last first.

This parable of the workers on the vineyard is one that has a number of different stages to it. As we're going through it, we naturally sympathize with those who are called first.

And as they are being paid at the end of the day, it starts with the last people to be called, the last people to be commissioned to work on the vineyard, and then gradually moves to the payment of those who came to the vineyard first.

And they're scandalized because they do not get anything more than those who came last. And we can often feel scandalized for them too. One of our basic moral instincts is equal pay for equal work.

And yet they do not receive equal pay for equal work. Those who worked for a long time receive much the same pay as the people who worked just for a couple of hours. How does this parable relate to what has gone before?

[14 : 25] Well, perhaps we could relate it to the rich young ruler and the disciples. The rich young ruler is someone who observes the path of the law in many ways. He is someone who probably has social standing and respectability.

He's an observant law keeper, all these sorts of things. And the disciples are people who come along later. They're people who are fishermen. They're a tax collector. They don't have the same social status.

But yet they will receive the same payment. God will reward them as if they had been faithful law keepers throughout their whole lives. Perhaps that's something of what's going on.

For me, a more likely explanation is one that relates it to the story of Israel more generally. Israel is the vineyard. The people being called to work on the vineyard are prophets and righteous men and all sorts of other people.

And the disciples come along at the end of the line of that in many ways, late on in the day. And yet they receive the same reward. And then people called after them. Even though they may not suffer the heat of the day and the difficulties of the situations that martyrs and prophets that have gone before them experienced, they will receive the same reward.

[15 : 36] This payment that God gives as the owner of the vineyard is not according to the merit of the work that they have done. Rather, everyone who works on the vineyard gets the same reward.

The disciples may have given up many things, renounced many things, but they remain continually concerned about pecking orders. And the difficulty of self-denial and the desire to get what's due to us can persist even when we've given up many things.

And Jesus' parable here challenges that at the root. There is a reward for following Christ. There is a reward for going out into the vineyard. But that reward does not follow the same pattern that we are accustomed to in human wages.

Rather, it's given to every single person that serves on this vineyard. Every single person receives that same payment. Someone like Peter might want to be assured that he's going to get special treatment.

They've gone out. They've faced the heat of the day. They've faced the difficulties. They've stood with Christ in tough situations. Shouldn't they be rewarded accordingly? And yet, out of the goodness of God, people who have not suffered in the same way, who have not experienced the same difficulties, will experience the kindness and generosity of the owner of the vineyard.

[16 : 52] Everyone who renounces their possessions and their family and all these other things that attach them to this age will be rewarded. But they will be rewarded in a way that foregrounds the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, not the merit of their labours.

A question to consider. Jesus calls the rich young ruler to an act of great generosity. And the owner of the vineyard is later on defined by his generosity.

How does the practice of generosity enable us to overcome some of the issues that Jesus is highlighting and tackling here?