

- History*, Bk. VI, chap. 8), violates the principles laid down by Paul against the uselessness of such rigor. (Col. 2:20-23; see notes on 5:29, 30) For the Christian, then, this is not a live option.
2. Those who are unmarried may choose not to marry, in order to be more effective in their service for the Kingdom. However, the motivation and one's moral capacity is important: Jesus is not interested in a mere abstinence from marriage or a superficial continence. He is rather discussing the person whose intellect and desires are so actively engrossed in the advancement of the Kingdom that he has no desire or impelling reason for marrying. This is non-ascetic celibacy for the sake of one's work. Again, any consideration of the single life for its own sake is also to be rejected, because the only question important to the Lord is whether His disciples are living lives that reflect their dedication to God, i.e. **for the kingdom of heaven**. If their celibacy does not actually promote this, He is not interested.
  3. Those who are married, but whose unbelieving partner refuses to live with a Christian, when forced to let the unbeliever depart, find themselves, for the sake of Christ, in the situation of a virtual **eunuch for the kingdom of heaven**. They are not obligated ("bound") to maintain a marriage for sake of the marriage to the detriment and disadvantage of their confession of Christ and their belonging to Him. (1 Co. 7:12-16) So, in principle, Jesus' expression, **eunuchs for the Kingdom**, does leave the door open for separation from an unbelieving spouse, but, even so, it is not a divorce initiated by the Christian in order to remarry (as in 19:9 or Mk. 10:11f), but a bowing to the choice of the unbelieving spouse, in order to follow God's call to peace in the Kingdom. (1 Co. 7:15c; Ro. 14:17) It is the choice to remain unmarried for Christ's sake, hence **a eunuch for the Kingdom's sake**. In a sense, this forced dissolution of a marriage is forced upon the believer. It is a condition over which he has no control, much like becoming a physical eunuch is beyond the decision of the person involved.

There are two senses in which every Christian must consider himself a **eunuch for the Kingdom**, even if he does not possess that gift of celibacy that expresses itself in a personal choice not to marry:

1. The Lord has declared that we, His disciples, must be willing, should the situation arise that requires it, to surrender everything we possess, even life itself, for His sake. (Mt. 10:37-39; 16:24-27; 18:6-9; 19:29; Lk. 14:26-33) This may include one's wife. (Lk. 18:29)

Even though Matthew does not include "or wife" in 19:19, as Luke does in Lk. 18:29, it is mistaken to believe that he saw some contradiction between Jesus' strong, hard-line stand on the permanence of marriage (19:3-12) and the loss of one's wife for Jesus' sake (19:29), and that for ascetic considerations, deliberately sidestepped the issue by omitting it.

So the call to great sacrifice of every relationship for Christ's sake, even marriage if need be, may reduce one to the level of a virtual eunuch, even though already married. (See above at 19:11.)

Was this kind of sacrifice temporarily required of Moses? He started out from Midian to begin his mission in Egypt, taking his Midianite wife and sons with him. But after the crisis over the son's circumcision at which time Moses' life was endangered and his wife reacted negatively (?), rather than take her and the boys with him to Egypt, Moses sent them back to Jethro, while he pressed on toward his great mission. Did Zipporah's attitude have anything to do with his decision? At least, it was not until his return to Sinai with the freed people that he was able to embrace them once again. (Cf. Ex. 4:18-29; 18:1-6)

2. There is another sense in which every Christian must consider himself **a eunuch for the Kingdom of God**. Every Christian must, for Christ's sake, treat everyone of the opposite sex, who is not his or her mate, as if he or she could not consummate physical sexual relations with them because of a physical defect. The real hindrance is of course not physical but moral. (See notes on 5:27-30)

These are important, however secondary, senses and do not nullify the truth that some have the gift to live the single life in God's Kingdom and for His service.

**He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.** (*ho dunámenos choreîn, choreîto*) The main problem of interpretation here is the decision whether Jesus is giving a command or making a concession, since the Greek imperative may be understood either way. Blass-Debrunner (§§387, 384) note:

The imperative in the NT keeps for the most part within the same limits as in classical usage. As in the latter it is by no means confined to commands, but also expresses a request or a concession

. . . In the latter case the imperative can simply be the equivalent of a concessive clause . . . There is, however, a strong tendency to use the imperative instead of the optative, not only in requests, for which the imperative has a place in classical too, but also in imprecations which in classical take the optative.

Also, as in our case with the third person imperative (*choreito*), the imperative can be equivalent to the hortatory subjunctive, i.e. as an exhortation. (Cf. Robertson-Davis, *Grammar*, 164, §308; 312, §407) There is practically no way of rendering the third person imperative in English, except as an exhortation: "Let him accept it!" On the basis of the foregoing, then, Jesus' exhortation is no ground for a church law that legally demands celibacy of an entire class of people (i.e. clergymen or any other group). Forced celibacy does not share Jesus' viewpoint and certainly is not commanded. Considered as an exhortation, this expression reflects the proper use of Christian liberty to marry or not as one's individual situation, gifts, opportunities, etc., permit. There can be no unanimity of application among Christians, since these factors all differ from person to person and from century to century as well as from country to country. Since the disciples had categorically excluded marriage, Jesus urges them to reconsider their rash proposal. Let them take individual differences into considerations. Four classes of people have been discussed: three classes for whom the single life is quite properly indicated, and one class—by far the largest—for whom only marriage is the solution. Now Jesus exhorts them: "Let each person decide what is best for himself."

See Special Study: "Money and Marriage: Manacles of the Mundane?" after 19:30.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what part of Palestine was Jesus operating when He was questioned about His position on divorce? Is it possible to pinpoint this place with precision?
2. Had Jesus ministered in this section before?
3. How does Matthew's account harmonize with that of Luke and John regarding any extended ministry of Jesus in this area? Is the period represented in chapters 19 and 20 another of Matthew's collections of events together (as he does in chapters 8 and 9),

or is there objective evidence that the events narrated occurred in the order indicated by Matthew?

4. Explain the significance of the peculiar question placed before Jesus by the Pharisees. What was there about the divorce issue that served the critic's purpose to trap Him?
5. List the points Jesus made in His reply.
6. What Bible texts did Jesus quote to the Pharisees in support of His argument? Explain how Jesus could affirm that these texts represent the words of God.
7. What did "hardness of heart" have to do with divorce? How would "hardness of heart" require a bad law on divorce?
8. What exception did Jesus make to His universal prohibition of divorce? In what does this exception consist? Explain why only this exception is justifiable.
9. How much of Jesus' discourse on marriage, divorce and the single life was publicly presented to the Pharisees and how much was stated privately to His disciples? How do you know?
10. What was the disciples' objection and what provoked it? That is, what were they objecting to, AND what in them caused them to do so?
11. What is a "eunuch" and why could Jesus use such a person as an illustrative basis for His discussion?
12. Who or what is a person who has "made himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"?
13. What is the major lesson on marriage and the single life that Jesus taught at the conclusion of this section?
14. List the texts in Matthew 18 that find practical application in this section and show their connection.

## Section 48

### JESUS BLESSES THE LITTLE CHILDREN

(Parallels: Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17)

TEXT: 19:13-15

- 13 Then were there brought to him little children, that he should lay his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them.  
 14 But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not,

to come unto me: for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.  
15 And he laid his hands on them and departed hence.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you think that Jesus had ever blessed little children before? If so, why do the disciples object only here? If not, is there anything indicated here about the nature of the people in Perea who would desire this for their children, something that people elsewhere did not feel?
- b. Why would these parents have brought their children to Jesus to be blessed? What, do you suppose, was in their minds as they did so? That is, what positive good did they imagine such a blessing would bring their children?
- c. In what sense is it true that the Kingdom of God belongs to such? If the Kingdom really belongs to God, how is it also true that it can belong to such as those who are like children? Explain the meaning of "belong" in each case.
- d. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me," and yet it was their parents who brought them, i.e. they did not necessarily **COME** on their own without their parents. So, what does the Lord expect us to understand about how the children are to come?
- e. Mark and Luke add here the warning: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein." What is there in common between "receiving" and "being like a child"?
- f. List several possible reasons why the disciples rebuked the parents for bringing their children to Jesus.
- g. Of what principles in Jesus' Sermon on Personal Relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Now there were some people who were bringing their children—yes, even babies—to Jesus, so He could lay His hands on their heads and pray. But when His disciples saw their intentions, they criticized and scolded the parents who brought them. Jesus was furious when He saw what was going on, and called them all back to Him. "Let the children come to me! Do not stop them from doing it, because the Kingdom of God belongs to people like this! I can guarantee you

that unless a person has the humility of a child enough to let God give him the Kingdom, he will not enter the Kingdom at all!"

Thereupon He put His arms around the little tots and, laying His hands on each one, gave them His blessing. Then He resumed His journey.

## SUMMARY

Parents, anxious for their children to have the blessing of the young rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, brought them to Him. His disciples, however, concerned about this interruption of Jesus' precious time, rebuffed them brusquely. But the Lord, deeply angry at this misunderstanding of His concerns and mission, called them all to Him, arguing that children have their proper place in God's plans. He further threatened that entrance into the Kingdom would be refused to any who do not do so with that humble submission characteristic of a child. Not only did Jesus formally lay His hands upon the children and pray for them, but took them up to hug them. He had time even for little kids!

## NOTES

### II. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN CHILD-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS (19:13-15)

#### A. SITUATION: PARENTS BRING CHILDREN TO JESUS FOR BLESSING. (19:13a)

19:13 **Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should lay his hands on them and pray.** Although Matthew and Mark consistently call them *little children* (*paidia*), Luke (18:15) says "infants." Luke's expression recalls Jesus' healing ministry which was continuing during this period. (Mt. 19:1, 2) This, because not only were many sick people brought to Him for healing, but, as Luke has it, "even infants, that he might touch them." That these were not merely larger children in whom one might suspect the presence of a seed-germ of faith, is shown by the usual translation of Luke's word *bréfōs*, "babe."

See Lk. 1:41, 44; 2:12, 16; note 2:27 *paidton* 40 days old; Ac. 7:19; 1 Pt. 2:2. 2 Ti. 3:15 "from childhood" is not necessarily counterevidence, since it may mean "You have known the Scriptures all your life!" Timothy's faith in God's Word could hyperbolically be said to have begun almost before he was born, because of the faith of his devout grandmother Lois and his godly mother Eunice.

There was likely a mixed group of children and babies brought to Jesus. Some think that the Jews customarily brought their children to the synagogue on their first birthday for a blessing from the rabbi. The special interest in Jesus shown by the folks who brought these children to Him certainly underlines their appreciation of His goodness. It is not unlikely that the parents, having observed Him lay His hands on the people He healed, blessing them with complete healing, would naturally consider it a special privilege for their children to be blessed by this great Rabbi.

#### B. THE DISCIPLES' REACTION: THEY REBUKED THE PARENTS WHO BROUGHT THEM.

The disciples' behavior recorded here is another indication of the Gospel writers' straightforwardness and impartiality. Although they must report what is embarrassing to the disciples themselves, this candor confirms our confidence in the reliability of their narration.

**The disciples rebuked them.** Note that these men scolded the adults, not the infants. Their reaction is not totally blameworthy, inasmuch as Jesus had established no Sunday Schools, no Daily Vacation Bible Schools or Christian Service Camps. Without being against such methods, He dealt with the decision-makers at the head of the house. The Apostles could cite no example where Christ worked first with children. And yet, here they are mistaken! What went wrong?

1. If, as suggested above, Jesus' time for teaching them was constantly invaded by demands for healing people of their sicknesses, in this case, however, parents had brought to Him their little ones who were quite healthy, begging to let Him touch them. The Apostles deemed this unreasonable request intolerable.
2. It may well be that some of them were thinking, "Children do not count in the adult business of the Kingdom. They are not important to its progress." So they begin hindering the parents,

rebuking them for the nuisance. Theologically, this reaction is inexcusable and shocking, since these disciples had personally heard Jesus' teaching on the little people's importance for the Kingdom. (Mt. 18:1-14) But it is psychologically understandable on the basis of the disciples' other inconsistencies and inability to connect Jesus' concepts with practical situations they faced. Nevertheless, these disciples represent stumbling blocks for these parents on the road to God, just as they had been a hindrance to the isolated worker of miracles. (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49f; see on Mt. 18:5, 6)

3. A corollary of their devaluation of the children was their misplaced emphasis on the importance of adults. According to them, the Kingdom of God is the prize and possession of qualified, worthy people who have merited it by doing the right deeds. Once more His followers show their inability to understand Jesus and the nature of the Kingdom.
4. Theirs might be the common human reaction to an embarrassing situation where, when people do not know how to handle it, they try to make it go away. On another occasion they had planned to send the people away without needed help. (Mt. 14:15f)
5. Were the disciples, in their rebuke of the parents who brought the children, partly moved by a misconstruction of His words concerning celibacy for the Kingdom? Did they suppose that an Essene-like celibacy was to become the Kingdom ideal? Did they suppose that in the renewed universe (= in the Messianic Kingdom) people would be as the angels, neither marrying nor being given in marriage, hence would have no children? What place would children have in such a scheme? From this standpoint, it was providential that the mothers brought their little ones to Jesus for His blessing not long after He had spoken words which might have been misinterpreted as a criticism of sex and family relations. Certainly, the Son of God intended no ascetic view of sexuality by His lesson on "eunuchs for the Kingdom." Because children are the living reminder that a fully sexual marriage is real, because they are its natural product, the blessing of the children furnished Jesus the providential opportunity to protest strenuously against any such misreading of His words.

C. JESUS' ANGRY REACTION: "CHILDREN ARE SO IMPORTANT TO THE KINGDOM THAT THEY ARE THE ONLY SORT OF PEOPLE OF WHICH THE KINGDOM IS MADE!" (19:14f)

19:14 **But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.** Far from being soft, mushy sentiment, these words snap with Jesus' anger. (Mk. 10:14) Why should he NOT burn at the injustice shown these God-fearing caring parents who bring their dearest possessions, their children, seeking His blessing? How could anyone, much less His own disciples, who had heard the mighty Sermon on Personal Relations and the importance of little ones (Mt. 18), slam the gates of the Kingdom of God in the face of the very persons most qualified for entrance into it? To suppose Him, the Messianic King, to be unwilling to welcome a child is to misunderstand and misrepresent Him to the world—and should He not be angry?

**Suffer the little children** (*áfete tà paidía*) Permit them: do not hinder them! **Forbid them not.** See note on Mk. 9:39 after Mt. 18:5. People who desire to come to Jesus to labor in His service and receive His blessing must not be hindered but encouraged to do so, regardless of what we think about their qualifications, importance to us or their merits. **For to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven.** According to Mark (10:15) and Luke (18:17), Jesus repeated here a line out of His Sermon on Personal Relations (Mt. 18:13): "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." The Kingdom of God is not something that can be bought or earned by self-complacent people certain of their own importance and worth to God. It must be received as a gift from God as the result of His divine initiative. (Cf. Lk. 12:32) This is a gift of grace, not founded upon the supposed greatness and worthiness of its recipients. The only worthy attitude in which to receive the Kingdom, therefore, must be that of the children who cannot earn it and to whom it must be given, if they are to have it. Like these children brought to Jesus, those who enter God's Kingdom do not march in and take over. They are carried in by the grace of Christ. Their only sufficiency is of God. (2 Co. 3:5)

On the question of infant baptism it is worthy of notice that Jesus did not regard children as "little pagans," but as people to whom the Kingdom rightly belongs. It is a false dichotomy that emphasizes "of such" (*toioúton*) against "of these" (*toúton*), as if Jesus meant,

"Not these particular children, nor all children, but those who are childlike in character, are possessors of the Kingdom." (Plummer, *Matthew*, 262) This distinction is manifestly false

1. because of its bad logic: how could these very children be thought unqualified for the blessings intended for those of whom they themselves are the standard?!
2. and because Jesus had already clarified it that *children* per se enter the Kingdom. (Mt. 18:2ff)

Their real innocence of any personal sin is a proper condition for their entrance. Only sin excludes. If the Kingdom rightly belongs to them, His reason is that He does not believe the doctrine of inheritable sin, but rather its antithesis, the natural innocence of children: The purpose for which these parents brought their children to Jesus was for His blessing, not for soul salvation or circumcision or any other purpose. It is a distortion of this event to see in it a justification of infant sprinkling or "baptism" which the child-baptizers think took the place of circumcision.

Children have an unconditional right to be admitted into the Kingdom of God because of their innocence. No baby baptism is necessary to remove non-existent "inherited sin." They would not be thought of, however, as members of the Church of the redeemed, because they are not even qualified to be redeemed, since they have no sin from which to be saved. Until the child sins, he is like Jesus, mortal but sinless. However, they are positively members of God's Kingdom and may live with Him and His people forever, should they die in their infantile innocence, because they have never sinned. They cannot partake of Christ's atonement for sinners any more than He Himself needed atonement. The tragedy Jesus sees ahead for children is a diabolically inevitable future bristling with temptations to sin. (Mt. 18:6f)

Here we may notice that sinlessness in children is part of the standard they represent for the adult disciple. This is because the self-humiliation and repentance, the tender consideration of others, the long-suffering and forgiveness, the spirit of unity in seeking God's will, the altruistic service Jesus required in Mt. 18:1-35, must inevitably eliminate sin. And yet this is the spirit of the child, dependent upon others, in need of guidance and help. By inculcating receptiveness, humility and childlikeness, Jesus eliminates the selfishness and pride that lies at the root of sin. This is the practical side of love that makes a man perfect. (See notes on 5:7, 43-48; 7:12.) In a positive way He requires here what sounded so negative in self-denial and

cross-bearing. (Mt. 16:24ff) The result, however, is the same.

So, as long as children are children, their innocence or sinlessness is the standard and goal for every disciple. The perfect absence of rebellion against God (= sin) is, on the negative side, what the Kingdom is all about. Sadly, when they grow to the age of awareness and become conscious of the appeal of temptations, wittingly or not, they join the ranks of those who rebel against God and turn against His beneficent rule and leave their natural place in God's Kingdom. *Then they too must become like children to recover what they have lost.*

Although on this occasion the parents brought the children to Jesus, hence His words must mean that the disciples are to let the parents of the children bring them to Him, nevertheless **Let the children come to me and do not hinder them** may well look forward to a time when the children, on the basis of their personal love for Jesus and desire to be with Him, would want to come to Him on their own. They must therefore not be hindered but encouraged. Do we not see here His exhortation to the entire adult community of disciples to encourage the personal decision and individual responsibility of children who are maturing decisions about Jesus? Thus, the accusation of some that we baptize more babes, even though they are seven or eight years old, is false. These children who grew up in Christian families with proper teaching and so have had excellent opportunities to know the Lord, must not be hindered from obeying Him. But, it is objected, if these understand their need of a Savior from their personal sins, they would not therefore be "such" as those to whom the "Kingdom of God belongs," because they would not be innocent, as argued earlier. This would overturn the decision that they were really innocent of inherited sin, hence proper candidates for the Kingdom. But this is false, because, whereas before their arrival at awareness they were innocents, hence candidates for the Kingdom and the sinless standard for everyone else, now, even as they are becoming more and more aware of their present imperfectness, they are still humble, trusting, teachable people, the very kind of people Jesus can work with most easily. Hence, even here, they are the standard for adults, and Jesus can still say, **Of such is the kingdom of heaven.** Let them come, then, while their heart is tender, their mind impressionable, their will pliable and their conscience sensitive to Jesus! God's Kingdom rightly belongs to such people, and to NO ONE ELSE!

Some commentators note that the Evangelists locate this event

logically right after the major discussion on marriage because of the appropriateness of discussing the importance of and concern for children. Here, then, is another corrective for the mistaken notion that a permanent marriage union is undesirable and inconvenient: what of the children?

19:15 **And he laid his hands on them.** Mark underlines the Lord's tenderness with these little ones, both in the Sermon on Personal Relations (Mk. 9:36) and here, however with the added significance of this occasion, "He took the children in His arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." (Mk. 10:16) What a contrast there is between His welcoming, embracing and blessing the weak, needy children, and the bumptiousness of the officious disciples who presume to form an isolating cordon around the Master to intercept these "troublesome interruptions of His important work!" Jesus would have them learn that to be kind and considerate to sincere, needy people and seek God's blessing upon them, especially where they are trying to do their best, is His work and theirs too!

Very likely He placed His hands on the head of each child and called down the blessing of God upon each. (Mk. 10:16, *kateulógei*: "to praise highly, bless," Rocci, 1017; "to call down blessings upon," Thayer, 339) Thus, He prayed for the children as the parents had requested. (19:13) Remember how Jacob took Joseph's sons in his arms, kissed them and blessed them (Gen. 48:8-16), or how the old Simeon took the Baby Jesus in his arms and prayed, then blessed His parents (Lk. 2:25-35)

The Church of Jesus Christ today can measure her faithfulness to her Lord by the degree to which her program deals with the needs and growth of the children. How deep, then, must be the concern of all parents, that their children be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and that from a child they have the blessed opportunity to know the sacred writings which are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. If the Lord of glory turned aside from what others thought was the main thrust of His busy ministry, to defend these defenceless children and bless them, dare any man or woman who shares His attitude turn their care and development over to others less able or less concerned to give them such blessings as God has commissioned us as parents to give them?

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. Explain what the parents desired for their children when they brought them to Jesus. That is, what does it mean to them for Him to "lay His hands on them and pray"?
2. What was the attitude of the Apostles toward the children and those who brought them?
3. What was the attitude of Jesus toward the children and those who brought them?
4. Explain: "To such belongs the Kingdom of God."
  - a. What phase, or expression, of the Kingdom of God belongs to them?
  - b. In what sense does it "belong to such"?
  - c. Who are the people intended by the expression "to such"?
5. What additional teaching do Mark and Luke include that further clarifies Jesus' meaning? Where in Matthew have we already encountered this?
6. What is the total impact of this vignette in the life of our Lord? There may be several points to notice.
7. List the texts in Matthew 18 that find practical application in this section.

## Section 49

JESUS TESTS RICH YOUNG RULER  
AND ENCOURAGES DISCIPLES

(Parallels: Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30)

TEXT: 19:16-30

## A. The Demands of Discipleship

16 And behold, one came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? 17 And he said unto him, Why askest thou me concerning that which is good? One there is who is good: but if thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments. 18 He saith unto Him, Which? And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honor thy father and thy

mother; and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. 20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I observed: what lack I yet? 21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. 22 But when the young man heard the saying, he went away sorrowful; for he was one that had great possessions.

### B. The Dangers of Possessions

23 And Jesus said unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 25 And when the disciples heard it, they were astonished exceedingly, saying, Who then can be saved? 26 And Jesus looking upon *them* said to them, With men this is impossible: but with God all things are possible.

### C. The Dividends of Faithfulness

27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Lo, we have left all, and followed thee; what shall we have? 28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life. 30 But many shall be last **that are** first; and first **that are** last.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What do you think is the motive(s) behind the rich young ruler's request?
- b. Why did this Jew make this particular request, i.e. what point of view is back of the wording of his question?
- c. Why did Jesus hold him off at arm's length at first, quibbling over the word "good," or would you consider this a quibble? If

not, what is the point of Jesus' shifting the emphasis from the "deed" to do, to the "good" that would qualify such a deed to inherit eternal life?

- d. Do you think Jesus meant to deny His own essential goodness by asking: "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good," i.e. God?
- e. Since Mark and Luke both report Jesus as saying: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone," do you think Jesus meant to deny or affirm anything about His own essential deity and goodness? What would be the point of making these remarks before getting down to the young man's initial question?
- f. If selling all that the young man possessed was the one thing he lacked to inherit eternal life, as Jesus later shows, what could have prompted Jesus to cite the commandments first? Was this a mere diversion, or an essential part of the total answer? If you think it was essential, explain why you think so.
- g. Do you think the young man was sincere when he affirmed: "All these I have observed from my youth"? What makes you think this?
- h. How would the sale of his possessions, alms and discipleship to Jesus make the young man perfect? What does this teach us about our own road to perfection?
- i. Jesus said, "If you would be perfect . . ." in answer to the young man's assertion, "All these (commandments) I have observed; what do I still lack?" Do you feel a touch of irony in His words? Why?
- j. As the price of our eternal life must we sell all we possess in order to have treasure in heaven? Is there no lesson or principle in this incident for us? If so, what? If not, why not?
- k. The young man "went away sorrowful," but not angry. Why?
- l. What kind of discipleship do you think Jesus was offering him? Was it eventual apostleship or some other function? On what basis would you decide this?
- m. While the Scripture says he went away sorrowful "for he had great possessions," is it not also correct to say that he went away sorrowful "for great possessions had him"? Of what fundamental sin is he guilty?
- n. Why do you suppose it is so difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom? To what phase or expression of the Kingdom is Jesus referring here? How does one's understanding of the Kingdom help to see why wealth makes entrance hard?
- o. What picturesque figure of speech did Jesus use to illustrate the

rich man's difficulty of entering the Kingdom? Did Jesus mean "difficulty" or "impossibility"? How do you know?

- p. Why were the disciples so stunned to hear Jesus' pronouncements about the hindrances blocking the entrance of wealthy people into the Kingdom? Name some wealthy AND godly people whom the disciples could have cited as certainly in the Kingdom. What is the point of view behind their astonishment?
- q. What motivation prompted Peter's reaction to Jesus' surprising pronouncements on wealth, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?"? Is it selfish calculation? Genuine curiosity motivated by interest in spiritual rewards? Are there any clues in the text that would help you decide whether his is a wrong-headed question or else perfectly proper?
- r. Some teachers of ethics and moral philosophers insist that good deeds based upon hope of reward are thereby vitiated. To what extent does Jesus' answer prove that rewards for Christian service are not ethically wrong?
- s. How could the future, glorious, messianic age be referred to as "the regeneration"? Do you think Jesus means the Christian age on earth, or the post-judgment new world of eternity? On what basis do you decide this?
- t. Does not Jesus' promise of "a hundredfold" actually promote the kind of materialistic calculation for selfish ends, that He had so obviously denounced in affirming the impossibility of rich men to enter the Kingdom? In what sense, then, does He promise "a hundredfold" what had been surrendered for His sake?
- u. Why did Jesus sound the warning that "many that are first will be last, and the last first"? Why is this aphorism appropriate at precisely this point?
- v. How does the section on the rich young ruler speak to the larger human problem of the relations between rich and poor, or does it? If so, what is the message?
- w. What else did Jesus teach about money, the desire for it and the use of it? What did He say about *how* to have treasure in heaven, and about *why* we should have it there?
- x. Have you noticed the connections between the latter part of this section (vv. 27-30) and the parable which immediately follows in chapter 20:1-16? What are the points of connection which illuminate Jesus' thinking even in our present section? How would this present section tend to mold our conclusions as we proceed to interpret the next?

- y. Of what principles in Jesus' Sermon on Personal Relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus was resuming His journey when something remarkable happened: a certain ruler came running up to Him and, kneeling before Him, requested: "Good Teacher, what good deed should I do to guarantee myself eternal life?"

Jesus pulled him up short, "Do you realize what you are saying when you refer to me as 'good'? Why ask me about what is absolutely good? After all, nobody is perfectly good, but God alone . . . You already know the commandments, so if you really desire to enter life, keep them!"

"Which?" he asked, "What kind of commandments do you mean?"

"These:" Jesus replied, "You must not kill. You must not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not cheat, Honor your parents, and, You must love your neighbor as you would yourself."

The young man objected, "But, Teacher, I have kept all these rules ever since I was a boy! What do I still need?"

As Jesus looked at him, He loved him. Hearing his reaction, He told him, "There is just one thing you still need. If you really want to go all the way to perfection, go sell everything you own and distribute the proceeds among the needy, thus transforming your earthly wealth into spiritual riches. Then come back and follow me."

But when the young man heard that, he was appalled. Visibly shaken, he went away grieved, because he was very wealthy, since he owned a great deal of property. When the Lord saw the man's reaction, He looked around at His disciples, and commented, "Believe me, it will be extremely difficult for men of wealth to enter God's Kingdom!"

The disciples were amazed to hear this. Nevertheless Jesus insisted: "Boys, how tough it is for ANYONE to get into the Kingdom of God! I repeat: a camel could more easily squeeze through a needle's eye than a monied man make it into God's Kingdom!"

When the disciples heard this, they were even more dumbfounded, and exclaimed to each other, "In that case, who can possibly be saved, if a wealthy man cannot?"

But Jesus looked them in the face when He declared, "Men just

cannot save themselves, but God can save them. This is because anything is a possibility for God."

Relieved, Peter began to say in reply to this, "Look, Lord, we, in contrast to the rich, have left everything we could call our own, to follow you . . . Uh, what are we going to get out of it?"

Jesus answered them, "Truthfully I can guarantee you that in the Kingdom of God when all is made new, during the glorious reign of the Messiah, you Twelve Apostles who have been my followers will also rule with me over the true Israel of God. Further, ANYONE who has given up house, or wife, or brothers or sisters or parents, children or farms on my account, for the gospel and the Kingdom of God will be repaid a hundred times whatever he gave up. He will receive it even now in this present time: houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and lands,—though not without persecutions—and in the coming age, eternal life will be his inheritance too! Many people who are so important here and now will be put in last place. Others who count for nothing here and now will be considered great then and there.

### SUMMARY

A ruler requested of Jesus the one magic deed that would guarantee him eternal life. Jesus turned him toward God and His Word, but the young man considered that all a past accomplishment and demanded more. Jesus demanded that he dismantle his central idol, wealth, distribute his wealth and disciple his heart, but he balked and left in disappointment.

The Lord commented that earthly wealth makes salvation difficult. The disciples, aware of everyone's desire for possessions, wonder who can be saved. Self-earned salvation is impossible for men, but God makes things possible.

Peter asked what the disciples' sacrifices for Christ deserved in payment. Jesus announced high, glorious rewards for everyone, especially the Twelve, but earthly value systems will be overturned.

## NOTES

III. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN RICH-POOR  
RELATIONSHIPS (19:16-30)A. SITUATION: RICH MAN ASKS ABOUT THE ONE GOOD  
DEED ALL-ESSENTIAL TO BUY ETERNAL LIFE. (19:16)

Note the theological connections that link the instruction about children (19:13-15) with the teaching regarding wealth (19:16—20:16):

1. Each supplements the other. Like the tax collector confessing his sins to God (Lk. 18:13f), the children were closer to the Kingdom than each could have dared dream himself to be. But the rich young ruler, like the Pharisees congratulating God on His good fortune to have such a worthy citizen as he, was miles farther from entering it than he imagined. When Jesus preferred the children, He honored those who could not be ruined by such glory. When he humbled the rich man, He abased one who should have been helped by his humiliation.
2. Each contrasts with the other. Jesus had insisted that God's Kingdom must be received humbly as an unpurchased, unearned gift of God. (Mt. 10:15 = Lk. 18:17) The Kingdom belongs to children only on this basis. But the rich man showed by his question how little he understood the essential basis on which eternal life in the Kingdom is to be enjoyed, since he thought the blessings of grace could be bought and sold for one nobly heroic deed unthinkable for little children.
3. Whatever the rich young ruler thought he wanted, his question carries forward another theme seen in Jesus' comments on the children's possession of the Kingdom of God: *eternal life*. The Kingdom and eternal life are coextensive. (Cf. Mt. 18:8, 9 with Mk. 9:42, 47, as well as the basic presupposition underlying the Mt. 18 discourse.) In fact, Jesus' final answer on inheriting eternal life or being perfect requires total surrender to the will of God, and this is the Kingdom. (19:16, 21) And when the young ruler turned it down, he turned down the Kingdom. (19:23)

19:16 **And behold one came to him.** Mark (10:17) and Luke (18:18) fill in graphic details of his approach:

1. "As He was setting out on his journey"—is this the departure for Jerusalem? (See on 20:17.) Not too many more events are going to occur before Jesus arrives in Jericho for the final ascent to the bittersweet Last Week. (Mt. 19, 20; Mk. 10; Lk. 18, 19)
2. The man, whom Luke identifies as a ruler, ran up and respectfully knelt before the Lord. These are not merely signs of youthful vigor (Mt. 19:20), but especially of earnestness: did he sense that with Jesus' departure he was about to lose the invaluable opportunity to learn the secret of life? No Nicodemus this man, heedless of others' bad opinion of him, he publicly appealed to Jesus for answers in the daylight.
3. His wealth, surprisingly mentioned last by all three Evangelists even though it is really the turning point of the story, may well explain his position as ruler at his unusually early age. (See on 19:20.)

**Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?**

On the form of his question, see 19:17. What, exactly, is this person really seeking?

1. Is he offering himself for discipleship? By seeking this kind of information from Him whom he designates "Teacher," it would certainly lead to virtual discipleship, if he accepted even the answer he expected. If so, what kind of discipleship would he have expected? (Study Jesus' treatment of another, a rabbi. Mt. 8:19f notes.) Is this his way of offering himself and his power and influence to enhance the public image of Jesus' cause? Does he suppose that the intrinsic worth of Jesus' program surpasses the superficial impression one might get of it by estimating it on the basis of His ragged, rough-hewn followers? Does he conclude that the cause needs more substantial "window-dressing" such as he has to offer? If so, he may be hoping to keep his wealth and power and have the Kingdom too.
2. This rich man, who had grown accustomed to use his wealth to secure and guarantee himself everything, perhaps very sincerely believed that even the inheritance of eternal life could be assured only by means of the scrupulous fulfilment of certain special rules or the mathematical result of doing certain, unusually pious deeds, in short, paying the price. At any rate, the outcome was always in his own hands, something he could control, something over which he would always be master, never servant, never dependent, never needy. But the Kingdom belongs to God who is a King who

- royally dispenses His gracious favors, not a merchant haggling over prices with those who think they can buy His priceless wares!
3. Did he recognize that the standard righteousness of rabbinism (19:20) and his own unusual wealth were inadequate to satisfy life's deepest longings? Had this person who enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm of youth, a lovable personality, wealth and social status and an exemplary life, felt dissatisfaction in it all? Had he been superficially satisfied with life in general until he came into contact with the personality and teaching of the Master? Did that message give him self-knowledge that spurred him to higher things—yes, even the enthusiasm to attempt something really worthwhile, even heroic, for God? If so, his insight into the insufficiency of those mainstays of Jewish society should warn Jesus' disciples against any ideological dependence upon earthly power (wealth or any other) or upon any human, self-authenticating aristocracy (religious or philosophical or other).
  4. Does his question request some special, meritorious deed that would guarantee him what he presumptuously supposes cannot be had in normal obedience to God in all that He requires? If so, his supercilious attitude toward common faith and obedience to the revelations of God applicable to his life MUST be called to his attention. (19:17) It is important to notice, however, that Jesus assigns him something to DO which, of course, will help him to BE what he must BECOME. (Cf. Jesus' approach in Lk. 10:25, 28, 37) This is not merely a Jewish approach to his goal that equates righteousness with deeds rather than character, since what Jesus requires would be no merely mechanical, esoteric, meritorious deed whereby he could earn the Kingdom, but a practical act of faith that left the outcome entirely in God's hands. (See on 19:21.)

#### B. JESUS' RESPONSE (19:17-19)

1. Jesus challenges his understanding of Jesus' position and his own comprehension of what is really good: "On what basis do you call me what is absolutely true only of God, and desire to know from me what only God can know?"

**19:17 Why askest thou me concerning that which is good?** As reproduced in the Paraphrase and Harmony, the rich man's question

may have actually used "good" twice, once to distinguish Jesus as "Good Master" (according to Mark and Luke), and once to ask what "good deed" must be done (according to Matthew). Then, in Jesus' reaction there were two rapid questions, not just one: "Why do you call me good? Why do you ask me about what is good?" This is the simplest, least problematic harmonization of the seemingly contradictory, even confusing, wording which scribes and scholars of Matthew's Gospel have attempted to eliminate by assimilating Matthew's original text to that of Mark and Luke. The scholars who see the Synoptics' reporting as bristling with difficulties need to see that Jesus' two questions are both valid and important.

1. "Why do you call me good?" (Mk. 10:17, 18; Lk. 18:19)

- a. That the title "good teacher" was utterly unknown to the Jews, as some affirm because it does not occur even once in the Talmud, proves nothing about what this young man could have thought, because the so-called "un-Jewishness" of such a title is but a generalization about what Jews generally think and do, not an inflexible, intellectual straitjacket that invariably governed their every thought. In fact, Jesus' answer does not condemn the un-Jewishness of his flattering title, but the thoughtlessness of it.
- b. Some take the skeptical view of these words that Jesus, embarrassed by the ruler's overcomplimentary title which appropriately referred only to God, intended to deny any pretense of absolute goodness. This view is so far out of harmony with Jesus' own self-understanding (Jn. 8:46) and other Scriptural declarations (e.g. 1 Jn. 3:5; 1 Pt. 1:19; 2:22f; 3:18; 2 Co. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26-28; 9:14), that it cannot be taken seriously. Although it is true that Jesus is not affirming anything about His own character or identity and is merely reproving the ruler's flattery that could not seriously intend what is implied by his terms, the following syllogisms illustrate how Jesus could not be rejecting His own goodness:

EITHER: There is none absolutely good but what shares in deity.

Jesus Christ is absolutely good.

Therefore, Jesus Christ shares in deity.

OR: There is none absolutely good but God.

Jesus Christ is not divine.

Therefore, Jesus Christ is not absolutely good.

But can we so lightly reject the absolute sinlessness of our Lord, without, at the same time, jeopardizing our own salvation that depends upon what, in such a case, would be His no longer perfect sacrifice?

- c. Jesus' challenge has been expressed syllogistically like this:

EITHER: God alone is good.	OR: God alone is good.
You do not believe me	You call me good.
to be God	So, call me God, and be
So, do not call me good.	prepared to take the
	consequences.

- d. Jesus' method of dealing with the young man is immediately to draw his attention to his own superficial use of words: "On what basis do you call me what upon reflection you would admit is true absolutely only of God. You throw that word 'good' around so loosely, that you need to examine your idea of goodness. Do you really care about goodness? If there is none good but God, to apply that term to me with this understanding is to affirm that I am God—but do you believe this?" The objection of some that the ruler could not have understood this kind of reasoning fails to nullify Jesus' right to argue this way and lead the man to think along lines he had never before considered. It is not unlikely that the self-righteous ruler considered Jesus to have arrived at His goodness in the same way he had merited HIS. Thus, he is complimenting himself in conceiving of the Son of God as a man very much like himself, even if possessed of a far higher degree of the same kind of goodness. Jesus could no more tolerate the title "good" in this sense, than He could permit others to call Him "Christ," when intended in a mistaken sense. He refused to be accepted on the level of a merely "good teacher." In fact, since He was not just a "good teacher," but the Word of God incarnate, for anyone to refer to Him as an especially holy sage and then to seek from such a man only God could be trusted to know for certain, is all a terrible error. In this sense, the rich young ruler is turning aside from the true, divine foundation of Moses and the prophets to what he supposes, without any reasoned basis, is but an admirable, quite human rabbi renowned for his unusual wisdom. AND NO MAN, ANCIENT OR MODERN, CAN HAVE JESUS OF NAZARETH ON THESE TERMS! So, while Jesus' instant rebuttal points the rich man to God alone who is good, this is His deliberate thrust to prod this ruler's conscience to reflect upon what basis he

addresses Him with a title that unquestionably belongs to God. He is scolding His careless use of titles.

2. **Why do you ask me about what is good?** (Mt. 19:17)

- a. Since the ruler thinks of Jesus as only a man, he is asking Jesus to play God for him. This, because his inconsiderate question demands that Jesus be wiser than God by proposing a step the merit of which would surpass all preceding divine revelations. Now, whatever else may be said about the specific wording of the Evangelists' reports, if Jesus goes along with the game and furnishes ANY answer in harmony with this kind of request, He automatically exposes Himself to the accusation of having given information on a problem that only God could be competent to decide. But this is precisely what He did! (See on 19:21.) Thus, even if Jesus' deity and goodness are not clearly expressed, but rather seemed to be denied in His opening words, they are definitely not absent from the ultimatum He handed the young man, since He acts like God by requiring of him what only God could require.
- b. The point is: would the man really depend upon God to furnish him the true answer to his question? If so, why come to Jesus? By coming to Him, does he hope to circumvent the undoubted revelations of God or obviate obedience to them? If so, the only possible answer of a prophet faithful to God is: Go back to what God has already said in the commandments. (Cf. Isa. 8:20 ASV)

Thus, on the ruler's assumption that Jesus is a mere human, Jesus MUST refuse both to be called "good teacher" and hand out private nostrums supposedly leading to eternal life. The only right answer to Jesus' question is: "I call you 'Good Teacher' and ask you about the good, because I know you are a teacher come from God, since no man can do these miracles you do, unless God be with him." But the ruler gave no such answer at this point in our text. The dull silence of the young man serves to underline his shallowness. Jesus had proven that his complimentary title "good teacher" was mere flattery and his interest in "the good" an attempted side-stepping of God's will.

Whether you are asking for the source of human goodness or for the one good thing essential to have eternal life, **One there is who is good.** Will you trust him to tell you? Observe how carefully, almost meticulously Jesus worked with him. He is in no hurry to make a glib

convert who can repeat all the correct phrases but with no real understanding of what is involved in his statements. Although this meditation is the slower route, nevertheless to arrive at correct concepts of what is involved in goodness, eternal life, God and commandments is the essential task of true discipleship.

**But if you would enter life, keep the commandments.** To the modern Christian accustomed to the NT doctrine of the inadequacy and imperfections of the Mosaic Law with its inability to give life or make anyone perfect, this command of Jesus must sound little short of unbelievable. In fact, how can ANYONE **enter into life** by **keeping the commandments** He means? (Gal. 3:21; 5:4; Heb. 7:18f; 10:1) Yet, when the young man asked for illustrations, Jesus cited some typical, Mosaic legislation. Good stuff, of course, but why that?!

1. Because this demand is the all-essential first step to the conversion of anyone. Everyone must come face to face with the divine standard to see his sinfulness and be led by this realization to confess his need of divine grace. **Keep the commandments** demands perfection, not just relative goodness, because any admission of failure is enough to damn the person who depends upon perfect performance of law for salvation. (Ro. 2:13; Jas. 1:22-25; 2:8-11) **Keep the commandments** means: "Do not just listen to them or play at observing them!" This should drive the man to his knees before God in the painful awareness of his own sins, in desperate need of a Savior. In fact, had the young man been more severely honest with himself, he need not have gone any further than this answer, because it was God's answer for him. Sincerity would have compelled him to cry out with Peter, concerning Moses' law, "Neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear it." (Ac. 15:10) His answer should have been, "NONE of these things have I kept from my youth up: God; be merciful to me a sinner!" The critical importance of this part of Jesus' strategy will be vindicated later. Since the ruler so easily breezed past the Law with its stern demand of perfection, his failure to admit his need for a Redeemer may well explain his failure to accept Christ's invitation. Not having really faced the Law, he was not really ready for the Gospel.
2. Another reason why Jesus referred him to **the commandments** might be that these commands find their origin in a divine initiative. They are no merely human codification. Jesus turns his attention to the **One there is who is good** who is, at the same time, Author of **the commandments**, hence Author of that which "by

doing a man shall live" (Lev. 18:5). Since the young man had asked for something based on deeds that would lead to life, Jesus is perfectly in order to point him to God and His Law. (Cf. Gal. 3:11, 12) But even this points him to Him who alone is Judge and Standard and who alone can enable him to live by such a standard. But to admit this turns one's attention beyond mere deeds of law to see Him who alone can make him good enough **to inherit eternal life**. In fact, by saying that **only God is good**, He warns that no man can observe the Law absolutely perfectly, because to be good one must be perfect. If the young man were really thinking now, he must see that his own imperfection damns him and he must cry out for grace. If he is to have this kind of goodness, he must receive it from God as a gift of grace.

3. Another reason Jesus can safely point this Jew to **the commandments** is that the overconfident young man might manage to claim perfect observance of some of the Decalogue, but would eventually hang himself on "Thou shalt not covet!" And, worse, he would prove that he really knew nothing about the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me!"

So this is the only route, **if you would enter life**. Nor is this somehow a different route than that which leads to perfection, indicated later. (See 19:21.) On the assumption that *life* and *perfection* represent the same thing in Jesus' mind, we may safely conclude that *the commandments* (v. 17) and the demand of absolute consecration (v. 21) are closely related too. Otherwise, we would have the false dichotomy that common, ordinary people can squeeze into **life** by keeping ordinary commandments, whereas special **perfection** is only available for informed insiders who can make extravagant sacrifices in response to personally tailored asceticism. Jesus' preliminary answer, then, means that the way to eternal life is not based on the extraordinary or something not already widely known, but rather on the obedience to well-established commands of God.

Whereas Jesus is dealing with one man's personal problem, He nevertheless furnishes him the proper sort of credentials proper for a true prophet. He urges obedience to other well-authenticated revelations, **the commandments**. This very step is essential for Jesus as much as for the man himself. (Study "How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" after 15:20, where prophetic credentials are discussed more fully.) From this standpoint, Jesus' appeal to the Law as a true beginning point was but one more evidence to the ruler why He

should be believed. The Nazarene had not laid another foundation, had not pointed him to other gods or other laws, but significantly directed him to the undoubted Word of God.

2. Jesus furnished him commandments God had already revealed.  
(19:18, 19)

19:18 **He saith unto him, Which?** Because the man asked, "**What kind of (*poías*) commandments?**" it may be that he anticipated some mysterious precept with such an esoteric excellence that it differed radically in kind from the usual sort of thing ordinary people could learn in the Law. **And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honor thy father and thy mother; and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.** The Evangelists' listings furnish no secure basis for critical conclusions about liturgical order of the commandments in the early Church. The order of the commandments here is probably unimportant to Jesus, since He is only furnishing the rich young ruler a handful of typical commandments of God's, extraneous to the Ten Commandments. Attempts to see special significance in the choice of the commandments cited note the following points:

1. Placing the Fifth Commandment to **honor thy father and thy mother** after VI-IX does call some attention to it, especially where the Jewish mind would have expected Him to cite the Tenth. Was there some shortcoming in the young man's life with respect to his parents that Jesus could see? Had he dedicated his goods to the temple by the diabolical "Corban" formula? (See on 15:3-6.)
2. **Do not defraud** (Mk. 10:19) This is found in Lev. 19:13, although the Greek wording is not that of the LXX for this Hebrew text, but of two manuscripts of the LXX of Dt. 24:14, followed by Sirach 4:1: *mè aposteréses*. Defrauding would be the standard businessman's temptation to shrewdness in his transactions, hence quite appropriate to cite for the rich young ruler. However, some see this commandment as a summary reminiscence of Ex. 20:17, the Tenth Commandment, since defrauding presupposes a covetous desire that would do anything to gain what belongs to another.
3. **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.** (Lev. 19:18) Plummer

(*Matthew*, 266) decides that Jesus could not have cited Lev. 19:18 on this occasion, because, had He done so, the rich man could not so easily have affirmed, "All these have I observed." But this fails to grasp just how shallow the human heart can be, especially if its attention is fixed on some supremely excellent deed and the person's mind is already impatient with familiar precepts like Lev. 19:18! In fact, it is easy to affirm that we have always done this from childhood, until we crash head-on into some unpleasant, uncomfortable or unwanted duty, as this young ruler so abruptly discovered. In fact, it was precisely this commandment that Jesus later chose to test the sincerity of his affirmed desire to be perfect. (19:21) Despite all the poverty and suffering all around him, he could still justify piling up wealth. He apparently loved his poor neighbor in the abstract, but not in the concrete, because, when faced with the practical opportunity to meet the immediate needs of some poor people and enlist himself in the service of Christ, which often involves going out of one's way to be of service to others, he balked.

Just because Jesus did not refer here to any particular command related to his relationship to God, we may not assume that Jesus considered the man to have properly ordered his religious life. In fact, by emphasizing his duty in the field of human relations where only truth in the heart can satisfy the conscience, He would show that he was not really in harmony with God either, because failure in human relations deeply affects one's relation to God. (1 Jn. 3:14-18; 4:20f) The Lord did not cite anything from the law of worship or ceremonies, because He knew how relatively easy it is to absolve oneself on the basis of perfect performance of rituals, justifying oneself by saying, "If God be appeased by the religious ritual, it does not matter greatly about my personal relationships. After all, my fellows are not going to be my final judge." Rather, with Lenski (*Matthew*, 750), we may think that Jesus cited these commandments, because they would be the ones of which the rich man might feel surest of his own perfect compliance. Ironically for this way of thinking, God judges us not so much on how orthodox is our ritual ("The right mode of baptism is immersion, the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day, and nothing but Welch's grape juice and Mandelbaum's matzos on the communion table, please!"), as on how truly seriously we take our relationship to other people. This is the old problem of "not just right ritual, but right relations too!" (See notes on 9:13 and 12:7.) Unconfused

by his assertions of his own goodness, Jesus will place before him a simple order that will unmask the legalism of all his previous care for others. And because he will turn down that requirement, this orthodox Jew will prove once more just how difficult it is for Jesus to do anything with "the righteous." In fact, Jesus came to call sinners to repentance, not the self-satisfied, self-justifying "righteous."

### C. THE YOUNG MAN INSISTS ON PERFECTION (19:20)

19:20 **The young man** (*neanískos*) was not necessarily a mere boy, since a person was considered a youth from about the 24th to the 40th year. (Arndt-Gingrich, 536; cf. *neaníou* of Ac. 7:58) **All these things have I observed.** Attitudes of commentators tend to range themselves into two positions regarding this young businessman's assertions: charity and realism.

1. With charity we might say that he had observed the Mosaic Law to the extent that he understood its meaning and to the extent he had fathomed himself. As Staton (*Servant's Call*, 9f) points out, so many religious homes are without real love for God and one's fellows, where its members live by regulations and judge their happiness by their ability to follow certain rules, without ever bothering to wonder to what purpose the rules were given in the first place. So they tell themselves and others that they have performed God's will merely because they have punctiliously kept a set of memorized rules.

The tragic reality represented by this young man is his unfeigned sincerity in affirming his faithful observance of the Law. His is a position actually possible for the person who accepts the pre-supposition upon which his statement is based, i.e. eternal life and righteousness can actually be attained by perfect observance of divine law. (Study Paul's own position as a Pharisee: "as to righteousness under the law—blameless!" Phil. 3:6) It just never occurred to such people that the revelation of God to Moses at Sinai depended entirely upon the gracious discretion and enterprise of God, not upon man. And if the Law itself did not depend upon human legislation, neither did the life it offered to those subject to it. Everything depended upon God from start to finish. (Isa. 26:12; 1 Chron. 29:10-16) And it is still that way. (Heb. 13:21; Phil. 2:13; 1:6; 1 Th. 2:13; Jn. 15:4f; Ro. 7:18; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

Charitably, we may see his declaration, not so much conceited as disappointed that Jesus had nothing more stimulating to tell him than what he had heard all his life. He had expected to be shown something heroic and inspiring and is reminded of mundane responsibilities on which he had been busy since he was a boy.

2. More realistically we may note that he had punctiliously performed all those commandments in harmony with the way they had been understood in Pharisean circles. His answer smacks of Little Jack Horner's attitude: "What a good boy am I!" How could anyone, who knows the holy God of heaven, have the gall to assert, as this man does in all seriousness, "I have put into practice everything that Moses required, and am now ready to move on to bigger things!"?! This young chap actually took the "Love your neighbor as yourself" in stride! His is the pride of accomplishment, the certainty that absolutely everything in his past is pleasing to God: there have been no mistakes, no slipups, no blunders, no bungling of any human relation.

Whichever view is taken of his first statement, by his own self-evaluation he should not have made the second one. That is, if God's will had been faithfully and perfectly observed, as he affirmed, how could such a good man say: **What lack I yet?**

1. Did this young fellow really desire an answer to his question? Does not his question sound like the game played by the thousands? These wring their hands in false despair, precisely because they are perfectly sure that they have lived up to the standard, they have always paid their bills, and yet, despite all their rule-keeping, their conscience does not let them rest. Nervously they ask, "What's wrong with me? What have I not done?" They expect no real answer from the person asked. They expect rather the soothing confirmation of their own goodness. Should the other person fail to play the game, and, instead of saying, "What more do you want? You are already the finest person we know!," he tells them the unwelcome news that they are imperfect in a deliberately ignored area, they are shattered. His statement about his faithful observance of the law exhibits great ignorance of its duties and of himself, but it is sincere. However, is his question as equally sincere?
2. He is really one step better than the Pharisee praying in the temple (Lk. 18:9-12) who is absolutely certain he had no need for improvement, whereas this young man at least admits the possibility that

he lacks something. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 726) solves it best:

Here superficial smugness is struggling with deep discontent. This young man tries to make himself believe that 'all is well; yet on the inside he is pathetically perturbed . . . though he tried hard to believe in his own virtue and respectability, he was actually feeling ill at ease.

Mark (10:21) registers here one beautifully tender reaction of the Master: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him." Why? Because He could look beyond his shallow self-complacency to see that this promising young person had been victimized by the formalism and legalism so characteristic of a religion of superficial observance of law. He could love him for the lost sheep that he was. (18:11-13; 9:36)

#### D. JESUS OFFERS PERFECTION THROUGH ABSOLUTE CONSECRATION (19:21)

19:21 **If you would be perfect** means "One thing you still lack." (Mk. 10:21; Lk. 18:22) It is not unlikely that, by divine insight, the Lord could have furnished him a rather substantial list of his shortcomings. Such humiliating perhaps would not have accomplished as much as the generous condescension He actually showed. With His usual tenderness He answered the ruler's question exactly as asked, "You ask, 'What do I still lack?' Just one thing, which, if you desire to be perfect, will make all the difference in the world." (1 Jn. 2:15-17; see notes on 13:7, 22.) It is the step whereby he would really come to know the true God and eternal life. (Jn. 17:3; 1 Jn. 5:20f) This would be no mere perfection in keeping the commandments as such, but perfection in arriving at the heart of ethical conduct and a right understanding of his relation to God and to the neighbor he had claimed to love as himself, which is the basis of all commandments. (See notes on 5:48.)

**If you would be perfect** has a touch of irony in it for the man who had just claimed to have kept the commandments, especially the "love your neighbor as yourself," a command that perfectly summarizes all that is really involved in moral perfection. But the young man hardly understood all this. There is special irony in Jesus' sending him back to this very commandment he had so flippantly claimed to have already kept as much as necessary. Despite the irony, Jesus'

demand is seriously meant, because He is really testing him on these main points: love and trust in God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; love and service to his neighbor as himself; and his willingness to follow Jesus' leadership. (Mt. 22:36-40 = Mk. 12:28-34; Mt. 16:24ff)

**I. LOVE FOR GOD ABOVE ALL: Sell all you have . . . and you will have treasure in heaven.**

- A. Furnishing this formula to the ruler, Jesus is not thereby subscribing to a doctrine of good works, as if giving away so much wealth could guarantee him so much eternal life. Rather He exacts of him an act of faith in the grace of God and a self-surrender so complete that, without faith, he could never make the leap. So far from depending upon works and leaving out faith, there is almost **NOTHING BUT FAITH** here. (Col. 3:1-5) In fact, the promise of **treasure in heaven** guaranteed by God as a result of this major sacrifice is realistic only for the person who believes Him. (Heb. 13:5f; see notes on Mt. 6:19-34) So far from being a superhuman, esoteric act which would merit eternal life, Jesus' command was the simplest, most practical, most immediately verifiable way for him to take hold of God's grace by faith. But, as proven by the outcome, he did not believe, did not obey Jesus and so could not be saved. Thus, Jesus actually explores his real reverence for God, and so pushes him back to the First, Great Commandment of the Law, summary of the first table of the Decalogue. (Mt. 22:37f; Ex. 20:1-8; Dt. 6:5; cf. Prov. 19:17; 14:31; 28:27; Dt. 15:7-11) The Lord aims at breaking his dependence upon his wealth, so he could learn that he could not do without God. So long as he was well supplied with this world's goods, he could buy his way out of trouble without God's help, and even arrive at the point where he had eliminated all need for the constant, daily provision of the Heavenly Father.
- B. **Sell all you have and give it away** is an incredibly radical demand for the person who believes wealth to be essential to expansion and influence of the Messianic Kingdom. Jesus therefore asking him completely to disavow an essential article in his credo: no wonder he stumbles at it! But how many thousands of relatively rich Christians over the centuries have hallowed that article in their practice and thinking?

With half-hearted confidence in spiritual power, they substitute a show of wealth in great, barn-like edifices "to the glory of God and so that the world will sit up and take notice!" They form denominations and interdenominational power structures to ram "needed" legislation through Congress and lobby at the U.N. and smuggle military weapons to people's movements struggling for their share in the control of the world. Power in this world is based on wealth, but Jesus shocks everyone by saying to His most promising contact in the wealthy community, "Get rid of it!" Unbelievable doctrine, but solidly based on God's usual way of doing things. (Cf. Jer. 9:23, 24; 1 Co. 1:26 in its context of 1:18—2:18) Everyone needs to understand that God does not need our wealth and influence, our importance and social position to make His Kingdom function or succeed!

- C. The rich young ruler's biographical by-line, "he had great possessions," means that he had exceptional means at his disposal, and, whether he was a wise investor or the heir of a billionaire, his millions were locked safely away from the disturbing problems of needy people, as if the care and maintaining of possessions were the destined end-all of God's intended blessing. As it was, he was but the slave of as many masters as he had possessions, furnishing janitorial service to polish sources of pleasure he rarely if ever used or enjoyed. This is because *the more things one possesses, the more he is obligated to protect, maintain and increase them, leaving him less and less time for the simple enjoyment of any one of them.* Worse, because he must realize a wealth-oriented dream in his mind, the mammon-worshipper must turn down what comes to him unmanipulated in life. If God brings him something in life that does not fit his own preordered plans, he must ruthlessly thrust it aside, if his own scheme is to be realized. And yet, this young man had asked Jesus for something that did not fit preordered schemes! From this standpoint, his original question was destined to bring him to choose whether he would leave his own wealth-oriented dreams in order to accept the unforeseen in God's will that risked his wealth, or hold tenaciously to his dreams and risk losing God too. So, he cannot really enjoy reality as it is, even if God Himself made it that way. Instead, he tries to force reality to conform to his limited preconceptions and

dreams born of what money can buy. Thus, he misses all the interesting, richly exciting, genuinely satisfying experiences of adjusting himself to new, spiritual realities that could bless his life beyond his happiest imagining.

## II. LOVE AND SERVICE FOR HIS NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF:

**Give it to the poor.** How could he so carelessly pretend to love his neighbor as himself (19:19b), when he hoarded, despite the poor all around him? (19:22; cf. Jas. 1:27; 2:14-16; 5:1-6; 1 Jn. 3:15-18) Wealth tends to develop in the possessor the impulse to cling to possessions in order to retain them. Thus, selfishness develops, growing out of the struggle to hold what is in constant danger of slipping away through one's own neglect or through the greed of others. So Jesus strikes at the heart of his problem—selfishness, not merely the abundant possessions he had. Note that not even here do we find asceticism or self-privation ordered as an end in itself. This is not poverty for poverty's sake, but the ideal of brotherhood and sharing. It is rather the intelligent distribution of his goods made available to the poor, his brethren. (Cf. Luke's word, *diàdos*, "distribute," Lk. 18:22. See also Ac. 2:44f; 4:34f.) Genuine love must be the motive. (1 Co. 13:3)

## III. WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW JESUS' LEADERSHIP: **and come, follow me.**

- A. The severity of Jesus' demand is softened into a sincere, affectionate invitation. Jesus actually wanted him in His service, because He could envision what this young man could become under his tutelage.
- B. The remedy for addiction to possessions does not lie in the communistic equalization of wealth or in divorcing our day-to-day existence from dependence upon some form of economic system. God knows that no man can live in a utopia where the necessities of life should not have to be paid for, because man is a sinner who has already destroyed the one utopia for which he was created, and he will not have another until he faces squarely the problem of His own sinfulness. (Study Gen. 3:16-19; 2 Th. 3:6-13; 1 Th. 2:9; 4:11f; Eph. 4:28.) Rather, the cure for wealth addiction (= covetousness = idolatry, Col. 3:5) is to be found in discipleship to Jesus. Only He can restore us to sanity by helping us to see the true value

of what He calls **treasure in heaven** and by devaluating all our temporal value systems, all our earthly treasures. Because our treasure takes our heart with it (Mt. 6:21), earthly riches tend to shackle our hearts, our interests, efforts and hopes to this earth, causing us to lose sight of, and finally interest in, the things of God and eternity. This is worldliness. (1 Jn. 2:15ff) His discipleship, then, is not an extra without which we could get along quite satisfactorily, because if we did not take His word for the reality of our true **treasures in heaven**, we would not take the steps He indicates to make it ours! Unless we follow Him, finding our true security in our trust in His leadership, our dependence upon His evaluations and His advice for our investments, we are at the mercy of every other temptation floating through our consciousness.

- C. If we interpret Jesus' demands as terms on which the ruler could have become an intimate follower at the level of the others, then Jesus' strict impartiality becomes evident, since He subjects him to the same sacrifices the other more intimate followers had made in order to enter His service. (See on 19:27.)

The young man had supposed that he could keep his wealth and inherit eternal life too by means of some magic formula he hoped to learn from Jesus. But Jesus, acting like God, demanded that he do something that did not fit an already established moral scheme. He suddenly overturned the calculating reasoning of the man and handed him what appears to be the special, tailor-made formula he had requested. And yet it was not a formula that he had expected, because it required no monumental use of his wealth, nor did it depend upon his past deeds or goodness. Rather, it stripped him of his usual supports and economic strength, leaving him practically naked before God and the world, and enrolled by faith in the discipleship of an itinerate rabbi whose future was not yet all that clear. The ironic thing about this whole situation is that he had asked for some nearly superhuman deed whereby he could inherit eternal life, and when, in form, Jesus furnished him precisely what he had requested—although the substance totally overturned his own concept of it—he turned it down. He had practically asked Jesus to play God for him by furnishing an arbitrary task that did not fit the usual scheme of things (such as the commandments in the law), and Jesus gave it to Him. Yet, in essence, He demanded that the ruler simply

*repent* of his addiction to wealth which is nothing more than the idolatry of covetousness. The specific form his repentance was to take must not obscure the fact that he was ordered to repent.

But is there nothing for the modern Christian in this special demand? Certainly, the surprising thing about Jesus' stringent demand made of the rich young ruler is that it is not just a tailor-made ultimatum specially designed for that man's special situation and personal need. It is the kind of dictate that Jesus could hand ANYONE! (See notes on 13:44-46; cf. esp. 19:29. Cf. Lk. 12:33 in its total context of Jesus' message on trusting God completely, Lk. 12.) The concept of heavenly wealth, as opposed to earthly riches, is not new for Jesus. (See notes on 6:20 in its context of 6:19-34!) In fact, Jesus' demand of the rich young ruler was nothing less than the rule that governed and explains His own matchless life in the fruitful service of God. In order to reign, He too sold all that He had and gave it to the poor! (2 Co. 8:9; Ro. 5:6ff) He too had to conquer by dying to all that was dear to Him. This is the pathway to eternal life for every disciple. (See Special Study: "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:28.)

In fact, the difference between Jesus' requirement of the rich young ruler and what He demands of everyone is only a question of details: what specifically must we do with our possessions? The ruler must sell everything and distribute it and we must turn over to Christ all claimed right to our possessions and then utilize them as His administrators, i.e. considering them a stewardship for His use. On 1 Co. 7:29-31, Bartchy (*First-Century Slavery*, 152) is correct to notice that Paul's insistence "that whereas the various earthly activities and relationships in which Christians were involved were not rejected, their definitive character for Christian existence had been negated," was founded not merely upon the passing of the present world scheme or upon the shortness of the time, but upon the call of God. (1 Co. 7:15c, 17-24) It is not "buying" as such that is called in question but rather "the keeping, the seizing, the possessing . . . Also, Paul did not criticize in principle either crying or rejoicing. (See Ro. 12:15.)" That is, we are to fix our attention on what God wants to do in our lives where we are with what little or much we have, rather than concern ourselves over much with the superficial, often accidental, circumstances that characterize our existence on earth, e.g. marriage, slavery, wealth, commercial activities, former religious status, etc. Accordingly, the determining attitude for Jesus' disciple is a refusal to set one's heart on earth and its transient treasures,

"for the *schema* of this world is on the way out!" (1 Co. 7:31b) Can you imagine the revolution in rich-poor relations that such insights must bring to people who accept them?

With insight Tolbert (*Good News From Matthew*, 165f) notes how Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," has been turned into a cliché to repeat to everyone who wants to become a Christian. What would be the result in our twentieth century affluent world, were we to hammer out the demand Jesus laid before the rich young ruler? How many so-called Christians on the rolls today would have ever become a Christian, if they had been required to repent of their covetousness before being baptized? How many are unquestionably rich rulers with more real concern for their possessions than for God? Since when has this idolatry become fashionably "Christian"? Rather than be owned by their possessions, people must be free to be able for Christ's sake to utilize or dispose of them as the situation demands. The man that allows possessions to govern his thinking and activity cannot allow God to do so. (Mt. 6:24)

#### E. BUT THE YOUNG MAN BALKED (19:22)

**19:22 But when the young man heard the saying, he went away sorrowful; for he was one that had great possessions.** The rich young ruler is not like the happy farmer or the pearl merchant (see notes on 13:44-46), because, although he was faced with the supreme cost and value of the Kingdom ("eternal life" or "perfection"), he would not buy. He turned it all down and walked away, and Jesus let him go! Of what use to the Kingdom of God were his talents, his youth, his management ability, his uprightness, etc., if his claim to love his neighbor as himself (19:19) is false? Loving one's God enough to make this kind of sacrifice for the Kingdom is what the Kingdom is all about! However, everyone's will to accept must be left free to refuse, so Jesus did not detain him. If he did not really love God or his neighbor more than his gold, what kind of a disciple would he really have made? Although Jesus loved him (Mk. 10:21), He did not compromise His principle a hair's breadth to attain an influential addition to His cause. Staton (*Servant's Call*, 10) wisely counsels:

Jesus was not just concerned about the quantity of His disciples but also about their quality. When we go about making disciples,

we must not overlook the kinds of people Jesus disciplined and the kinds He allowed to walk away.

Why was he **sorrowful**?

1. Is he shocked, hurt and grieved that for the strength of His Kingdom the Master can so easily do without the success symbols, means, power and influence that he, as a wealthy person has to offer? He had undoubtedly envisioned a situation where he could keep his wealth, respectability, power and influence, and have his eternal life too. And, if he resembles the other disciples, he was probably convinced that the Kingdom of God was going to need his very gifts and possessions to make its influence felt in the world, for are not these the indicators of success in our world? This would have let him nourish his addiction to wealth and guarantee him a slice of eternal life too!
2. Is it merely because he loved his possessions too much to part with them? If so, although Matthew says, "he had great possessions," it is also true to say, "Great possessions had him!" He was accustomed to the sway over others that wealth can buy. He had heard his money talk and enjoyed its commanding voice. But what would be left of him, if he lost his voice?
3. Or is it because he could see that Jesus had just unmasked him for the moral pauper he really was, and that, stripped of his pseudo-respectability, he could perceive that there was nothing left inside? Could he see that, unless he made the demanded sacrifice of total consecration, he would have wasted all his other efforts at goodness? Was he shaken to see that the pain of withdrawal from his addiction only underlined that much more clearly how thoroughly he depended on wealth to provide him his sources of happiness and security? Because he dreaded to take the risk and make the plunge Jesus indicated, he was not unlikely aghast at his own cowardice, at how needy he was and how very insecure without that crutch that gave him identity and apparent importance. His sorrowfulness is a plain symptom of his addiction, because a person who is not addicted is able to do with less, or at times even without, painlessly. He probably had thought himself equal to anything the Master could demand of him, only to find himself dangling helplessly from his own moneytree.
4. He was **sorrowful**, because he felt deeply the rightness and reasonableness of Jesus' answer. Otherwise, he would likely have scorned it as extravagant or insulting. His grief is the product of his struggle

to choose between giving up his purpose to have eternal life and giving up his possessions.

**He had great possessions.** Why mention this so late in the incident? Up to this point his major failing seemed to have been his self-righteousness, but here he chokes on the demand to liquidate everything and make practical use of it as gifts to the poor and take up personal discipleship to Jesus. Very possibly his addiction to wealth is mentioned last, after his standard Jewish morality is made abundantly clear, so that the reader may be psychologically satisfied that his wealth is not necessarily ill-gotten gain, and perhaps actually led to the (typically Jewish) conclusion that his wealth is but the normal pay-off for his orthodox goodness. (See on 19:25.) This, then, would be for the purpose of showing that even the undoubted blessing of wealth from God can become the most exacting slavery and the most unquestionable idolatry, and although justifiable within limits, must be unmercifully sacrificed when it becomes the cause of one's own spiritual loss. (Study Mt. 18:6-9.)

#### F. JESUS' COMMENT ON THE INCIDENT AND TEACHING ON WEALTH (19:23-30)

1. "Entrance into God's Kingdom is difficult for the wealthy."  
(19:23)

**19:23 Verily I say unto you, It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.** The young man went away sorrowful, but he left Jesus sorrowing too. The Lord's quiet observation is the reaction of One who fully understands the demand He has just made and is grieved that such a fine, potential disciple could not break himself free from the one slavery, the one idolatry, that held him bound.

But why should it be so tough **for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God?** Two reasons suggest themselves:

1. Simply because his unwillingness to admit that, despite all the tangible evidences to the contrary, he has not really arrived in the Kingdom. He must begin all over, as a little child. (See notes on 18:3, 4; Jn. 3:3-5.) The trauma for so many self-made men would be so great that the necessary self-humiliation would always

elude them. In fact, to admit as final the value system of the Kingdom of God means that they must reject the finality and the this-worldly goals of the often unethical economic systems upon which so much of their wealth is founded. But the habits of mind and practice developed to gain, maintain and increase their wealth will have become so ingrained that to admit that they are totally mistaken means literally that anyone whose whole life has been immersed in that way of life must completely start over. Nicodemus' question (Jn. 3:4) is really pathetic, really pained, because it hurts deeply to admit that most, if not everything one is or has, at best, is wrongly oriented, and, at worst, is a deliberate exploitation and an abuse of others. (Jas. 2:6, 7; 4:1-6, 13—5:6) The deep chagrin felt by every driver who learns that he has gone miles out of his way and yet is nowhere near his destination and must lose further time and spend extra money and effort to arrive at the proper end of his journey only faintly illustrates that inner self-accusation and humiliating disappointment burning in the soul of the man who suddenly discovers that almost everything he represented in the past was foolish and wicked in the balance of eternity. (Lk. 12:13-21; see fuller notes on Mt. 6:19-34.) "Poor rich man!" is no idle comment!

2. Although God had said, "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day." (Dt. 8:18), this precept is easily forgotten in the temptation to bow to economic power as a supreme being in itself. Very few people are capable of keeping their head all the time in the fast-moving rush to hold and increase one's wealth. (Study 1 Ti. 6:9f, 17-19, notes on Mt. 13:7, 22; as also Wilson, *Learning From Jesus*, 273-296.)

In short, the reason wealth blocks its possessor's access to the Kingdom lies, not so much in the possession itself, as if wealth per se contaminated like nuclear radiation, as in the attitude of the possessor toward what he thinks wealth is and what wealth can do. The difficulty, therefore, lies primarily in what wealth does to the possessor. (See full notes on 6:19-34.) In fact, this may explain the low-profile discipleship of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. (Cf. Jn. 19:38f; Mt. 27:57; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50) Vested interests make even good men cowardly lest they lose their grip on their investments in position, wealth, power, etc.

**Enter the kingdom of heaven**, in this context, means "be saved" (19:25) or "be perfect" (19:21) or "inherit eternal life" (19:16). **The Kingdom**, here, means that life lived under the rule of God which begins in this life with one's salvation from sin and proceeds through his perfection in the character of Christ and culminates in life lived with God for eternity. (See notes on "the Kingdom" after 13:53.) **It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven** means that the man addicted to wealth is an idolater who has too much at stake in his possessions to let God be the Ruler of his life, because this rule is the Kingdom.

Mark (10:24) reports that "the disciples were amazed at his words," a foretaste of their mounting astonishment that breaks out in Mt. 19:25 with their "Who then can be saved?" This close quizzing of the Lord by the disciples that we see taking place in this subsection (19:23-26) is precisely what Jesus intended should happen on other occasions, when, as in the Sermon on the Mount for example, He overturned everyone's expectations about the position and importance that wealth and power structures represented for the Kingdom of God. (Study note on 5:3ff; cf. Lk. 6:20, 24.) Disciples are driven to decide once again whether they think Jesus' view is the only tenable position, or whether their own is real. Is it really true that the blessing of the Kingdom is the possession of the poor in spirit?

2. Apostles are staggered (Mk. 10:24), but Jesus repeats His dictum even more emphatically. (Mt. 19:24)

19:24 **Again I say to you** means that Jesus is coming at His previous statement from another angle, because the **hard** (19:23) is not illustrated by **the camel going through the needle's eye**. In Mark (10:24), Jesus actually repeated His former exclamation: "How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!" Although even in Mark Jesus stays on the subject of the perils of wealth as an obstacle to entrance into the Kingdom, it would seem that Jesus means: "You are astonished that I say that it is difficult for men of means to get into the Kingdom? Let me remind you that it is difficult for ANYONE to enter the Kingdom!"

On Mk. 10:24 it should be noticed that the better manuscripts do not have the expression, "for those who trust in riches," "a rich man," nor "those who have possessions." As Metzger

(*Textual Commentary*, 106) points out, "The rigor of Jesus' saying was softened by the insertion of one or another qualification that limited its generality and brought it into close connection with the context."

But Jesus meant to leave it general, because He must also deal specifically with this generality later. (Mt. 19:26) Thus, in Mark He means: "No ONE can claim prior right to entrance into the Kingdom on the basis of accidental distinctions such as race, wealth and social position, or cultural acquisitions such as the external performance of a legal code."

**It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.** We need not waste pages deciding whether the camel was really a camel and the needle's eye really a needle's eye. These expressions need no further comment than Jesus' word: "impossible!" (19:26) If it be urged that Jesus did not say that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, then it must be answered that the term "rich man" is ambiguous. Does "rich man" mean owner, or rather steward of great wealth that really belongs to God? The monied man who answers, "That wealth is MINE," cannot enter the Kingdom. The even wealthier magnate who exclaims, "Why, it is only God's: I am just His responsible administrator with no proprietary rights over these vast holdings!," understands Jesus and can enter the Kingdom. The first thinks HE is a rich man; the latter knows he owns nothing and that God is the wealthy One.

The disciples' reaction (19:25) is understandable only if we see them reacting to a paradoxical declaration that pictures a proverbial impossibility. It is a useless exercise to point to any of these words as special "Biblical Greek" capable of special renderings, when every one of these words (*kámelon*, *trématos*, *rhafidos*, *trumaliâs*, *belónes*) is known to classical Greek. (Rocci, 384, 963, 1638, 1853, 1862) The explanation that "camel (*kámelon*) should be cable (*kámlon*)," is but a feeble human attempt to attenuate the rigor of Jesus' hard saying. It does not represent the correct textual rendering of Matthew, Mark or Luke (See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 50, 106, 169.), and should be forgotten by serious NT scholarship, except as a lesson on what not to do with NT words.

3. Dumbfounded, the disciples ask: "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?" (19:25)

19:25 **And when the disciples heard it, they were astonishingly exceedingly, saying, Who then can be saved?** What does their question mean?

1. Is this the anguished outcry of a pilfering Judas? (Remember Jn. 12:4-6.) Some believe Jesus' unrelenting rejection of a rich man as a proper candidate for the Kingdom was not only to correct the disciples' understanding about the rich young ruler, but also, even primarily, to bring Judas back to reality. In the same way other Apostles were dreaming of thrones and honors, was Judas imagining the wealth that would be his? But Matthew's words is *disciples* (plural), because there were more than Judas who were stunned by Jesus' incomprehensible rejection of the wealthy.
2. It is not unlikely that the disciples' underlying presupposition was a typically Hebrew argument: "Does not God furnish man the power to get wealth? (Dt. 8:18) But would He have blessed the wicked in his greedy grasping? (Psa. 1; Prov. 3:9f, 16; 10:22; 11:24f; 15:6; 22:4; 24:3f) Therefore, whatever other faults the rich may have, they must have some hidden merits which the all-seeing God chooses to reward. Is not wealth, then, evidence of one's righteousness? But if a rich man cannot be saved, who can?!" Such an argument assumes, of course, that any amount of goodness, merits or future obedience can make up for past sins and failures. Had they been considering the licentious rich who cruelly grind the poor under their heel (cf. Jas. 2:6f; 5:1-6), they could have more readily agreed with Jesus. But Jesus was discussing a wealthy person who was but one step away from perfection! "If those whom we deem particularly qualified for the Kingdom cannot enter, then who can?"
3. The disciples' question, "**Who then can be saved?**," means: "Then, no one can be saved!" They rightly sense that Jesus refers to a situation possible for anyone. Their question has its proper answer: "Zacchaeus can be saved in identically the same way Jesus' indicates here." (Lk. 19:9f) But this they do not see. They only guess that all people are attracted to wealth and are driven by it, whether rich or poor. Therefore, since all have the virus, all must be damned.

Does their question mean that they too are secret addicts of wealth, shocked that Jesus had just wiped out their covertly admired heroes? To admire or indulge the practices and philosophy of the wealthy because of the quantity of comforts their wealth can provide them is not merely to acknowledge the addict in us, but also to become their accomplice by tacit or even unwitting secret agreement with them. Idolizing the money-grabber is already a latent commitment to the same paralyzing idolatry that will manifest itself when the first opportunity presents itself. Are the disciples dupes of the propaganda circulated by monied people to ease their own conscience about their own enslaving habit? Unfortunately, those accustomed to wealth often have society's communications media working full-time not only to perpetuate the concept that life is linked with wealth's purchases (contrast Lk. 12:15), but also to make this the official ideology of the world. Those who are relatively poor or really so, then, when confronted with this philosophy, have the choice of rejecting the popular dogma by accepting or rationalizing their poverty and being thought fools, or of becoming Mammon-worshippers too. After all, wealth is relative: one can be as dependent upon wealth with little as with much. Trusting in riches is a question of attitude toward it, not how much one actually possesses of it. There is, of course, Jesus' third alternative: that of relativizing wealth by re-assigning to the means of material wealth its true economic function, by subordinating it to the things of the spirit, which, in His view, is the true treasure. As we saw taught in Mt. 18 and as this section illustrates, the present age of the world is structured in such a way as to draw exaggerated attention to the powerful and the wealthy, who are, from Jesus' standpoint, the less secure, the more infantile, less scrupulous and more bulldozing members of the race.

Nevertheless, Jesus will answer the Twelve's pessimistic question by showing that not everyone will be so selfish. Rather, everyone who is motivated to make the sacrifice will be saved, and at the same time, will be amply repaid all that this cost him, even in this life. (19:29)

In this particular case, the disciples ask, "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?" But other disciples with other orientations would just as easily ask: "If an ecstatic charismatic cannot be saved, who can?" or "If an ascetic holy man cannot, who can?" Or it might be a philosopher as opposed to the man on the street, or just any man as opposed to a woman, or a free man as opposed to a slave, a Jew as opposed to a Gentile, a powerful king as opposed to a lowly

commoner—and the list is endless. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:26-31; 2:6; 3:18-23; 4:8-18; 1 Co, 7; Gal. 3:28) The reason for this is that, according to each one's orientation, these various groups, due to their inherent merits, are thought to have automatically attained or earned the goal coveted by all. Nevertheless, a Christian's salvation and self-identity does not depend upon his earthly status, but upon what God makes possible for him to become in Christ and in accepting the challenge to be a Christian right where he is with what he has. Christ's invitation to discipleship is not based on the disciple's earthly situation, race, sex or social condition, but upon His own graciousness. Paul had learned this, and so could almost turn eloquent prose into poetry describing "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"! (Phil. 3:8-11)

4. Jesus answers: "God is lord of all possibilities." (19:26)

19:26 **With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.** Whatever else the details of this wonderful declaration may mean, Jesus proclaims in dramatic terms the absolute Lordship of God: God is in absolute control of everything: **with God all things are possible.** This declaration has soul-stirring significance for the original hearers and readers of this Gospel, especially because they faced earth-shaking sociological, economic, philosophical and theological upheavals that threatened to leave them adrift on a chartless sea. But to know that God is at the helm of the universe is security. But this fact also had immediate, personal ramifications for those disciples who were not a little perplexed when their Master took a hard line on divorce. (Mt. 19:10) And just now He has all but damned society's greatest, most influential citizens. (Mt. 19:23-25) Their emotions and readiness to believe are being strained to the limit, as if everything they had nailed down was coming loose. With these words Jesus anchors their souls to something solid that counts, something that is eternal, unaffected by time and change, to a God with whom **all things are possible.** (Cf. Lk. 1:37; Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27; Zech. 8:6)

But the very proposition, **with God all things are possible,** may very well mean that, for the disciples as for anyone else, God may well have to take some unpredictable steps, unforeseeable by limited human conceptions. While God may be counted upon to be perfectly wise, holy and loving, He may talk and act in ways that no one on

earth could have foreseen or predicted with certainty. This is because God cannot be shut in by human categories or definitions. In fact, Jesus' parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers (20:1-16) explicitly teaches the unexpected truth that, in contrast to the usual, human notion that recompense should be measured on the basis of work quotas met, everything depends upon the free will and mercy of God.

What is it that **with men is impossible**, but easily falls within the province of **God with whom all things are possible**? Two answers are possible, depending on what is meant by **this** or on what is meant by **with men, with God**.

1. **This** refers to the disciples' question, "Who then can be saved?"

a. Basically, their question meant, "Who can be saved from the addiction of wealth so as to be admitted to the Kingdom?"

They implied that none could be saved, because all normal people are involved, in one way or another, in the preoccupation with the gaining and maintaining of possessions.

b. Further, if those who seem to be gifted, particularly qualified personalities cannot be saved, who can?"

Jesus answers either standpoint.

2. **With men, with God** means "in the judgment of men or God about what each can do."

a. It is a mistake to understand the preposition *with* in either phrase as referring to accompaniment. *With* (*para* with the dative in both cases) does not mean to indicate the person with whom one cooperates, i.e. God or men, as determining the possibilities of the case, as if Jesus had said, "If being saved depended upon other men, men cannot be saved. When men take God's hand, they can do the impossible and be saved." Jesus did not say this.

b. Rather, *para* with the dative points to the judgment seat before whom one stands figuratively: "in the sight, or judgment, of someone." This meaning passes over into the simpler "with" and becomes almost equivalent to the dative, "possible or impossible for someone." (Arndt-Gingrich, 615) He means, therefore, that what in human judgment is impossible, God judges perfectly possible. Since we cannot live with wealth and we cannot live without some possessions, we must judge salvation, perfection and eternal life to be unobtainable. But God alone can work the necessary transformation of our vision of wealth,

so that we no longer depend upon it, but upon Him.

Men just cannot merit salvation, no matter how rich or righteous they are, because no amount of human qualifications can remove sin. (Heb. 9:22; Eph. 1:7) Only a perfect sacrifice can effect that. (Jn. 1:29; 1 Pt. 1:18-21; Ro. 3:21-26; 5:6-11; Heb. 7:26-28; 9:11-14, 23-26; 10:10, 26) And only God can furnish a sacrifice like that, for **with God all things are possible**, and, as Jesus will say later, He Himself is that sacrifice, a ransom for many. (20:28) Salvation is in the hands, not of self-congratulating men, but of a God who, seeing the human mediocrity and incapacity to be perfect, can do precisely what Jesus did with the rich young ruler, i.e. provide an arbitrary path to eternal life. This "arbitrariness," however, is apparent only to people who have carefully amassed their fortune in moral merit badges and brownie points with a view to cashing them in on eternal life at the end. But because they are sinners, they must not suppose that any quantity of merit can pay for one sin. This must be atoned for on quite another basis, because any goodness they may have expressed was totally their duty. (Lk. 17:7-10) The "arbitrariness of God" consists in His choice to save, not those who have carefully "earned" their salvation, but those who never earned it at all, but rather trusted Him to be generous and did what He asked. (See notes on 20:1-16; cf. Ro. 4:4, 5.) This is but the Pauline doctrine of justification by the obedience of faith. (Cf. Ro. 1:5; 16:26; 3:25; 4:24; 5:1; 6:17f, etc.)

The reason wealth and religious merit may be connected in this context is that "wealth" is but coined life, i.e. time and energy used to produce a certain result, hence that for which a man spends his lifetime must be considered his wealth, because he considered it worth his effort to produce or pursue it. This is why excessive well-being, too many worries, any earth-bound work carried on unlimitedly, all hinder the individual from possessing the Kingdom, because these leave no space, no time, no energy, no spiritual freedom to dedicate himself to the things of God in the common things of life. Anything that occupies our whole life and leaves no time for the Kingdom of God, anything that leaves us insensitive to Christian concerns or does not permit us to feel the need of God's salvation, is dangerous wealth. This includes that wealth that consists in religious practices punctually observed and carefully registered which salve the conscience that one's duty is done, but at the price of true love for God. (Cf. Maggioni, *Luca*, 237) So, even if a man spends a

lifetime hoarding up a treasure of merit wherewith he may buy his soul out of hell and pay for his right to enter God's eternal rest, his pursuit of this wealth is a striving after wind and vanity too.

The rich young ruler was a man who, by almost anyone's standards, deserved to be ushered into the Kingdom on a red carpet, but, staggered by the unexpectedly high price of the Kingdom, judged it impossible for him to pay, and walked away. In glorious contrast to him; however, there is Zacchaeus, the filthy rich chief tax collector. There hardly lived a man more "camelly" to go through the needle's eye of the Kingdom than he! And yet, during a visit with Jesus Christ, by the grace of God **IN HE WENT!** (Lk. 19:9) Not because rich, but because repentant.

If the Apostles' question means, "Who can break the spell that wealth holds over its possessors?," Jesus' later answer to Peter (19:29) will show that God had already begun to succeed in liberating the Twelve (with the possible exception of Judas) and many others from the fascination of possessions.

#### G. PETER'S WRONG-HEADED QUESTION ANSWERED (19:27-30)

1. "We have sacrificed what the rich young ruler would not: what is our reward?"

19:27 **Lo, we have left all.** Objectively, they had sacrificed little more than a few boats and nets and the simple fisherfolk that made up their families, hardly a treasure to compare with the ruler's millions. But it was their entire life: their livelihood, their loved ones. So when they turned away from these things to follow Jesus, they demonstrated as truly their dedication to Jesus as if they had renounced all the finest gold in the world or forsaken the treasured company of kings. **What then shall we have?** Is Peter's reaction to the foregoing statements of Jesus positive or negative?

1. Positive. Peter sees that the Twelve disciples had actually made great sacrifices to be in His personal service. They had willingly done what the rich young ruler had not, although the objective quantity was not near as great. If, then, the road of the wealthy is a dead-end street, what lies ahead on the road of sacrifice? Because the Lord does not seem to scold Peter's abrupt question,

it may be that He interprets Peter as asking, "Lord, since we have sacrificed for the Kingdom, does this mean that we are among the recipients of God's grace for whom He facilitates entrance into the Kingdom? What has God made possible for us?" Since Jesus had pointed out the impossibility to be saved ("With men this is impossible"), Peter may be uncertain about whether they, in their sacrificing, were laying up "heavenly treasure." But the fact that Jesus is not openly scolding in His answer is not decisive, because even His slightest warning (19:30; 20:16) may be thought to contain a criticism of Peter's question.

2. Negative. The rich young ruler had just been turned away because of the hold earthly possessions had on him, and now poor, grasping Peter commits the same basic error! **What shall we have?** means that what the Apostles even then possessed in the Person of Jesus Christ was to be judged meager in comparison with what they considered missing, and undoubtedly less than what they expected to come.
  - a. Peter and anyone who agreed with him was still addicted to wealth, because he just cannot quite stop thinking about what has been surrendered to be in Jesus' service. Worse, he values too lowly the beauty and preciousness of all the compensations with which he was even then surrounded. (Cf. Mt. 13:16f; Lk. 10:23f; Heb. 11:13; 1 Pt. 1:10-12)
  - b. Further, Peter's observation has the flavor of self-righteousness, because **we have left all** reminds the Lord of the greatness of their self-denial. So his question is colored by covetousness. Perhaps he thought, "Our rare success in doing what the most amply qualified citizens find impossible to do must be a very meritorious accomplishment indeed." **What shall we have?**, then, hints for V.I.P. positions and preferential treatment.
  - c. In the larger context, it may be that Jesus' remarks on the dangerous temptations of riches had a discouraging effect on Peter, leaving him uneasy about prospects of immediate reward on earth in the Kingdom of a King who inexplicably refused to be crowned (Jn. 6:15) and steadily predicted His own judicial murder (Mt. 16:21; 17:22f).

Though charity requires that we not condemn Peter without solid proof of his guilt, the latter interpretation seems more correctly to explain his motivation, since the warning Jesus gives in 19:30 and more especially the point of the Parable of the Eleventh Hour Laborers

(20:1-16) grows directly out of this question. Over-concern about contracts with God and the "What is there in it for me?" spirit endangers those who react and reason this way, because of its legalistic calculation, its putting self-interest first in priorities, and its expecting preferential treatment:

2. Jesus' answers: "You will be rewarded, but not on the basis you think." (19:28—20:16)

a. PROMISE: "In the new world, you will reign with me, judging all Israel."

19:28 Although His further remarks will leave the merit-counting self-seekers scratching their heads and frustrated, the interesting thing about Jesus' answer here is the gentleness of His reproof of Peter's self-interested question. Instead of criticizing his question, He answered it! There is a striking similarity between this reaction and His promises given in Lk. 22:28-30, despite the self-seeking dispute among the Twelve about relative rank and importance at the Last Supper (Lk. 22:24-27). A closer look at the answer in each context, however, may convince us that His promise of their future greatness intends to destroy any hope of personal gain or superiority over others. He disappoints every aspiration of personal distinction in a graduated hierarchical scale by seating them on twelve equal thrones. No one is worthy to be seated higher than another. This implies that no merit is accumulated even on the basis of the relatively differing sacrifices made by each one. (See on 20:1-16.)

**You who have followed me** means "you who have continued with me in my trials." (Cf. Lk. 22:28) The disciples deserved high positions in the Kingdom, not because they had sacrificed so much (Mt. 19:27), but because they had been willing to be His disciples despite all the common-sense rationalizations that told them to drop Him. They would be rewarded on the basis of their well-tested but victorious faith. They had seen in Him absolutely nothing that would concretely sustain any real hope of earthly security or power. Their faith is not perfect: they would misunderstand Him and they would yet express some ambitious hopes. (20:20-28) But these failings, in His view, were but ripples on an otherwise calm sea of deep trust in Him. He did not despise the generosity of their self-denial, however often it might misunderstand Him. Their general humility and willingness to be led was worth everything to Him: why should He fail to reward

them? Only an uninformed, greedy jealousy could raise an eyebrow at the idea of rewarding them for following Him, because, as He has intimated time without number, the rewards of the Kingdom are not the sort of thing that would attract the greedy or arouse the materialistic anyway. (See "The Reasonableness of the Redeemer's Rewarding Righteousness," Vol. I, 198-201; cf. notes on 10:41f and 20:20-28.) And, because eleven-twelfths of their number would finally learn the critical route to true greatness (18:1-4), He now replies to their original question in language more nearly resembling what they hoped He would use. But even then, the nearness of terminology must not be mistaken for nearness in thought!

**In the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** As suggested above, regardless of what attraction the Apostles thought they saw in these words as they heard them the first time, they did not receive what they anticipated. And yet the Lord did not deceive them, because it was something similar, but something which their later, maturer Christian judgment would decide far superior and far more gratifying than all their earlier, paltry dreams. But to what does Jesus refer here? Note the two possible time elements and their relative applications:

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| <p>1. <b>The regeneration:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The Christian age</li> <li>b. The renovation of the universe</li> </ul> | <p>2. <b>The Apostles' judging the 12 tribes of Israel:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. By means of their teaching</li> <li>b. By decisions at the great judgment</li> </ul> |
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It may well be that such neat outlining is far more precise than the Lord Himself, especially if we must make either/or choices between what in the Lord's thinking may have been one continuous process that would include all of the above elements as progressive phases in the process. The details of that process, examined individually, then in harmony with each other, illustrate this.

1. Because Jesus says **in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne**, the time element is contemporaneous with the glorious reigning of the Messiah. Elsewhere, instead of saying "**in the regeneration**," Jesus said "in my Kingdom." (Lk. 22:30) His reign was announced as an accomplished fact the first Pentecost after His ascension. (Ac. 2:33-36) His Kingdom is a present reality. (Col. 1:13; 1 Co. 15:24f; Heb. 1:8; Eph. 5:5; 2 Ti.

- 4:1; Rev. 1:9)
2. **Regeneration** (*palingenesia*), as the Greek word suggests, refers simply to that long-awaited era when everything would begin to be made new. This would begin with the rebirth of men on the present earth. (2 Co. 5:17; Jn. 3:3-5; Tit. 3:5; Ro. 6:4; 8:10; 12:2) But the process would not be completed until this transformation of the present scheme of things affected every part of the total universe itself. (Ro. 8:18-25; 2 Pt. 3:7-13; Rev. 21:1, 5)
  3. It is to be a time when the Twelve would **sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel**. Note the kind of action represented by that present participle, **judging** (*kritontes*): it is durative, representing an action as in progress and continuing during the time when the Twelve would be seated on their thrones with Jesus. If we may presume that, following the great, final judgment, **the twelve tribes of Israel** would have already been finally judged and their fate no longer in question, then with that act also the Apostles' function as judges would come to an end. Thus, their *judging* must have been something in progress prior to the final judgment. Two problems should be noticed:
    - a. The thrones are *twelve*, because Judas would be replaced by Matthias (Ac. 1:15-26) and, for the time being, Jesus is not taking Paul and the Gentiles into consideration, so He does not mention "thirteen" thrones. But if there are at least twelve, there is not to be just one throne in the Vatican, the cathedra of Peter. We see here something far more wonderful: the college of Apostles gathered around Jesus Christ, ruling God's people.
    - b. Should we think of the *judging* in modern terms—only as a strictly judicial function? Plummer (*Matthew*, 270; see also Barnes, *Matthew-Mark*, 201) raises the interesting question whether the Apostles' specific function should be thought of as reminiscent of the position and activity of the Judges in ancient Israel, who not only gave sentence in legal cases, but positively governed the nation. (Cf. Jdg. 3:10; 10:2f; 12:8f, 11, 13f; etc. See Keil and Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 241.) Contrary to the Jewish expectation that the tribes of Israel would be ruled by the Twelve Patriarchs, the sons of Jacob (Cf. *Testament of Judah* 25:1), Jesus the Messiah elevates His own Apostles to that office.
  4. **The twelve tribes of Israel**, considered as an expression in the ears of a Jewish disciple, could have meant nothing but the ideal people of God. Certainly it may have been badly interpreted as referring

only to fleshly descendents of Abraham, thus eliminating the Gentiles, as it often was. But this abuse does not deny the propriety of Jesus' using it in a perfectly Jewish context. (Cf. Ac. 26:6, 7) It meant the ideal Israel. (Cf. Rev. 21:12) But the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) includes believers of every sex, race and condition (Gal. 3:28). Thus, Jesus' expression is symbolic for the people of God redeemed by the Messiah. (Cf. Jas. 1:1; 2:1 shows that these are Christian.) But is there no sense in which the Apostles ever dealt with the literal tribes of Israel? Certainly, but hear their preaching as they go to "the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Ac. 13:46; 18:6; 26:6, 7; 28:20, 28; Ro. 1:16) The sentencing of the Jews will depend on whether they accepted the inspired preaching of the Apostles or not. But reference to fleshly Israel must not outweigh His reference to the true Israel of God. (Cf. Ro. 9:6-8) It is mistaken to believe that the reference is not intended in any sense to include Pentecost and the Church's establishment, a conclusion undoubtedly founded on the unwarranted identification of **the twelve tribes of Israel** with unbelieving Jews only, and on the too strict identification of the Church and the Kingdom. It should be noted that Jesus did not say "Church" in our text, but alluded to *thrones* suggesting regal judgment and, in the later comment of Lk. 22:28-30, said "Kingdom." His reference is not exclusively to the Apostles' judgment of the Messianic Community, but rather to the total rule of the King, beginning from His accession to the throne and continuing until the end of time. Thus, the Apostles could actually begin their *judging* of the believing and unbelieving Israel even at Pentecost, and not merely with the beginning of eternity at judgment day.

These data, taken together, lead to the conclusion that Jesus' words contain no mysterious, eschatological pronouncement, but simply declare what even the youngest Christian already knows by heart:

1. By their personal example of willing obedience to Him in whom they saw the works of God and from whose lips they heard the voice of God, these Twelve, more than any other disciple, rightly judge all Israel. They did the homework assigned to the entire nation, thus proving that it could and should have been done. (Cf. the example of Noah, Heb. 11:7b) Their example of successful discipleship should stand for all ages as a living monument and worthy of imitation, because even without their saying one further word of condemnation, their faithfulness to Jesus in His

lowest humiliation will damn "the wise and understanding" who thought they knew too much to believe the "impossible, unreasonable claims of that eccentric Nazarene!"

2. The Apostles' inspired doctrine is the official standard by which not only the new "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; 3:7-9, 26-29) is to be judged, but the proclamation of a Gospel by which the "Jew first" would be justified or condemned. (Ro. 1:16) Today, in the Kingdom of God it is "the Apostles' doctrine" (Ac. 2:42) that is the standard by which everyone is to be judged faithful to God and members of the Church of the Messiah. (See notes on 16:19; 18:18 and all notes on Mt. 10.) This prophecy was already being fulfilled in the Apostolic era. In fact, Matthew's book itself judges us!

In short, what Jesus promised in Mt. 16:18f and 18:18, that the Apostles' legislative and judicial voice would be considered as final, is going to be realized in all questions of faith and practice in the earthly expression of the Kingdom of God. As McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 548) said it:

During their personal ministry, they judged in person; and since then they judge through their writings. True, we have written communications from only a part of them, but judgments pronounced by one of a bench of judges with the known approval of all, are the judgments of the entire bench.

In the imagery, Jesus pictures the Twelve as ruling **when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne**. Some might object that Jesus' presence in the scene would preclude as superfluous any legislative jurisdiction on the part of the Twelve. However, neither Jesus thought so, nor did they themselves. Undoubtedly every Apostle, during his earthly ministry, could say with Paul: "It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved." (2 Co. 12:19b; cf. 2:17; 4:2; 5:11; 1 Ti. 6:13) Like the Thessalonians, believers embrace the Apostles' words as God's word. (1 Th. 2:13) Bruce (*Training*, 258f) exclaims:

Surely here is power and authority nothing short of regal! The reality of sovereignty is here, though the trappings of royalty, which strike the vulgar eye, are wanting. The apostles of Jesus were princes indeed, though they wore no princely robes; and they were destined to exercise a more extensive sway than ever fell to the lot of any monarch in Israel, not to speak of governors of single tribes.

- b. ENCOURAGEMENT: "Sacrifice for the Kingdom is a profitable investment."

19:29 **Every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life.** Not only are the Apostles in line for exalted blessings as they follow Christ, but EVERYONE who has sacrificed for Jesus' sake will be rewarded even in this life with hundreds of times more than what they give up, and eternal life "in the age to come." (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30) Giving away, letting go, liberating oneself of possessions is the only way of keeping and multiplying them! This is incredible doctrine, if not Utopian nonsense, to our hard-nosed, business-is-business, "practical-minded" world, but no more so for ours than for that of Jesus' original hearers. And yet, the Lord knows that this is the only way to free us from the nearly uncontrollable slavery to things and security-building relationships that distract men from the innumerable possibilities in life that do not involve possessions at all.

Everyone who has made the sacrifice, taken the risk, let go of his earthly securities, kicked the habit of addiction to possessions, says Jesus, **will receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life!** Mark and Luke emphasize the this-worldly character of Jesus' promise: "... now in this time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." In terms of sheer reward, faith in Jesus pays far more than it requires of us, compensating for anything surrendered with 100-fold returns! (Cf. 1 Co. 3:21-23; 2 Co. 6:10)

**Inherit eternal life** is the language used by the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:17 = Mt. 19:16). What the Lord required of that potential disciple was not hopeless, profitless sacrifice, but an investment paying off handsome dividends!

If **inherit eternal life** sounds like a merited payoff for people whose sacrifices earn their reward, Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 731) shows how these who are saved by grace may truly inherit such blessings: "a. They are freely given to them, not earned by them; b. the gift is based upon justice: they were earned *for* them and are therefore theirs by right; and c. they are theirs forever."

Why should the Lord be so lavish? Why should He **not** bless the man who loves the Kingdom so much that to gain it he would sell everything he has, and then, deciding such sacrifices inadequate, give

himself? Should the Lord not give the man what he gave himself for? However, the sacrifice Jesus rewards is not the calculating self-concern of the ascetic, but the willing surrender of one who loves Jesus. We must not forget that Jesus is answering the disciples' question: "Who then can be saved? To this Jesus answers, in effect, "EVERYONE—everyone who sacrifices whatever hinders his loyalty to me." **For my name's sake** means "for my sake and for the gospel" (Mk. 10:29) and "for the sake of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:29). For other notes on suffering for Christ, see on 5:10-12; 10:16-39.

Jesus Christ puts such a high premium on sacrificing everything for Him, because He knows what earth-bound value systems do to people. He knows that riches have a shrivelling effect on our spirit because they supercharge the ego with a false sense of power. This is because, when we have unlimited resources to mold our own fate, we limit our future to the low goals which we can consciously conceive, rather than take life as it comes, a day at a time, with its unforeseeables, its risks. Here is where faith is made real for the believer. But because of these risks, doubts can constrict our souls by tempting us to struggle to make life "safe" for ourselves, so we can continue to enjoy our wealth unendingly. But in this very safety there is psychological stagnation, and faith in God dies, because it is in the unknowns, the risks, that real life takes on the excitement and zest that makes it worthwhile. Thus, security symbols—even the security of safe family patterns (**houses, brothers, sisters, parents, children, real estate**)—may have to be risked in order to be able to grow into the kind of life Jesus offers. Who would have thought that, in our old security systems whereby we guaranteed ourselves a constant supply of whatever houses, lands and kinfolk gave us, were already planted the seeds of our own stagnation and spiritual poverty?

Ironically, but truly, the chief symptom that we are addicted to our possessions (all that we think is ours and is of value to us) is the sensation that we are unable to meet our world without the reassurance that they are there. Our security symbol may be a well-padded bank account, a martini, a shot of a narcotic, modish clothes, business as usual, kinfolks all in their places, eating well, pleasant family surroundings, whatever. A person is hooked if he has the uneasy sensation that, IF HE SURRENDER ANYTHING HE POSSESSES TODAY, HE WILL BE INADEQUATE OR NAKED WITHOUT IT, for fear that it might not come back tomorrow. Notice, then, how Jesus even condescends to our all-too-human uncertainty by assuring us, on His

honor as a Gentleman and a Teacher come from God, that not only will we have a constant supply of what we really need for our real security and happiness, but it will be supplied in greatly multiplied abundance. Nor will it be merely "pie in the sky by-and-by," but in this time.

There is also the soul-shrinking reality that, in inverse proportion as our wealth grows and our interest grows in those pleasures wealth can assure us, our interest decreases in those innumerable options in the realm of the spirit that have nothing to do with wealth or possessions. In fact, it may well be that Jesus' **hundredfold** here has only partial reference to expanded material riches or multiplied physical kinfolk. (Otherwise, He would be stimulating the very greed He has just been condemning.) Rather, He guarantees the gain of what would be valued at a hundred times the price of what was given up: the multiplied fellowship of brotherhood in Christ, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, and much more besides that would far exceed the mundane values abandoned for Christ's sake. (See Wilson, *Learning From Jesus*, "Treasures of the Kingdom" 228ff.) Ponder Bruce's further explanation (*Training*, 262):

Still it must be confessed that, taken strictly and literally, the promise of Christ does not hold good in every instance. Multitudes of God's servants have had what the world would account a miserable lot. Does the promise, then, simply and absolutely fail in their case? No, for . . . there are more ways than one in which it can be fulfilled. Blessings, for example, may be multiplied a hundred-fold without their external bulk being altered, simply by the act of renouncing them. Whatever is sacrificed for truth, whatever we are willing to part with for Christ's sake, becomes from that moment immeasurably increased in value.

Jesus is convinced that He is ordering us what seems like poverty, which, in reality, is itself wealth. It is a measure that is not intended to limit man's maturing, but the condition that will make maturity authentic and actually possible. This is because the man who, out of love for Jesus and the Kingdom, reverses the whole mechanism of covetousness in his life, finds that he has time for God and people like never before. Although he is money-poorer, he is rich in freedom from the cares brought by the economic struggle for "just a little bit more." (Prov. 15:16; 16:8; 1 Ti. 6:9) He is rich in serenity, because he has learned in whatever state he finds himself to be content with it, because his mind is fixed on God (Isa. 26:3; 2 Co. 6:10;

Phil. 4:4-7, 11-13; Heb. 13:5f; 1 Th. 5:18; 1 Ti. 6:6-8) And, because he is now deeply involved in helping others arrive at the only authentic humanity there is—that which is available only in Christ,—he is rich in brotherhood. (Cf. Ro. 1:6-13; Mt. 12:48-50)

**Hundredfold:** where is all this going to come from? Is God going to rain down manna from heaven on His beleaguered saints? More likely He is counting on that marvelous hospitality whereby His people take care of each other. (Study Ac. 2:44f; 4:34f; Heb. 13:1-3; 1 Pt. 4:9; 3 Jn. 5-8; Ro. 12:8, 13; Eph. 4:28; Phil. 4:14; 1 Ti. 3:2; 5:10; Tit. 1:8; 3:14) More would come from a new work ethic that would create financial independence. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Th. 4:11f; 2 Th. 3:6-13; Tit. 3:14) Above and beyond these human endeavors and resources there is the vast treasury of heaven at our disposal! (Mt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19; Col. 2:2f; 2 Co. 9:8-11; Eph. 3:20)

That no easy life is indicated here is clear from Mark's addition: "hundredfold . . . with persecutions." (Mk. 10:30; cf. Ac. 14:22) That persecution is not merely an accompanying phenomena of the Christian life or even a hindrance, but really part of our profit, is illustrated by Bruce (*Training*, 263):

We see further why "persecutions" are thrown into the account, as if they were not drawbacks, but part of the gain. The truth is, the hundredfold, is realized, not in spite of persecutions, but to a great extent because of them. Persecutions are the salt with which things sacrificed are salted, the condiment that enhances their relish. Or, to put the matter arithmetically, persecutions are the factor by which earthly blessings given up to God are multiplied an hundred-fold, if not in quantity, at least in virtue.

The fact that it is for Jesus' sake that we are persecuted, is a blessing in itself, because it furnishes additional proof that we are really faithful to Him, hence assures us of our belonging to Him and eventual redemption by Him. (1 Pt. 1:6-9; 2:12, 15, 19-25; 3:13-18; 4:1f, 12-19; 5:9) This is no idle promise, either for the early Christians who, in order to share in the Gospel and be in the Kingdom of God for Jesus' sake, actually abandoned family, field and fireside, or for the modern saint who is called upon to sacrifice the companionship of those nearest and dearest to him, because they refuse him for his commitment to Jesus. How many have experienced the literal truth of the Lord's word, in the actual multiplication of dear ones closer than one's own ungodly kin who cast them out?

How many have found in the warmth of the Christian congregation strength to accept the inevitable persecutions (Mk. 10:30; 2 Ti. 3:12), and the incredible joy that comes from accepting the plundering of their property, knowing they have a better, permanent possession that enemies cannot touch? (Heb. 10:34; 1 Ti. 6:17-19; Mt. 6:19-21)

The fact that Matthew and Mark omit "wife" in the list of things abandoned for Christ's sake must not be interpreted as an anti-ascetic reaction on their part, any more than its inclusion by Luke (18:29) indicates the contrary tendency on Luke's part. It may only indicate that the former Evangelists dealt with the problem of man-woman relationships in the context of Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and celibacy (Mt. 19:3-12 = Mk. 10:2-12) hence omit "wife" here to eliminate any suspicion of contradiction, whereas Luke, who will treat the divorce problem alone and in a quite different context (Lk. 16:18), could include "wife." In fact, as illustrated at 19:12, Matthew, in principle, does leave the door open for separation from an unbelieving spouse.

The current *Gemeindetheologie* school that believes that the Gospel writers wrote primarily for their own congregations (*Gemeinden*) and so reflected live needs and problems in their own special areas, do not hesitate to date Matthew's Gospel in the 80's and 90's, long after the fall of Jerusalem. However, the heavy insistence that the rich young ruler be immediately ready to sacrifice every item of value for the sake of Christian discipleship and the promise made to any disciple of a hundred times what would be sacrificed, quite easily point to an earlier period. We must not think that such problems arose exclusively at a later age of the Church. In fact, much earlier, people already had begun to experience the suffering of loss of all things for Christ. (Phil. 3:8; 1 Th. 2:14-16; 3:3f; 2 Th. 1:4ff) Rather, if Matthew's pastoral concern is to prepare his congregation for what it must face—and on the basis of what theory of pastoral theology can such a concern be denied?—then the early testimonies to joyful acceptance of the plundering of Christians' property because of their confidence in a better, abiding one (Heb. 10:32-36), tend to indicate a date prior to the Jewish war when the unbelievers of Judaism persecuted the Christian disciples, i.e. a date when Judaism, not yet preoccupied with war with Rome, could turn its persecuting attention upon the upstart sect of the Nazarenes.

## THE REWARDS OF SELF-SACRIFICE

Meditate these lovely lines by Bruce (*Training*, 255ff):

The first thing which strikes one in reference to these rewards, is the utter disproportion between them and the sacrifices made. The twelve had forsaken fishing-boats and nets, and they were to be rewarded with thrones; and every one that forsakes anything for the kingdom, no matter what it may be, is promised an hundred-fold in return, in this present life, of the very thing he has renounced, and in the world to come life everlasting.

These promises strikingly illustrate the generosity of the Master whom Christians serve . . . He rather loved to make Himself a debtor to His servants, by generously exaggerating the value of their good deeds, and promising to them, as their *fit* recompense, rewards immeasurably exceeding their claims. So He acted in the present instance. Though the "all" of the disciples was a very little one, He still remembered that it was their all; and with impassioned earnestness, with a "verily" full of tender grateful feeling, He promised them thrones as if they had been fairly earned!

These great and precious promises, if believed, would make sacrifices easy. Who would not part with a fishing-boat for a throne? and what merchant would stick at an investment which would bring a return, not of five percent, or even of a hundred percent, but of a hundred to one?

The promises made by Jesus have one other excellent effect when duly considered. They tend to humble. Their very magnitude has a sobering effect on the mind. Not even the vainest can pretend that their good deeds deserve to be rewarded with thrones, and their sacrifices to be recompensed an hundred-fold. At this rate, all must be content to be debtors of God's grace, and all talk of merit is out of the question. That is one reason why the rewards of the kingdom of heaven are so great. God bestows His gifts so as at once to glorify the Giver and to humble the receiver.

- c. WARNING: "Watch for a reversal of earth's value systems."  
(19:30)

19:30 **But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last.** This paradox is true, because the logic of the Kingdom overturns the whole merit-counting methodology of those people believed to be *first*. Earthly estimates and evaluations, based upon mistaken premises, however popular and widely believed, cannot but be reversed by God who judges everything according to reality. To worldlings, this must appear to contradict all sense of appropriateness and right, simply because the presuppositions, on which this sense is based, are themselves false. Imagine the world's surprise as all the most glorious prizes go to those to whom everyone would have assigned last place, the "also-rans," the "etceteras." But the big eye-opener will come when those judged "most likely to succeed" finish last! (See notes on 13:25, 30, 43.)

The Apostles had just witnessed a man, who by all counts, should have been *first* in the Kingdom, walk away from it to a destiny of *last* importance. Jesus' betrayer, too, was in line for greatness among the *first*, but Judas would be substituted by a disciple whose name never appears among the first disciples in the Gospels, but who would move straight to the top at the beginning of the Church. (Ac. 1:15-26) To reject the rich young ruler and Judas as not involved in Jesus' thought is to fail to look at Jesus' point from the disciples' standpoint, since they would certainly have considered Judas among the elite, and, as their own reactions showed, they had been staggered at the idea that an almost perfect rich man could not enter the Kingdom. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 732) agrees:

There will be surprises however, Not only will many of those who are not regarded as the very pillars of the church be last, but also many who never made the headlines—think of the poor widow who contributed "two mites" (Mark 12:42), and Mary of Bethany whose act of loving lavishness was roundly criticized by the disciples (Matt. 26:8)—shall be first on the day of judgment (Mk. 12:43f; Mt. 26:10-13). The disciples who were constantly quarreling about rank (18:1; 20:20; Lk. 22:24) better take note!

There is presumption in Peter's self assurance that takes it for granted that sacrifices should be rewarded and that the only

problem is WHICH reward. He must understand that there is no sense in calculating rewards in a Kingdom in which no one deserves even to serve! Because this maxim connects the Parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers with Peter's question (19:27), it very likely rebukes that self-complacency and pride that haggles with God over what He can or should give us. There could be a real situation in which those who considered themselves first because of their own self-sacrifice, would find it all vitiated by pride, and actually be surpassed by those who in genuine humility had equalled them in devoted, self-giving service to the Lord, even if not as fortunate to "get in on the ground floor" as the early disciples. Further, if Jesus' talk about handsome rewards for service might tempt some to serve merely for the prizes and not because they love the King, the Lord deflates such hopes by this prophetic epigram and the parable which follows as its illustration.

Note Jesus' terminology: **MANY shall be last that are first, and first that are last.** This means that not everyone who labors long, faithfully and efficiently in God's Kingdom will be contaminated with the mercenary, self-righteous spirit that congratulates itself on what it calculates as a reward for its arduous labor. God has ever had humble, unassuming, self-forgetful, generously trusting workers in His service. **Many** does not mean that all will be calculating and selfish. And, as Bruce (*Training*, 268f) astutely sees,

If there be some first who shall not be last, there are doubtless also some last who shall not be first. If it were otherwise,—if to be last in length of service, in zeal and devotion, gave a man an advantage,—it would be ruinous to the interest of the kingdom of God. It would, in fact, be in effect putting a premium on indolence.

For further notes, study the following parable which illustrates this point: 20:1-16.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Describe the man who came to Jesus. What was his character and position in society? What do his questions and answers reveal about him? What does his manner of approach to Jesus reveal about him?
2. What question did he place before Jesus? How does the wording

of Matthew differ from that of Mark and Luke? Interpret and harmonize these differences.

3. What concept of how to obtain eternal life did he have?
4. What preliminary response did Jesus make to the man's request? How does the wording of Matthew differ from that of Mark and Luke? Harmonize and interpret these differences.
5. List and locate by chapter and verse the commandments Jesus cited to the man.
6. What was the man's reaction to this repetition of the commandments?
7. What addition does Mark make that could aid in our interpretation of this text?
8. What did the man lack to be perfect?
9. Explain what was really required of him, i.e. show how total liquidation of his assets, giving alms and discipleship under Jesus would have led the man to perfection. What principle(s) behind these requirements apply to everyone?
10. Did Jesus say that rich men per se cannot enter the Kingdom, i.e. because they have the misfortune to have riches, or did He imply that those who trust in riches cannot enter? What is the evidence for the former conclusion? What is the evidence for the latter?
11. What is meant by the figure of the camel and the needle's eye?
12. How did the disciples react to Jesus' closing the Kingdom to wealthy people?
13. How did Jesus react to their reaction?
14. How did the disciples react to Jesus' further reaction?
15. What does Jesus mean when He says, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"?
16. What question did Peter ask as a general reaction to Jesus' firm stand on wealth and its relation to the Kingdom? What did the Apostle mean by his query?
17. What did Jesus refer to in His promise of twelve thrones for the Apostles? When and/or how would they "judge the twelve tribes of Israel"?
18. According to Jesus, what are the rewards of Christian service?
19. With what pithy principle did Jesus punctuate His remarks? What did He mean by it?
20. List the texts in Matthew 18 which find practical application in this section.

## SPECIAL STUDY

### MONEY AND MARRIAGE: MANACLES OF THE MUNDANE?

Modern apostles of the single life and semi-bohemian pushers of poverty even in the Church of Jesus Christ are making their voices heard to justify their less conventional life-styles. While each one must decide how best to react to the station in life in which he has been called by God, the disciples of Jesus Christ must see the options clearly, not being misled by popular talk that at times sounds like something straight out of the Gospels.

In our present sections we have examined Jesus' reference to those who would be natural and proper exceptions to marriage: "the eunuchs for the Kingdom of God," those who remain virgins in order to pursue specific goals for the advancement of God's rule. Further, we heard Jesus urge the rich young ruler to distribute his wealth among the poor to be "perfect." Now, if celibacy is to be received by those rare souls to whom it is given, and if voluntary poverty is required to be perfect, then a life-style that reflects these characteristics most nearly would have an intrinsic superiority over the married person who possesses property, would it not? And would not the freedom from these manacles permit a higher spirituality?

It is to Bruce (*Training*, 245-254) that we are indebted for the following salient points that analyze this problem:

### ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE, IS FALSE FOR THESE REASONS:

#### I. IT IS BASED ON A FALSE ASSUMPTION.

A. Asceticism assumes that abstinence from lawful things is intrinsically a virtue superior to moderation in using them.

B. This assumption is false:

1. Because abstinence is actually the virtue of the weak, because it is the safer way for anyone given to an uncontrollable love of a thing. Abstinence gains this safety at the expense of that disciple that develops character and strength. A self-controlled moderation is the virtue of the strong. (Cf. Ro. 14:1—15:7)

2. Because abstinence is inferior to moderation for its psychological sanity.
  - a. Asceticism tends to exaggerate the evil of the things avoided, developing a morbidness about contamination and a deliberate distortion of reality to justify its abstinences.
  - b. Abstinence, while necessary in special circumstances, is really unnatural and inhuman, a forced withdrawal from what God created to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Ti. 4:3-5)
3. Asceticism is surprisingly inferior to moderation even in the element that constitutes its character: self-denial.
  - a. To eliminate at the outset everything that could ever be a source of human joy so that it could never be a temptation sounds very impressive.
  - b. But to live with and fully use everything that could always be a temptation, while, at the same time, maintaining one's own spiritual freedom untrammelled is real spiritual power and character. This self-sacrifice is actually the greater, because it is ready to move, not from the sterile wilderness of empty asceticism, but from the midst of life's dearest enjoyments, and not merely once for all, but many times and at any time. These, not the ascetics, are the greater heroes.

## II. THE ASCETIC THEORY IS BASED ON ERRONEOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRIST'S WORDS

- A. Jesus does not state or even suggest that the single life and total self-privation of goods are essentially superior to marriage and proprietorship rightly understood and used.
- B. He teaches, rather, that, under special circumstances, the unmarried or the penniless condition offered certain advantages which facilitate a single-minded pursuing the interest of the Kingdom.
  1. Danger and hard times underline this advantage most clearly.
  2. But this forced unnaturalness is a real hindrance in the absence of such crises. (See notes on Paul's view of celibacy at Mt. 19:11.)
- C. The Christian ideal is consuming devotion to the Kingdom, regardless of what it costs or when it costs, so that everything

else is placed subordinate to it.

1. It is this sense in which all of Jesus' demands of self-sacrifice must be interpreted.
  2. Any "overtime duty" is not asceticism for its own sake, but "extraordinary demands in usual emergencies" to get a job done.
- D. The reader is referred to the notes on 19:3-12 and 19:16—20:16.

### III. OPTIONAL ASCETICISM AS AN IDEAL OF VIRTUE IS A LOGICAL CONTRADICTION:

- A. If asceticism or abstinence be a virtue essentially and unavoidably superior to moderation and self-control in the use of lawful things, then with what logic can asceticism be thought of as optional?
1. If godliness and perfection are inexorably linked only to poverty or celibacy, then to arrive at perfect godliness there can be no thought of free options.
    - a. Are we really free to choose whether we will be a "perfect" Christian as opposed to a more common "good" Christian?
    - b. May we be excused from developing a given character quality merely because it is too demanding, if it be really true that that very virtue is essential to a supposedly superior Christianity?
    - c. In short, if it is a virtue, it is required: if it is optional, it is not a virtue!
- B. Were asceticism a virtue, then Jesus made a mistake not to command literal poverty and enforced celibacy for everyone. But that He did not, in fact, do so is everywhere evident in Scripture where Apostles continue to hold out perfection for everyone regardless of the condition he was in when he was called to be a Christian.
- C. Ascetic poverty necessitates, for its continued existence, that the "superior ascetics" depend upon those "inferior Christians" who still possess enough capital to support the mendicant ascetics also, or worse, it must depend upon charity from non-Christians, or else, by personal industry, compromise its absolute poverty enough to possess the tools necessary for gaining its own living.

IV. ASCETICISM, AS A THEORY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE, IS ABSURD, BECAUSE IT ENTAILS THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY.

- A. Even if family and possessions are not everything, man's earthly life is profoundly concerned with both.
1. Enforced celibacy leads to disintegration of the Christian ideal.
    - a. Because celibates who remain faithful to Christ and their ascetic ideal are themselves but one generation from extinction or must resort to adoption of others' children to keep the community going. (Cf. the Essenes' approach to this problem.)
    - b. Because celibates who abandon their virginity but remain celibates, leave also their virtue and sink into a degeneracy and corruption through sensuality that destroys everything for which they had become ascetics in the first place.
  2. Enforced poverty lasts until the end of the groceries in the larder, then it falls into the logical contradiction of depending upon those of "inferior" virtue to sustain it either by charity or commerce.
- B. Service to God and human life lived to the full are not mutually exclusive. Rather, it is in the crucible of true humanness that God's original design for man is to be perfected, where every relationship, every natural ability, every desire, every earthly possession is to be turned to usefulness in Christ's service and made to contribute to our maturity in the character of Christ. We must live in the earthly condition in which God has called us, resisting its temptations and overcoming by His grace. We must mingle in the world's crowd, expose ourselves to its temptations, venture within the magic circle of its attractions, but show by the power of Christ at work in us that we are men of another world, hence superior to this world's allurements. We must dispassionately compare this world's pleasures and prizes with those God offers, and prefer these latter out of genuine conviction of their surpassing worth. (Cf. *P.H.C.*, XXIII, 366)

CONCLUSION: Christ's stern words on marriage and possessions, poverty and celibacy anyone with family responsibilities or preoccupied

with wealth. Then, shaken by his own vulnerability, he can turn to God for power to do the difficult, not impossible, task of concerning himself single-mindedly with the things of the Lord, as if he were unmarried, although he is married, and although responsible for many possessions, he may be free from the love of money, rich in heavenly treasures, humble-minded and generously devoted to Christ's service.

## CHAPTER TWENTY OUTLINES

Section 50. Jesus Tells Parable of Eleventh Hour Laborers (20:1-16)

Section 51. Jesus Predicts His Passion a Fourth Time (20:17-19)

Section 52. Jesus Refuses to Establish a Hierarchy (20:20-28)

Section 53. Jesus Heals Two Blind Men at Jericho (20:29-34)

## STUDY OUTLINES

(Theme continued from Chapter 19: "THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS")

### IV. GOD-MAN RELATIONSHIPS Illustrated by the Parable of the Eleventh-Hour Laborers (20:1-16)

#### A. Parable of householder hiring workmen to work in his vineyard.

1. Having been hired at various hours of the day, they expect varying wages.
2. He orders them all paid the same amount, beginning with the last laborers hired.
3. Those who worked all day complain that the last were made equal to them in pay.
4. Householder answers:
  - a. "I am doing you no wrong, because you received all the pay you bargained for."
  - b. "I can do what I want to with my own possessions. What is that to you?"
  - c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (Everything depends upon the free will and mercifulness of God.)

B. General principle taught: "Human expectations are likely to be overturned by God's free, generous decision."

I. FOURTH PASSION PREDICTION (20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34)

A. SITUATION: Jesus and disciples on last trip to Jerusalem

B. JESUS' REACTION: Passion prediction

II. THE QUESTION OF POWER-STRUCTURE IN THE KINGDOM: JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH A HIERARCHY (20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45)

A. JESUS' AUNT SALOME AMBITIOUSLY SEEKS ARBITRARY FAVORITISM FOR HER SONS (20:20, 21)

B. JESUS PARRIES THEIR REQUEST (20:22, 23)

1. Rebuke: "You do not know what you are asking."

2. Question: "Are you able to suffer with me?" They answer, "Yes."

3. Prophecy: "You will suffer with me."

4. Refusal: "Places of honor are only for those for whom my Father intends them." (Everything depends on God.)

C. THE OTHER APOSTLES ARE JEALOUS AT JAMES AND JOHN (20:24; Mk. 10:41)

D. JESUS REPEATS HIS LESSON ON TRUE GREATNESS (20:25-28; Mk. 10:42-45)

1. "Worldly greatness apparently consists in the number of people over whom one exercises authority."

2. "True greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the number of people to whom you are able to do service."

3. "My own life of service and death for others is the standard!"

III. PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION OF JESUS' TRUE MESSIAHSHIP OF SERVICE (20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Lk. 18:35-43)

A. SITUATION: On Jesus' journey to Jerusalem after He taught the Twelve about the sinfulness of selfish ambitions, He is met by two blind men at Jericho requesting help from Him as "the Son of David" (= Messiah).

B. RESPONSE: After permitting the blind men to address Him repeatedly in public as "Son of David" (= Messiah), Jesus stopped everything to heal them, proving not only He was truly the Messiah, but also that His royal majesty is seen in the service of others.

## Section 50

JESUS TELLS THE STORY OF  
THE ELEVENTH HOUR LABORERS

TEXT: 20:1-16

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. 2 And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; 4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. 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; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? 7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. 8 And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto the first. 9 And when they came that *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling. 10 And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received every man a shilling. 11 And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, 12 saying, These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. 13 But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling? 14 Take up that which is thine and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? or is thine eye evil, because I am good? 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Since Matthew was not encumbered with chapter divisions or verse separations (all things of later date), it may be that this section is but the continuation of the teaching given in the incident recorded in 19:27-30. In fact, the present section ends with the same words. (v. 16) If so, what are the points of connection that

illuminate the meaning of our present text? That is, what is there in Peter's (wrong-headed) question that finds further answer in this parable?

- b. Above and beyond particular details involved in the application of this parable, what is its obvious, majestic theme permeating this story? Some think that the sovereignty of God in dispensing His mercies is the main theme of the parable. If you agree with this evaluation, how do you account for the fact that at least some of the workers in the story actually earned the pay for which they had contracted at the beginning of the workday? That would not be grace, but merit! (Cf. Ro. 4:4) How do you explain this?
- c. Who are "the first" and "the last"?
  - (1) Jews and Gentiles? i.e. the Jews called first to God's service, the Gentiles called last?
  - (2) Rich and poor? i.e. first in the wealth, position and fame; last because poor?
  - (3) Early personal disciples of Jesus, as opposed to later generations of Christians?
  - (4) Church members in positions of greatness, as opposed to humbler servants?
  - (5) Life-long church members, as opposed to death-bed repenters? On what basis do you answer as you do? How much of this parable is to be considered essential to the point stated in the last verse (16)?
- d. Does this parable, with each laborer's being paid the same wage, speak to the question of rewards in heaven? If so, how? If not, why not?
- e. If we have no business discussing rewards in a heaven to which we do not deserve to go, why does the Lord, in other contexts, promise rewards for Christian service? Are there rewards, or not?
- f. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

## PARAPHRASE

Because many human expectations concerning their own merits may well be overturned (19:30), God's Kingdom may be illustrated by the landlord who went out at daybreak to engage grape-pickers for this vineyard. He made a contractual arrangement with the workmen for the regular wage of a denarius a day and sent them to work

in his fields. About nine o'clock he went out and found other men standing around in the marketplace, unemployed. He invited these too: "You men go work in my vineyard and I will treat you right at the end of the day." So off they went. About noon and again about three o'clock in the afternoon, he went out and did the same thing as before. Then around five o'clock he went to town and found other men waiting for work. To these he said, "Why have you been standing here all day, doing nothing?" Their answer was, "Because nobody has employed us." He answered them, "You go work in my fields too."

At day's end, the master of the vineyard ordered his foreman, "Call the workmen in and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first ones hired." So, when those who began to work at five, just an hour before quitting time, stepped up to be paid, each man received a denarius apiece. Then when the first ones hired came, they assumed that they would receive a bonus. But they were paid a denarius each like those before them. As they took their pay, they protested to the landlord, saying, "These latecomers worked only one hour, and you gave them pay equal to those of us who have done the heavy work and sweated in the blazing sun!" But he replied to their spokesman, "My friend, I am not being unfair to you. You contracted with me for a denarius, did you not? So, take the money you earned and go home. I choose to pay this last man what I pay you. Surely I am allowed to do what I please with what belongs to me. Must you show a calculating selfishness because I am generous with them?" So you see, many human expectations about rewards for their work for God will be overturned.

### SUMMARY

Continuing His discussion of Peter's question, "What shall we have?" and the others' troubled query, "Who in the world then can be saved?," Jesus illustrated His pithy maxim about the reversal of positions of relative importance, assuring His people: "That you will be paid for your service in the Kingdom is assured, but it will be on a basis different from what you expect."

## NOTES

IV. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HIS JUSTICE AND MERCY  
(20:1-16)

20:1 **For** indisputably links the following parable with the foregoing section on the rich young ruler and Jesus' discussion of the peril of wealth (19:16-30) of which this is an illustrative story. In fact, the punch line of this illustration (20:16) is roughly the same as that which concludes the preceding chapter (19:30). Indeed, were we not hampered with late-date, human chapter divisions, we would have assumed that 19:30 were the real beginning of our story which concludes by reiterating the point. (20:16) If so, this fact will be an invaluable key to understanding the story. **The kingdom of heaven** in this illustration is seen from generally the same perspective as that in the Paradise of the Unmerciful Servant. (18:23-35) Note the identical pleonastic use of *anthrópo basileî* (18:23) and *anthrópo oikodespóte* (20:1) with which each story begins. While there are differences of emphasis, the similarity of the two parables lies in Jesus' use of both to picture how God's grace and justice function in His dealings with His servants. This is the Kingdom, or Rule of God.

**A man that was a householder . . . went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.** Householder (*oikodespótes* = "master of the house," Arndt-Gingrich, 560; "landlord, head of the house" Rocci, 1312; Thayer, 439, adds "householder," Mt. 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; cf. v. 40; 24:43; Mk. 14:14; Lk. 14:21; 12:39; 13:25) The fact that what is being illustrated is God's Kingdom leads to the conclusion that Jesus intends to underline God's ownership of everything by calling the principle figure in the story "the landlord, the lord of the vineyard." (20:8) This point will be especially heightened in the climax (20:13, 14) **Early in the morning:** in the busy season every farmer's workday is from "can see" until "can't see." Jesus pictures here a twelve-hour workday from about 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. This rich farmer must have begun his grape-harvest just as soon as the sun was coming up, because no sooner had he organized the first wave of pickers at their work than he went back to town at 9:00 for more hands. **To hire laborers into his vineyard,** as verse 3 shows, he went to the place where just such day-laborers could be found, the town square. It is quite probable that the vineyard labor intended by Jesus is the main vintage

when the largest quantity of grapes are fully ripe and must be rapidly harvested. While it is true that grapes can begin ripening in the Jordan Valley as early as June and on the coast later in the summer, the main grape-harvest in the hills occurs in autumn as in Italy. (*I.S.B.E.*, 3086f) During the early, smaller gatherings, the individual vinedressers can, with the help of a few extra hands, keep the ripening grapes picked back and moving to market as table grapes. But when the big grape-harvest arrives, the entire ripened crop is harvested carried in baskets to the wine-presses. The families of the vineyard keepers camp out in the vineyard during this time in order to be able to labor as long as possible, uninterrupted by having to return back to town at night. (See also Thomson, *Land and Book*, II, 411) This special busyness connected with the vintage, that is not particularly connected with any other phase of vinedressing, points to the last, big harvest of grapes before the fall rains come and ruin the quality of the vintage.

Depending, of course, on what route Jesus took through Perea on His way to the ford of the Jordan at Jericho, He would have passed close to an area even yet today rich in vineyards. (Rand-McNally, *Bible Atlas*, 161)

On the western slopes of the mountains of Gilead there is Abel-keramim ("meadow of vineyards," Jdg. 11:33) just about six and a half English miles southwest of Amman, Jordan. (Cf. Grollenberg, *Shorter Atlas*, Maps 3 and 5; *I.S.B.E.*, 5) McGarvey (*Lands of the Bible*, 366) noted that Es Salt, about 20 km (14 miles) northwest of Amman had quite extensive vineyards in his day. These would be 16 km (10 mi.) off to Jesus' left if the usual Jordan Valley road were their route. But if they were travelling as far east as Jerash, Ajlun and Salt, they would pass right through this district, although not at harvest time.

If so, these vineyards would furnish a handy illustration of what Jesus intends to teach in the parable and would be further proof that He had not yet crossed the Jordan.

If we notice that the working day for all the laborers ended with the payoff at sunset, a symbol of the end of everyone's possibility to work and his subsequent retribution, then the entire working day pictured before us represents the sum total of man's labor in God's service. **Early in the morning**, accordingly, from the point of view of the Apostles, would indicate those privileged to enter Kingdom service from its very inception, an observation that points ominously

to the Apostles themselves.

20:2 **And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard.** A **shilling a day** is the English Revision's attempt to translate *a denarius a day*, which was the standard working-man's wage for a day's work. (Arndt-Gingrich, 178) It is the buying power of this coin that furnishes us some basis for establishing the value of other coins which may be figured as multiples of the denarius. The main question is always what could a common laborer buy with his daily pay.

Tacitus (*Annals*, 1, 17) notes that two-thirds of a Roman denarius was the daily pay of the Roman soldier. Polybius (2, 15) mentions the price of a day's hospitality in the inns of Cisalpine Gaul as only one-half as, equal to one-twentieth of a denarius. (*P.H.C.*, XXII, 463) A drachma (= 1 denarius) a day was also a day's wage for a trusted guide. (Tobit 5:15 LXX) 2 denarii would pay a hostelry bill until "the good Samaritan" returned. (Lk. 10:35)

Whether the denarius be judged high or low for a day's pay, it must be remembered that, in an agricultural society, the farm day-laborers must make what they can in their high season, from spring to fall, moving from one harvest to another, and from crop to crop, before the bad weather comes and they cannot earn anything but what they can make indoors. Theirs is a precarious existence that depends upon their being hired on during the good seasons so they can make it through the lean ones. This fact will exculpate the men hired later in the day in Jesus' parable. (See on 20:3-7 on "idle.")

Since the landowner had gone out to hire (*misthósasthai* from *misthōs*, pay, wages), and he employed them after agreement for the perfectly normal, going wage for this category of labor, the relationship between them is strictly contractual. There is nothing unusual about the *denarius a day*, except that the fundamental point of the story will revolve around this contractual agreement. After any one of these day-laborers will have put in his day, he will have earned no more or less than his denarius. It might be instructive to ask about the agreement: does Jesus mean to imply that there had been some haggling over the price before the final agreement was reached *for a denarius a day*? If so, this bargaining spirit of the first workers hired stands in contrast to all those who were hired later, who came for "whatever is right" (v. 4) or even for no promise but the trustworthiness of the Lord (v. 7). From the point of view of unemployment and the loss of a day's work, those hired first would

consider themselves the most fortunate, a fact reflected in the reality by those who enjoy great opportunities of service in the Kingdom of God, especially by those fortunate disciples who got in on the ground floor at its beginning. This opinion would be adjusted at the final payoff, the judgment. These laborers could well represent any, like Peter, who carefully negotiate their work contract with God: "We have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" (19:27) In fact, the spirit of bargaining for a contract separates these hired first from all those hired later, so we must consider only two groups: those who had a carefully stipulated contract, but grumbled; and those that came trusting in the lord's fairness and were happy with his graciousness.

**20:3 And he went out about the third hour.** If, as is likely, Jesus is counting time by the Jewish system which begins at six o'clock in the morning, **the third hour** is nine o'clock. **He went out . . . and saw others standing in the market-place idle; 4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard.** This system of securing workers is still in use even in modern countries like Italy, where day workers, available to harvest grapes, olives and other truck farm products, gather early in the public piazza of the town as their point of contact with hiring farmers who need workers for that day. There are, of course, variations in the system such as use of professional mediators who seek out the farm owners for the laborers and who seek out the laborers for the farm owners—all for a fee. There is usually considerable hubbub involved in the hassle over wages and rights before the agreement is reached and the workers finally depart for the fields, a fact that gives the early morning market-place the air of a county fair. In some country towns the after-sunset hours turn the public square into what seems like a town meeting with a considerable portion of the male population roaming the square, discussing the day's events, seeking employers or employees for the following day, etc. **Standing in the market-place idle**, therefore, means that these day-laborers were where they should have been to find work. They were not loafers unconcerned about work.

**What is right, I will give you.** There must have been considerable trust generated by this generous householder, since he could start workers moving toward his fields to work for **whatever is right**, "no questions asked." These workers accepted his work offer, probably expecting a fraction of the denarius that would normally fall to them for a portion of a day's work. But the point is that they trust him enough to work for him, even without strict contracts to protect their

supposed "workers' rights."

**20:5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. Again!** The vineyard not only must have been large and the crop bountiful, but there must have been some urgency that more and more workers he engaged to bring in the loads of grapes before sunset. So the householder made trips back to the market-place at noon and at three in the afternoon. The workers he found do not haggle, but gladly hurry off to the vineyard, relieved to be able to work for even part of a day.

**20:6 And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? The eleventh hour,** or 5:00 p.m., is almost quitting time. Although grapes begin ripening as early as June in the Jordan Valley (*J.S.B.E.*, 3086), the big grape-harvest occurs in autumn in Palestine, so the sun would not go down until about seven with a long twilight. This would give these last hired a couple of easy hours in the cool of the late afternoon to work. (cf. 19:12) However, according to the protesters, these last just got in one good hour before quitting time. If quitting time at 6:00 p.m. seems too early for later summer or early fall, since there would still be considerable daylight to see to work by, it should be remembered that the remainder of the time would probably be used to walk back into town or to their homes, and most of these workers had been at work since morning.

**Why stand ye here all the day idle?** Had the householder noticed them earlier in the day during his earlier efforts at rounding up workers? It is doubtful that he had talked with these men before this instant, as their answer implies.

**20:7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us.** No dead-beats these, their unemployment is not culpable, since they had lost a whole day's work merely because no one had engaged them for the day. Their readiness to go to work without even so much as a promise of payment, confident in the master's goodness, is evidence not only that their unemployment was not caused by unwillingness or refusal on their part, but also that they had been actively seeking work all day. There is no promise here for willful laziness or refusal to work for God when the first opportunity presents itself. This parable cannot be thought to hold out any hope for last-minute repentance for inconsiderate people who reject the call of God all their life, but decide at the last to take advantage of the Lord and accept His gracious invitation with a view to receiving the same reward as any other saint who labored faithfully all his life. McGarvey

(*Fourfold Gospel*, 553) wrote an interesting counter-parable that more correctly pictures the futility of such calculating shrewdness. The eleventh-hour laborers in Jesus' parable, on the other hand, had apparently never been approached by anyone and eagerly grasped at the first opportunity offered them.

This verse gives a preview of the graciousness of the lord of the vineyard, for he is not merely concerned about the progress of work on his estate, but also about these men who had desperately and patiently hung on to hope of work even past the time when any hope of being hired for that day was gone. Who ever heard of engaging workers almost at quitting time for just one hour's work? In fact, who would have thought that so provident a landlord as this man—who, in the reality, represents God—would not have hired enough men at the beginning of the day?

If those hired first represent the Apostles who ask, "What shall we receive?," and whose harvesting of souls and royal ministry of judging the Israel of God over the centuries by means of their writings in the NT, then they must learn that the Lord may well call other workers after their own ministry had long begun, and that these latter laborers would be paid according to the gracious free will of God, not on the basis of merits, and not even an Apostle could complain if these last received pay equal to that of an Apostle. If so, the call of God comes to other workers centuries later in the present world age. So, God could not have engaged these latter Christians to enter His fields until later. This text, then, can furnish no criticism of His providence or foresight. Rather, its total impact confirms both.

But this man continues hiring workers all day long! The point is clear: he is fully as interested in the needs of the people who need employment as he is in getting his own work done. God accepts every man who is willing to serve Him, even those who begin quite late with respect to others.

There is no price-haggling here: the men are only too glad to work, even if for a short while. Note that the later the workers are hired, the less claim they have toward their employer and the more they have to rely upon his goodness.

20:8 **And when even was come**, i.e. around 6:00 p.m. (Cf. 20:6, 12), came the time for the payoff of the day-workers, as required by the Law. (Lev. 19:13; Dt. 24:14f; cf. Jas. 5:4) **The lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward. The steward** (*epítropos*) is anyone

to whom the administration of something is entrusted (*epitrépo*), hence "manager, foreman, steward" (Arndt-Gingrich, 303), "superintendent, administrator, agent, curator, governor, protector, prefect, procurator" (Rocci, 745). In this case he is an employee in the master's household and estate who manages the keeping of financial accounts and pays the harvest crew. Some see Jesus as the *steward* of God, **the Lord of the vineyard**, since He acts as Mediator between God and man, and will be the One who will repay every man according to his deeds. (16:27) If so, the striking fact that, in the story, it is the owner himself, not his steward who calls the workers into the vineyard, leads to the remarkable observation that God Himself earnestly and generously calls men into His service no matter how late it is in terms of time left to serve.

**Call the laborers, and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.** It really made no difference who got paid first, just so everyone was treated justly. However, this order of payment is deliberately calculated to raise the right questions about which Jesus intends to make comment. (19:30; 20:16) The fact that those who should have received proportionately less pay are not only paid first, although hired last, but paid an amount equal to that of those who thought they merited more, could not but evoke comment, and this is precisely what Jesus is counting on. Jesus' tone here is specifically polemical and directly aimed at correcting the calculating legalism that wants God's pay scale to be prorated on the basis of personal merits, seniority, strictly counted hours and earnings, etc.

**20:9 And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling.** To their delight, the last ones hired, who had worked only one hour (20:12), unexpectedly received a denarius, the equivalent of a full day's pay. . . . Because they had not earned more than one hour's pay, the full denarius represents pure grace on the part of the lord of the vineyard. There may be several motives why the landlord should decide to pay every man a full day's wage irrespective of the time put in:

1. The lord of the vineyard alone knew what the labor of each man was worth to him. If it was urgent that this vintage he finished rapidly, then time was of the essence, and, as the hours rushed by, the rested vigor of unfatigued hands would prove particularly precious to the lord of the vineyard.
2. Each man hired had been true to the only opportunity to work offered him, regardless of when he had been hired, a fact true

even of those hired first. From this standpoint also every worker was actually equal. Each is paid, not on length or supposed importance of his labors, but upon fidelity to opportunity.

3. Those hired later had shown a magnanimous trust in their employer. Why should he not reward them magnanimously for coming when he needed them without losing precious time haggling over contracts, hours, wages and extra fringe benefits?

At any rate, he remains master of his own choices, except in the case of those laborers who had a specific contract, and this will be the main point of the parable.

Even though nothing further is indicated about the other workers who had put in only part of a day, having been hired at 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00, it would suit the tone of the parable to surmise that they too received a full denarius apiece. However, if the payoff proceeded consecutively "from the last unto the first" (20:8), then, because of the relatively more hours worked by those engaged relatively earlier, the anticipating of those last in line would be proportionately decreased, because the ratio of hours worked to pay received would increase. This may explain why Jesus omitted them from this part of the story. Or, it may be that the steward had only begun to go down the line of workmen paying them the full denarius when those hired first, impatiently asserting their seniority, cut in after those hired last, so as to be able to be paid second, thus leaving the payoff of those hired later in the day completely out of the picture.

The comments among the onlooking workmen waiting to be paid must have sounded something like this: "Wow, a full day's pay for just one hour's work! I wonder if the rest of us will be paid like that . . . Think of it: a denarius an hour, and I've turned in almost 12 hours today!"

20:10 **And when the first came,** they had already faced the annoyance of having to wait in line for their pay, even though they undoubtedly expected precedence over everyone hired after them. Another humiliation awaits them: no bonus! **They supposed that they would receive more** precisely because they had worked more hours and put up with more wearing toil out in the heat. (20:12) Nevertheless, their expectation of preferential treatment is groundless, because they had bargained with the vineyard's owner for a denarius, and a denarius is all they really earned. If pay must be based on a rule of earning or merit, this is all they legally or morally deserved, so **they likewise received every man a denarius.**

Not unlike Peter (19:27), these are disciples who drive a bargain with God. Their theology is a typically human one that expects God to reward seniority and show preferences on the basis of lifelong faithfulness, as if He owed something special to those who work long and hard doing their duty. They tend to rankle when God gladly welcomes with equal generosity even those who could not possibly have served so long as they. Naturally, they resent the idea that sinners and other unworthy, unqualified people should be welcomed by God on an equal footing with them who spend a lifetime of hard struggle against temptation. To them, this is unfair: it completely reverses their theology of righteousness. To them, Jesus can hobnob with sinners if He likes, but He has no right to treat them as if they had earned what it has taken the "righteous" many years of hard striving to attain!

20:11, 12 **And when they received it, they murmured against the householder.** They protest as if they were being handled with irresponsibility and injustice. Their complaint about the generosity of their employer completely forgets their contract bargaining of the morning.

1. **These last have spent but one hour**, i.e. they had worked from 5:00 p.m. until 6:00. On this basis, since pay must be regulated by the amount of work done, they do not deserve what they receive, yet they are paid a full day's work.
2. **(We) have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.** These men have undoubtedly put in a hard day working in summer-time temperatures around 30°C (86°F) to as high as 45°C (113°F) in some zones. (Cf. references to Palestinian heat and its effects: Gen. 18:1; 1 Sa. 11:11; 2 Sa. 4:5ff; Isa. 25:4f; 49:10; Psa. 91:1; 121:5f; Rev. 7:16; Jas. 1:11; Lk. 12:55) Much depends, as usual, on seasonal variables and geographical location, altitude and humidity.

Rand-McNally (*Bible Atlas*, 36) measures the average temperatures at 34°C (90°F) and 39°C (103°F) respectively, although Thomson (*Land and Book*, II, 77) measured 38°C (100°F) *at midnight* when encamped at Tiberias even in March. In April he experienced intolerable heat over the Mediterranean. (*ibid.*, 312)

The protestors had worked hard for about twelve hours in these conditions.

Their conclusion is, "Despite these gross differences in our performance, **you have made them equal to us.**" **You** is probably addressed to the **householder** who is standing nearby watching the payline move forward as each receives his pay. Their grumbling smacks of the same jealousy of the prodigal son's self-righteous elder brother. (Lk. 15:25-32) Unsatisfied with their pay, they are envious because of their unjustified expectations for themselves and because of the bounty given to "the undeserving." Their objection is based on the principle of Jesus' story: they who expected to be first and highest paid last in order and least in their own expectations. In terms of the sum paid for actual work done, the owner of the vineyard had not actually **made them equal unto** those who had worked all day. In reality, he had made them far superior, since all those who were called later were given what it had taken the others all day to earn. The superiority of grace for all without distinction of merit is a major point in the story's application.

In the application, this jealousy of religious status based on human effort or initiative will be shown for the worthless enterprise it is. **You have made them equal to us**, means, "Does it mean nothing to you that we have earned our goodness by \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)?" Men are forever filling in that blank with "good works," "circumcision," "being a male (a female)," "being a Jew (or Gentile)," "being free (or slave)," "rich (or poor)," "going to church every Sunday for the past 50 years," "tithing," "raising up my children right despite great handicaps and at great sacrifice," etc. Our greatest difficulty lies in our inability to admit the fact that in Christ religious achievements or status mean nothing as a means of exchange for our salvation. What is so shocking is that these things are simply irrelevant to the question. What really counts is doing what God wants, motivated by trust and because we want to express to Him our love. (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; 1 Co. 7:19)

The murmuring of these workers does not, as such, prove that they represent someone who finally will be cast out of the vineyard, as if even disciples could never murmur against the decisions of God they find unpleasant for themselves or judge to be wrong. The Apostles themselves had been tempted to talk this way. Rather, it is quite likely that Jesus' inclusion of the murmuring strictly warns every disciple of the injustice done by all pretenses against God's grace. He intends thereby to eliminate all sense of claim on our part. Even if some, at judgment, take the remonstrating attitude of these complainers, He is perfectly capable of giving them the salary they think

they earned without robbing anyone else or satisfying the grumblers' demands for extra rewards.

4. The Lord of the Vineyard answers: (20:13-15)

- a. "There is no injustice involved in paying you all you bargained for!"  
(20:13)

20:13 **But he answered and said to one of them** who perhaps had made himself spokesman for the others. **Friend** (*hetaïre*) is a general, kindly form of address to a person whose name is not known. (Arndt-Gingrich, 134), "comrade, buddy, associate" (Rocci, 776). Contrary to Lenski's opinion (citing Trench, *Matthew*, 776), *hetaïre*, in its only other appearances as an address in Matthew, is always a friendly correction expressed in a brotherly spirit (cf. 22:12; 26:50). As here, the speaker in all three cases has been offended by something in the conduct of the person so addressed. True, it introduces a remonstrance, but this does not make it a "word of evil omen," since the thing objected to in the other's conduct stands in striking contrast to the speaker's kindness toward the offender. It is truer to say: "We are friends, buddies, companions—and you conduct yourself this way with me?!" Its use in these texts draws special attention to an undeniable friendship that should have rendered impossible the unbrotherly conduct to which objection is made.

**I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling?** These men had demanded justice both when they made their contract and now when they demand equitable payment on the basis of merit relative to those who actually earned so little but were paid a handsome bonus. They wanted justice, so they got nothing but justice. They just did not receive mercy. If they condemn grace shown to others, it cannot, in justice, be shown to them. (Cf. notes on 18:23-35) Theirs was a strictly mercenary, contractual relationship with the owner. They would have held him to the legal terms of their stipulation, had he tried to pay them less than the agreed sum. But when he correctly honors his contract with them, they inconsiderately grumble because he had not also been generous, since he gave them no bonus besides! If they stand to lose, they are legalists, but if they stand to gain, they want grace and generosity! Bruce (*Training*, 267) calls such hireling servants of God

Calculating and self-complacent . . . ever studious of their own interest, taking care even in their religion to make a sure bargain for themselves, and trust little to the free grace and unfettered generosity of the great Lord.

**I do thee no wrong** means that God violates none of our rights when He does good to our neighbor. He takes nothing from us when He graces others with distinctions we do not receive. There is no injustice done, except in our own unjustified self-esteem. Because grace gives what is not earned, it seems an injustice only to those who do not understand grace. But to condemn another's grace as unjust is to insult him who shows it and is the quickest way to lose the mercy he would have shown the critic.

So saying, Jesus deals a deathblow to the whole Judaistic scheme of merit and reward and any other systems like it. Every specific agreement will be correctly honored, but everyone will receive payment appropriate to the kind of faith shown in the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. The lesson is that **WAGES**, measured on a strict ratio between labor and payment, are an unsatisfactory basis upon which to expect God's blessing, whereas **REWARDS**, contrary to earthly criteria but based on the goodness of the Master and calculated according to one's awareness of unworthiness and lack of claim upon Him, are most satisfying of all. This is one of the striking paradoxes of Christianity: the man who works for rewards never receives them, but he who works for the joy of service with no thought of reward, is always rewarded by God.

b. "I can do what I want to with my possessions.  
What business is that of yours?" (20:14, 15a)

**20:14 Take up that which is thine, and go thy way. That which is thine:** "You earned it, but only that: take it and leave." The denarius for this man was no reward; just the payment of a debt incurred. (Ro. 4:4) Those hired first got only what they bargained for; no more. Note the biting contrast between **that which is thine** and "what belongs to me" (20:15a). The landlord and the day laborer are both free to decide what they shall do about their own possessions. The latter had earned his denarius and so was free to take it home and spend it as HE desired. On what basis, then, could he legitimately deny that same right to the landlord? He had blundered in not

admitting the other's right to dispose of his own property as he chose.

**It is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee.** There is no compulsion, no wage-claim against the Lord which forces him to pay the late-comers a given amount. To those who were hired from 9:00 to 3:00, he had promised only "what is right," a commitment that left the payoff to his own discretion. The last hired had not even this much of a promise. Therefore, whatever he gave them above and beyond the calculated fraction of a day's wage would not be due wages, but a free gift of grace. (Ro. 4:4-6; 11:6) **It is my will** (*thélo* = "I choose") establishes the sovereignty of God's choices without reference to human expectations and pretensions. (Cf. Ro. 9:18f; 11)

It is in this anti-legalistic standpoint that the non-Judaistic character of this Jewish Gospel is seen most clearly.

**Go thy way:** should we think of this order as the Lord's rejecting these complainers who, because of their bad spirit, should be excluded from the class of the saved? Plummer (*Matthew*, 274) works on the problem this way:

It has been objected that the murmurers are not punished for their murmuring; they receive only a gentle remonstrance, and get their pay just as the others do. But is a rebuke from Him nothing? And, although He inflicts no punishment, yet there is the punishment which they inflict upon themselves. They get the reward that was promised them; but they have lost the power of enjoying it. The discontented are never happy, and jealousy is one of the worst of torments. Heaven is no heaven to those who lack the heavenly temper; and these murmurers will have no pleasure in their reward, until they accept it with thankfulness. From this point of view the first and the last *may* be said to have changed places. Those who came first to the vineyard had the least joy, and those who came last had the most joy, in the reward given to all.

**20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?** There is a touch of irony in this question, because the grumblers are appealing to a law of merit as they urge that they should be paid more. The lord promptly answers their unjustified appeal to the law of his conscience by appealing to the law of property rights. Every denarius in his possession, except those which they had just earned and which he has now paid off in full according to the legal agreement, is his own. What legal right had they to dictate to him how he may or may not dispose of his possessions as he pleases. So, he

is just in justifying him who has faith in his (seemingly) arbitrary way of treating his workers. (Cf. Ro. 3:26)

c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (20:15b)

**Or is thine eye evil?** = "Are you jealous?" (See on 15:19.) However, Prov. 23:6-8; 28:22 and Dt. 15:9 suggest that "evil eye" includes "greediness, covetousness and calculating selfishness." See these texts in versions where the idiom "evil eye" is retained in the translation. **Because I am good**, generous or liberal. Have these complainers any legal right or justifiable motive for their ingratitude that he should have been considerate and generous with their own fellow workers? The late-comer is as needy as any other worker. Is there no neighborliness in the early worker that would gladden his heart to see his hungry fellow's need for a day's work had been met as well as his own? In fact, the lord of the vineyard did not have to hire the complainers first. He could have hired others first. It was by grace that any of them were hired at all. So we see that everything depends on the merciful generosity of God from start to finish.

Surprisingly, even jealousy can be a motive that spurs one to change his mind and return to right thinking. (Study Ro. 10:19; 11:11, 14.) Jesus deliberately organized the payoff in this story to show the fallacy of the calculating self-righteous expectations of those who think they deserve more and better than others. But their jealousy stirs them to ask the questions that bring out the truth that men's blessing and joy in the Kingdom of God depends, not on their striving and worth, but on God.

Their jealousy exposes their lack of sensitivity to the community: they are unwilling to rejoice that the Lord bestowed such gracious benefits on undeserving men at all. They were unwilling to see that the landlord's graciousness took care of definite needs of members of their own community: their own neighbors, the worried wives and hungry children of these workers had now been cared for. They were criticizing the right-minded, sovereign judgment of the one in position to help their community's needs. This is real shortsightedness.

B. GENERAL PRINCIPLE TAUGHT: Human expectations are likely to be overturned by God's free, generous decision. (20:16)

20:16 **So the last shall be first, and the first last.** What at first appears to be a harmless little tag line on a nice story is really a multiple warhead nuclear missile which, though launched once, may be directed to strike many targets!

1. In the Kingdom of God, GOD is first, not last. He who has been left out of consideration in all human effort to be good enough to earn enough to put Him in debt, is actually the most important consideration. It is HE who makes the **last first and the first last**. God's sovereign right over His possessions guarantees Him the right to distribute His goods as He chooses. This will have pointed significance when the Lord must correct the wrong-headed ambitions of James and John who try to put themselves first and thrust all others into last place in their thinking. He must warn them all again to put themselves last, because it is God who assigns the first places: it is HE who is the owner of the vineyard. (20:23, 26f) Everything depends upon His wisdom and grace.
2. Similarly Jesus Himself, who would be despised and rejected by men, would come from *last* place in human estimations of His person and program, to be *first* and greatest of all, seated on the throne of His glory to judge all mankind. The greatest Servant shall be the Master and Ruler of all, a theme more fully developed in 20:26-28. It is HIS word and example of self-giving service that is the standard by which relative rewards of the Kingdom are to be dispensed. Our *first*-ness or *last*-ness depends upon our bowing to Jesus' rule by our sincere assenting to His judgment of our unfitness, by our readiness to take every opportunity to serve others as only our loving duty to Him, and by our leaving every decision about rewards to His discretion.
3. This is the conclusion to Peter's question, "We have left everything and followed you: what shall we have?" Coming in the general context of the rich young ruler's desire to earn eternal life by doing one supremely meritorious deed (19:16, 27), Jesus' warning admonishes the disciples against the kind of spirit that would hold God to exact wage contracts based on "so much wage for so much work," so much righteousness, qualification, worthiness, seniority, etc., in exchange for so much glory. The Apostles would be assigned positions of importance and responsibility in

the Kingdom (19:28), true enough, but such rewarding would have little to do with special personal merits, since others, less blessed with the opportunities enjoyed by the Twelve, would be recipients of God's goodness too. (19:29) The Twelve's judging Israel would not hinder the saints from judging the world and angels. (1 Co. 6:2f) Being first to possess the keys of the Kingdom and open its doors to Jew and Gentile, does not put Peter on a seniority list for preferential treatment ahead of all the other Apostles and common disciples who, too, will proclaim the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike! (See on 16:18f; 18:18f; 28:18f.) This is the kind of thinking that gives meaning to the priority of publicans and prostitutes ahead of "the pure and perfect." (Mt. 21:31f; Lk. 7:29f) Other parables taught this same truth. (Cf. Lk. 14:21-24; Mt. 21:33—22:14) No one seemed more "last" than Zacchaeus, and yet our Lord gave him the same promise He held out for everyone. (Lk. 19:1-10) This public thief, the chief tax collector, made a thief's restitution (cf. Ex. 22:1; Lk. 19:8) and turned 50% of his holdings into instant cash for the underprivileged, and this lost man was found, and he who was denied access to synagogues was proclaimed a "son of Abraham!"

4. Since Jesus has every intention of calling Gentiles into the Kingdom and blessing them on exactly the same terms as the Jews, even though there is not one word of this in this parable, He has laid down a principle here that must necessarily undermine any Jewish jealousy of their prior rights or prestigious position. (Ac. 13:46; Ro. 1:16; 2:9-11; cf. Lk. 13:22-30; Mt. 8:10-12) Greatness or importance in the Kingdom is just not based on the undisputed seniority of one's Jewishness, but upon anyone's accepting the call of God, submission to God, humble service to others, gratitude for anything received and his usefulness in helping others. (20:26-28; 18:1-20; Ro. 2; 3:9; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; 5:6; 6:15; Col. 3:11; Ac. 10:34-36; 1 Co. 7:19)
5. Here is promise for you and me: although we just came on the scene, looking for work in Christ's Kingdom, we need not despair of His gracious blessing for us too, merely because we are late to arrive in the King's vineyard.

If it be surprising that Jesus should be describing a situation likely to occur often among hard-working, self-denying people who make great sacrifices for God and His Kingdom, consider Bruce's explanation (*Training*, 268ff): the vice of self-righteousness is a live possibility.

1. when the self-denying spirit is not really a habitual way of thinking and acting, but rather a sporadic manifestation interspersed with longer periods of self-indulgence that needs to be justified by reminders of the merit of the past sacrifices.
2. when any given kind of ministry in the Kingdom comes to be highly honored because of its being in great demand, and so an opportunity for spectacular self-abnegation.
3. when self-sacrificing is organized into a sterile ritual and observed ascetically for the sake of the glory that accrues to the disciple rather than to the Lord.

To Bruce's analysis we might add

4. and, in the case of the Apostles, when their own seniority in the faith come to be regarded by them as particularly meritorious, deserving preferential treatment because of their sacrifices.

The point of Jesus' teaching, then, if expressed as an order, would be: "Do not serve in the Kingdom as mercenaries presumptuously calculating the earnings you think you merit on the basis of your own minor accomplishments. Otherwise, in your self-esteem, you will find yourselves dealt with according to the same cold, legalistic treatment due those who insist on contracts with God and work only after receiving specific guarantees. Serve, rather, saying, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty' (Lk. 17:10), trusting in the grace of your Lord, thinking of Him as One with whom you need no carefully stipulated contracts to protect yourselves. This way, although you consider yourselves unworthy to be treated as anything but one of the hired servants (Lk. 15:19), you will find yourselves warmly welcomed as sons of the Lord."

It misses the point to think that, in the distribution of rewards, there will be no distinction made between the first and last, because, although the laborers all received the same monetary pay in the story, nevertheless, in proportion to the work done and their attitude shown, they were not at all treated equally. In fact, the trusting, generous late-comers were treated far better than the calculating grumblers. The Lord's grace and generosity will be shown to His servants in every age who give Him all they have without precise contracts to protect themselves. God will always keep His word, but, for those who trust Him, He enjoys doing better than He promised.

Are the *last* in or out of God's Kingdom? Since the point of view of this parable is not merely the Church, but God's rule over men

in general, there is no time at which these workers leave the Kingdom or control of the King once they have begun to work for Him. Thus, even if the grumbling legalists who insult God's grace end up in hell, they are still within God's domain and under His rule, although terribly last and finally lost. The fact that Jesus did not define the denarius specifically in His story leaves us to understand Him to mean that the denarius is what anyone is to receive from God, our pay.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What contextual signposts point to the proper interpretation of this illustration?
2. State what Jesus considers the main point of His story.
3. What local customs of Jesus' day must be known to appreciate the householder's hiring and pay practices? What is meant by "early in the morning," "the third hour," "the sixth, ninth and eleventh" hours? How much is a denarius worth in our money? Who in our society gets the equivalent of a denarius a day?
4. What is the ground of the complaint of the grumblers? What motivates them to complain?
5. What are the kind, cheerful answers of the householder to the complainers?
6. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

### Section 51

#### JESUS PREDICTS HIS SUFFERING A FOURTH TIME

(Parallels: Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34)

TEXT: 20:17-19

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples apart, and on the way he said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, 19 and shall deliver him unto the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify: and the third day he shall be raised up.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you think Jesus took the Twelve to one side here?
- b. From what or whom would He be taking them aside?
- c. What effect do you suppose might ensue if Jesus made this declaration without this step?
- d. Why do you suppose Jesus provides so many explicit details while describing His suffering?
- e. How does this prediction prove that Jesus knew that He would be killed by the Romans, and not directly by the Jews themselves?
- f. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

When Jesus was on the point of going up to Jerusalem, while they were on the road, He was walking ahead of the disciples, and they were filled with misgivings, and those who were following were alarmed.

Then, taking the Twelve aside once more, He began to speak to them about what was about to happen to Him. He said, "Notice, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all the predictions that the prophets wrote about the Messiah will come true. The Messiah will be delivered to the high clergy and the theologians who will sentence Him to death. In fact, He will be handed over to the pagan Gentiles who will ridicule Him, insult Him and spit on Him. They will lash Him with whips and finally execute Him by crucifixion. But on the third day, He will be raised from the dead."

But they did not comprehend a word of it. His meaning was unintelligible to them, and they continued to fail to understand what He was saying.

## SUMMARY

During Jesus' last journey to the capital, His fearless way of going before His men filled them with apprehension about what might happen in Jerusalem. Once more Jesus gathered them around Him to announce that this is the prophetic journey of which He had so often spoken. However, this time He furnished even more detail, but the disciples listened uncomprehendingly.

## NOTES

## I. FOURTH PASSION PREDICTION

(20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34)

## A. SITUATION: Jesus and disciples on last trip to Jerusalem

20:17 **And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem.** The expression *mélion anabaínein* means "He was about to go up," however it does not settle whether it is to be taken geographically or metaphorically:

1. Metaphorically, it could mean He was about to journey to the highest point in Jewish thinking, i.e. to Jerusalem and the temple. However, taken with the expression *on the way* (*en tê hodō*), which Mark connects with "they were going up," it would seem less likely that Matthew intends it metaphorically here.
2. Geographically, *he was about to go up*, means that He had not yet arrived at Jericho where the final climb begins from -300 m (-1000 ft.) below sea level to 814 m (2600 ft.) above sea level. In this case, He would not have crossed the Jordan yet, so Matthew would mean that He was still in Perea. (See on 19:1.) This does not contradict Mark's assertion, "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem," if we understand Mark to mean the journey to the highest point in Jewish thinking, but not necessarily on the final uphill climb from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Whereas the rich young ruler just barely caught Jesus as He was setting out on the journey and evoked the teaching relative to the perils of wealth (19:16—20:16), Jesus and His group are now finally on their way to Jerusalem. (Mk. 10:32) Mark also signals the peculiar boldness and decisiveness with which Jesus stepped out, a fact that unnerved the Apostles. This tense atmosphere and foreboding of approaching tragedy would be left unexplained, if we did not have John's account. In fact, he records the Apostles' earlier objections to the Lord's return to Judea to be at the bedside of Lazarus: "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (Jn. 11:7, 8) And when they saw Him determined to go anyway, it was Thomas who courageously rallied the others with his exhortation, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him!" (Jn. 11:16) They referred to the violent opposition back in December. (Cf. Jn. 10:22-39) It was then that He had moved His center of operations across the Jordan to avoid precipitating the crisis before

the last Passover. After a lightning trip to Bethany for the raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-44), He faded away back into the hills again, moving in the direction of the wilderness north-north-east of Jerusalem to a hamlet called Ephraim, where He holed up with His disciples. (Jn. 11:54) From there He kept on the move toward the north, then turning east along the border between Samaria and Galilee (Lk. 11:11), until He could mingle with the Jerusalem-bound Passover crowds. (Mt. 19:2; cf. Jn. 11:55-57) It was probably this gnawing uncertainty, this constant running from opposition that broke the Apostles' courage. Now "they were amazed," because the running is suddenly over: Jesus was walking boldly ahead of them, obviously on His way to the very death-trap they had been so studiously avoiding by their recent withdrawals! So it was this realization that He is no longer running from death, but deliberately walking toward it, that seemed suicidal to them. No wonder that "those who followed were afraid." (Mk. 10:32) But the Son of God moved on ahead of His people, His mind engrossed in thought about the great work He must accomplish in the capital; and, determined to complete His mission, He pressed forward to get it started.

Considering these circumstances, it may be that Jesus noticed the Twelve hanging back, whispering among themselves, and perceived their misgivings. At this point **He took the twelve disciples apart** from the crowds of Passover-bound travellers, so that the following communication could be given in private. This detail suggests that He had every intention of entering Jerusalem as a Messianic King (Mt. 21). Since any untimely damping of the popular enthusiasm which figured in that scenario would be out of place, this Passion Prediction required privacy. This circumspection is one of His last efforts at Messianic reserve. (See on 8:4; 9:26, 30, 31; 12:15; 14:13 introductory notes and 14:22.) He is travelling in the company of hundreds of Galilean friends and sympathizers who, were they to learn this brutal truth, might well have been incited to riot by it, bringing only more bloodshed just to resist His arrest, and so hinder the plan of God. The two expressions *apart* and *on the way* depict the deliberateness of the Lord: although He speaks privately to the Twelve, they are already moving toward His destiny.

In the self-sacrificing predicted for Jesus in His prophecy, note how totally absent is the spirit that always calculates its own advantages: "What is there going to be in it for me?" This uncalculating altruism must condemn the ambition of the Apostles who not only ask, "We have sacrificed everything—what shall we have?" but

also demand to be exalted to the positions of highest honors. (Contrast Mt. 18:1-35; 20:20-28)

### B. JESUS' REACTION: Passion Prediction (20:18, 19)

20:18 **Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.** There it is: the official admission that this is the last trip. The running is over and this is to be the showdown. Luke (18:31) records the comforting word which proves that, however painfully unclear and unwelcome for the disciples Jesus' destiny might be, it was all planned by God: "Everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished." Note the power of prophecy to stabilize the wavering disciples:

1. He pointed them to their Bible to restudy the ancient messages of God's prophets concerning His Messianic mission. (Cf. His method with John the Baptist, Mt. 11:4f) This cannot but lend sound, Biblical perspective to the seemingly tragic fatality to be confronted in His suffering and death. (Remember Ro. 15:3, 4 for our encouragement too!)
2. He prophesied in detail what must, when fulfilled, become the strongest confirmation of His total mastery over circumstances. He knew what He Himself faced and conquered it by His glorious resurrection. He can empower us to do the same too. (Cf. Eph. 1:19f; 2:5f; 3:20f)

Note the precision even more evident in this prediction: 1. Betrayal; 2. Condemnation; 3. Delivery to the Gentiles; 4. Ridicule; 5. Torture; 6. Crucifixion; 7. Victory by resurrection. These words mark an escalation in the details of His prophecies concerning the end of His suffering. (Cf. notes on Mt. 16:21; 17:9, 22f) Lk. 24:6b, 7 may represent a rewording of the prophecies made in Galilee, made by Luke in the light of the fulfilment, rather than an actual quotation of a crucifixion prophecy prior to the one in our text.) From the standpoint of His disciples, the gradual escalation of information is an act of mercy that bares the gruesome details gradually to minds unable to bear the entire blow at once. (Cf. Jn. 16:12) But they must endure at least this much pain, not for the sake of the suffering it caused them now, but, having been forewarned before the fact, they might have the greatest confidence in Him after the fulfilment. (Jn. 14:29; 16:4) For them, this was fundamentally a

faith-building exercise.

However, the very precision of these details must have been a crushing load for Jesus to bear, since, although He is furnished with the infallibility of prophetic foresight, He is also forced thereby to anticipate mentally all that to which He must then voluntarily submit Himself. (Cf. notes on 8:10) No escapist, our Lord faced His own future squarely and courageously, and continued His march to Jerusalem and His forthcoming destiny. **The third day he shall be raised up.** The Lord never omitted this promise of victory, and every time He repeated it in connection with a Passion Prediction, He expressed His unshakeable confidence in the faithfulness of God who would bring it about. Further, by His own decisive example, He taught His people to deal responsibly with life's vital issues, facing with unflinching courage the questions, the problems and the forces of evil. Although He may certainly have been tempted to seek an easy comfort in anonymity and a tight-lipped indifference to the ever-present issues crying for solution, although He may have intensely desired that the world's sins could be eliminated in some other way, although He may have hated to choose His own death as the only workable alternative, Jesus Christ confronted His responsibility and accepted it. Overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God, He faced facts which would have crippled the vitality of anyone who did not trust the Father to keep His word.

As in the previous cases (Mt. 17:23b; Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45), so also now, "they understood none of these things; this saying was hid from them, and they did not grasp what was said." (Lk. 18:34) Their inability to comprehend Jesus is providential for us, since it proves that the hypothesis that they expected Him to rise again and therefore believed in His resurrection without concrete proof of its reality, ignores the evidence. (See notes on 17:23 = Mk. 9:32 = Lk. 9:45.) Thus, their mental block guarantees to the Church the gloriously solid truth of the resurrection facts.

Even if Matthew and Mark did not record the disciples' obtuseness and unwillingness to grasp this clearest of literal statements, they prove that this was really the Twelve's reaction, by their inclusion of the request for positions of glory made by James and John, as well as the angry jealousy of the other Apostles. This shows that they all, enamored with visions of future glories, refused to confront the reality Jesus pictured in this prophecy.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What additional details does Mark furnish to fill out the picture of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem?
2. In what peculiar manner did Jesus handle the disciples, preparing them to hear this prediction of His approaching suffering? Why would this particular treatment have been necessary at that moment?
3. What, in Jesus' words, is indicated about the time-period in which He was then speaking?
4. What are the details of His suffering that Jesus makes explicit now, details which before had been absent or only implied?
5. Show how Jesus' predictions harmonize with the Old Testament prophecies about His death, and how they differ. Cite some OT prophecies that predict His suffering.
6. What does the minuteness and accuracy of His predictions prove about His claims to be God's Son?
7. While Matthew and Mark do not report the disciples' inability to accept or understand Jesus' plain prediction, as does Luke, how do they prove that they do know about the disciples' failure to grasp it?
8. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

## Section 52

## JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH HIERARCHY

(Parallel: Mark 10:35-45)

TEXT: 20:20-28

20 Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee with her sons, worshipping *him*, and asking a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wouldest thou? She saith unto him, Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom. 22 But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? They say unto him, We are able. 23 He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink: but to sit on my right hand, and on *my* left hand, is not mine to give; but *it is for them* for whom

it hath been prepared of my Father, 24 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. 25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: 28 even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose James and John, two of Jesus' closest intimates, would stoop to make this request so obviously selfish in its exclusion of others?
- b. Why did they use their mother to promote their own purposes? Or do you believe that she herself pushed the question and the two brothers merely went along with it?
- c. Why would they make this request rather than some other request?
- d. On what basis do you suppose they replied so confidently: "We are able to drink your cup and be baptized with your baptism"?
- e. Why could Jesus not grant their request? For whom are such honors destined? That is, to whom do you think God has already prepared the chief places?
- f. How does the indignation of the remaining ten Apostles prove that they shared the very same spirit and understanding of the two brothers against which they were indignant?
- g. Why did Jesus select the standard of humble service as the measure by which He judges greatness in the Kingdom?
- h. How does Jesus' teaching in this section address itself to the problem of hierarchy or power structures in the Kingdom of God?
- i. Why mention His own death at precisely this time, right in the middle of His rebuke of the Apostles' greedy ambitions?
- j. Why would Jesus have to die? How does His suffering for others prove His point about true greatness?
- k. How is humble service and suffering for others the only path to true greatness and real power over others?
- l. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

At that time the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons, approached Jesus, with her sons. Bowing low before Him, she requested a favor of Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we request."

But He responded, "What do you wish me to do for you?"

She answered, "Promise to grant that, when you sit in state as King, these two sons of mine may sit with you, one at your right, the other at your left."

But Jesus answered them, "You do not realize what you are asking for! Can you drink from the cup of sorrow that I am about to drink or pass through the waters of suffering I am passing through?"

"We can," they answered.

Then Jesus observed prophetically, "You shall indeed share the cup from which I must drink and you will truly be immersed in suffering as will I. But the seating arrangements according to relative positions of honor is not something I can decide capriciously on my own. I must dispense them only to those for whom my Father has planned such honors."

The request aroused the indignation of the other ten disciples against the two brothers, James and John. So Jesus gathered them all around Him and began, "You all know that the people who are considered rulers over the pagans dominate them with despotic harshness, and their superiors make them feel the weight of their authority. However, it must be different among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be servant of all the others. If someone wants to be at the top in first position, he must be everyone's slave, just like the Son of man is. In fact, He is not here to be served by others, but to serve everyone else, and to surrender His life as the price of freedom for many.

## SUMMARY

James and John, in complicity with their mother, requested the highest posts of honor in the Kingdom, Jesus disapproved the request for its ignorance of the real issues, the suffering involved, but tested the two whether they could qualify. Although they responded with optimism and confidence, He prophesied their share in His sufferings. However, He must deny any right to dispense honors to favorites,

since the rule of God decided those to whom such would eventually and rightly go.

The other ten Apostles became angry at the conniving of James and John, making it necessary for Jesus to bring this problem to a head and solve it. This He did by forever damning political power structures as a means of ego-feeding in the Kingdom of God. Greatness and importance to God in the Kingdom is determined exclusively on the basis of unselfish, self-giving service to others. Jesus' own example—even to the point of laying down His life for others—is the standard.

## NOTES

### II. THE DISCIPLES AND THE QUESTION OF POWER STRUCTURES IN THE KINGDOM: JESUS REFUSES TO ESTABLISH A HIERARCHY OF POWER (20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45)

#### A. JESUS' AUNT SALOME AMBITIOUSLY SEEKS ARBITRARY FAVORITISM FOR HER SONS

20:20 **Then came to him the mother of the sons of Zebedee.** An alternate newspaper headline for this title story might have been: "JESUS REFUSES TO INDULGE IN NEPOTISM." Zebedee's wife might be Jesus' own Aunt Salome. (See notes on 10:2; 13:54, 58; 27:56 and the special study: "The Brethren of the Lord" after 13:54-58, esp. Chart 5) If so, her position as kinswoman would have weight that her sons were probably counting on. In this case, her sons, James and John, would naturally be His cousins. (Mk. 10:35)

The unusual expression, *the mother of the sons of Zebedee* (here and in 27:56), instead of "the mother of James and John" or "the wife of Zebedee," has led to the hypothesis that, shortly after the call of his two sons (Mt. 4:21f), the father, Zebedee, died. Is it possible that James or John was the disciple who sought permission to go bury his father? (Mt. 8:21) This will never be known. However, Mark (10:35) describes the brothers as "sons of Zebedee." Does this contradict the foregoing theories, or merely identify the two men by their well-known patronymic, whereas their father is not thereby proven to be dead or alive?

(Cf. Mt. 4:21; 10:2; 26:37; Mk. 1:19; 3:17; Lk. 5:10; Jn. 21:2)

How should we harmonize Matthew's assertion that *the mother* approached Jesus with this request, with Mark's notice that the sons themselves asked the question? By the principle that what a man commissions another to do for him may be said to have been done by himself. In fact, the entire account proceeds as if only the sons had made the request (cf. 20:24), since everyone—Jesus and the other Ten—holds the two brothers as personally responsible for their unwarranted social climbing. In fact, once her request is stated, Jesus dealt directly with the sons themselves as if she were not even present.

**Asking a certain thing of him** sounds like a blank check request, and Mark confirms this suspicion by furnishing their actual words: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Were they hoping to play upon His sympathy and good will, pushing Him into an unretractable blanket promise in their favor? At any rate, their deviousness is betrayed by their embarrassment about asking Him outright and by their felt need to use an intermediary to request what, if asked frankly and openly, their conscience knew they had no right to, and could not but arouse the jealousy of others. (Cf. 1 Kg. 2:19f)

Whether she is Jesus' aunt or not, she is certainly not unaware that her own sons are at the very heart of the larger nucleus of intimate disciples most likely to be appointed to positions of importance. It is not unlikely that the two brothers let their mother's ambitions take the risks of censure by others. Had she learned about the underground power struggle going on among the Apostles? (Cf. on Mt. 18:1) Rather than repudiate it, she joined it to press for an advantage for her boys! And they stand complacently by, making no protest, perhaps even pleased to have her advance their interests.

20:21 **And he said unto her, What wouldest thou?** He is not deceived either by His own love for them or by their fawning for His favors. He correctly requires that they commit themselves before He will commit Himself to sign any blank checks. Had Herod Antipas done this with His Salome, his outcome might have been different. (See notes on 14:7ff.)

**Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom.** Although these two disciples had been told of the absolutely essential humility required for honor in the Kingdom (18:1-35), nevertheless, Jesus had indeed

intimated that the Twelve would be honored over the rest of the twelve tribes of Israel by their being seated on thrones to judge them. (19:28) Consequently, James and John perhaps envisioned a throne-room with Jesus enthroned at the center of the back wall, with the Twelve seated on lesser thrones, half on His right, half on His left, arranged in a semicircle around the room. If so, those enthroned closer to Him would be presumed as worthy of greater honor than those seated farther to the left or right. (Cf. *Ant.*, VI, II, 9; 1 Sa. 20:25; 1 Kg. 2:19; Psa. 110:1) Those seated on His immediate left or right would be most honored as greatest. If this is their idea, their sin lies in boldly and stubbornly requesting the best of the seats for themselves alone, a request that necessarily excluded any consideration of the other, perhaps equally worthy, Apostles. Were they using this method to cut out Peter? Because of what Jesus had already committed to him, he would be a formidable rival. If James and John foresaw the indignant reaction of the others and yet plowed ahead, their heartless selfishness is the more inexcusable. The extent to which they did not foresee it only measures how much they were totally absorbed in their own self-centered planning. Bruce (*Training*, 274) eases our shock at the conduct of these intimate friends of the Lord, by noticing that

These were the two disciples who made themselves so prominent in resenting the rudeness of the Samaritan villagers. The greatest zealots among the twelve were thus also the most ambitious, a circumstance that will not surprise the student of human nature. On the former occasion they asked fire from heaven to consume their adversaries; on the present occasion they ask a favour from Heaven to the disadvantage of their friends. The two requests are not so very dissimilar.

They are asking to be the Messiah's most exalted, most influential counsellors.

The terrible incongruity between His predictions of death at Jerusalem (20:17-19) and this expectation of glory, both of which were known to James and John, is explicable only if we see the intensity of their unwavering confidence that the outcome of His suffering ("whatever THAT is supposed to mean!") must include a glorious Kingdom. Undoubtedly they judged His passion predictions as mere, unjustified pessimism, the result of fatigue and pressure of endless campaigning. Consequently, they express their confidence in His final victory by seeking those positions which could only come about

because of that triumph. Is this an attempt to cheer Him up and push His gloomy talk of crosses into the background? This, sadly, measures how fervently they disbelieved His prophetic passion predictions. So, *in thy kingdom* means "in your glory." (Mk. 10:37) Whatever else may be criticized about their request, it must be conceded that the plea is based on the unshaken certainty (= faith) that, despite the many stormclouds on the horizon, He and the Twelve would be enthroned in His Kingdom. (19:28) Further, the urgency that stirs her to present her request now on the way up to Jerusalem, points to her assumption (not unshared by many others, see Lk. 19:11) that, upon arrival in the capital, Jesus intended to establish His glorious government and announce His cabinet and begin His reign.

The perverse incongruity of this scheming for power by these crude Christians, so utterly contrasting with Jesus' approaching sufferings about which He had just spoken (20:17-19), rather than confirm the judgment that it is apocryphal because of our shock at the audaciousness these disciples show, should convince us of the authenticity of the narrative that contains it. Not only do the Evangelists bare the disciples' sordid presumption, but, in that act, convince the reader of the genuineness of its history. We are not in the presence of mythology created to glorify Christians heroes, but in the presence of an ugly fact too true to human nature to be denied. These disciples were yet rough-hewn Christians to whom the temptation to ambition was real.

## B. JESUS PARRIES THEIR REQUEST (20:22, 23)

### 1. REBUKE: "You do not understand what you are asking for!" (20:22)

20:22 **But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask.** Their expectation that He would proclaim His Kingdom upon their arrival at Jerusalem, was a popular notion (cf. Lk. 19:11; 17:21; 9:27), not totally unfounded. What was completely misunderstood was the manner and kind of reign He intended to establish. James and John ask for these positions of honor from a King who would shortly be exalted to a cross with two thieves nailed at His right hand and at His left! **You know not what you ask.** Their wrong-headed, selfish prayer is instructive because it illustrates the principle that

prayer, to be effective, must reflect one's sense of community as well as submission to God's will. James and John's prayer must be frustrated by the Lord, if the wishes of the other ten should be recognized, and vice versa. (See note on 18:19.) Further, it totally ignored God's planning for the Kingdom. (See on 20:23c.) Theirs was an appeal He could not admit without denying His own sense of fairness and being untrue to His instructions given in the Sermon on Personal Relations. (18:1-35) Worse, the two brothers are vain in their certainty that the promotion they seek could only promote the true interests of the Kingdom of God. They anticipate no negative effects from this request, either from the other Apostles, or even later. They cannot foresee that disaster could be forecast for a Kingdom that honors men of their views. Listen again to Bruce (*Training*, 275f) sketch their position:

James and John not only thought of the kingdom that was coming as a kingdom of this world, but they thought meanly of it even under that view. For it is an unusually corrupt and unwholesome condition of matters, even in a secular state, when places of highest distinction can be obtained by solicitation and favour, and not on the sole ground of fitness for the duties of the position. When family influence or courtly arts are the pathway to power, every patriot has cause to mourn. How preposterous, then, the idea that promotion can take place in the divine, ideally-perfect kingdom by means that are inadmissible in any well-regulated secular kingdom! To cherish such an idea is in effect to degrade and dishonour the Divine King, by likening Him to an unprincipled despot, who has more favour for flatterers than for honest men; and to caricature the divine kingdom by assimilating it to the most misgoverned states on earth.

Indeed, they did NOT know what they were asking!

## 2. QUESTION: "Are you able to suffer with me?"

**Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?** Because they steadily refused to see Him as a suffering King, they cannot see that a prayer for glory beside Him must be a request for suffering. They should have imagined that, on the principle that anything worthwhile requires renunciation, greatness in the Kingdom would demand sacrifice too. But they cannot imagine that only the way

of the cross leads to the throne. In other words, the path to promotion in the Kingdom does not take the route of self-indulgent clamor for position nor that of political prizes handed out to favorites. It must pass through the bloody baptism of suffering. To *drink a cup* is to experience its contents, whether good or bad. Biblical allusions are plentiful to illustrate positive experiences (cf. *Psa.* 16:5; 23:5; 116:13) and negative ones (*Psa.* 11:6; 75:8; *Isa.* 51:17, 22; *Jer.* 25:15f; 49:12; *Lam.* 4:21; *Ezek.* 23:32-34; *Hab.* 2:16; *Rev.* 14:10; 16:19; 17:4; 18:6) From the point of view of the host who pours it out for others, *the cup* would mean "the portion assigned," i.e. what God pours out for the individual. (cf. *Jn.* 18:11) So Jesus, later would speak of His cup of suffering (*Mt.* 26:39, 41 = *Mk.* 14:36 = *Lk.* 22:42). *Mark* (10:38b) adds: "and to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Since *baptism* is nothing but an immersion, that to which He alludes here is an overwhelming suffering in which one is immersed. (Cf. *Psa.* 69:1f; 124:3-5; *Lam.* 3:54) In the case of James and John, He refers to the painful experience of martyrdom and exile in His cause. Suffering for His sake is a theme underlined many times before. (5:10-12; 10:16-39; 13:21; 16:24-27) It would become one of the main themes in Peter's first epistle. (1 Pt. 1:6f; 2:20-25; 3:13-18; 4:12-19; 5:9f) His own Passion Predictions had been so many, so precise and recently so frequent, that His suffering, theoretically, should have been no mystery to any of them. They could not have been ignorant to what *cup* or to what baptism He so often, so honestly and so realistically had made allusion. (Cf. *Lk.* 12:50) They had come to Him with their request for a blanket promise of honor. Now He hands them his blank check of suffering, asking them if they are willing to sign it without knowing precisely what lay in their own future.

**They say unto him, We are able.** They still do not know what they are saying! These two men have a curious mental block that permits them to picture their own suffering for His cause, that yet contemporaneously and totally blocks out every concept of His death suffered for them, even though He talks about their suffering in figurative form and discussed His own in literal language!

**We are able.** With what mixed emotions do they answer this way? *THEY* are signing the blank check now. They had expected honors, wealth and glory, but He handed them a mysterious, sinister cup to drink. How much of their certainty partakes of the bravado of Peter who just as confidently asserted, "Though they all fall away, I will not deny you . . . I am ready to go with you to prison and

death . . . even if I must die with you, I will not deny you''? (Cf. Mt. 26:33; Lk. 22:33; Jn. 13:37; Mt. 26:35) Is this readiness to promise anything a brave front put on to cover an unexpected turn in the conversation, a stubborn continuation of their selfish request for positions of honor, as if His brutally frank question were but part of the necessary preliminaries? No, these fiercely loyal disciples cannot be charged with insincerity here. It is rather their over-confidence that believers themselves capable in their own strength of meeting anything that might come, that is blameworthy. If they envision His cup and baptism as suffering or difficulty in connection with some great battle or struggle surrounding the inauguration of the Kingdom, these fearless Galileans answer sincerely and perfectly in the character of their people. (Cf. *Wars*, III, 3, 3) It is unfair at least to John to claim that, in Jesus' last tragic hours of His rejection, all the disciples including these two were unfaithful to Jesus, deserting Him rather than share His cup of pain. The (traditionally) youngest of them proved to be the most intrepid. John, no doubt often dreadfully scared, courageously stayed on the scene through the trials and crucifixion. Their devotion expressed here is honestly meant even if wrongly understood.

This strange mixture of character traits in these two disciples is not intended as a passing curiosity, but rather for our instruction. The thoughtful reader must ask himself what it is, in this clashing combination of the Christlike and the diabolical, that makes the case of Zebedee's sons sound so familiar. Honesty compels us to confess the same zeal for the Lord and the same selfish ambition; the same high courage and the same cruel disregard for brethren; the same readiness to suffer and the same readiness to make others suffer; the same concern for the Lord's honor and the same disregard for the disaster that must come to the Lord's work if our own ambitions were to be realized. Only this kind of honest identification of ourselves in these disciples in this moment of weakness will help us feel the need for the teaching Jesus will give us to convert our thinking to His.

### 3. PROPHECY: "You will truly suffer with me."

20:23 **He saith unto them, My cup indeed ye shall drink:** "and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." (Mk. 10:39b) With what a grave manner He must have pronounced

these words as, in the Spirit, He peered into the future to pronounce their fate. Yes, their present commitment would be fully carried out. Rather than angrily expose their short-sightedness and self-seeking devotion by giving them an impatient scolding which they certainly deserved, He shared His cup with them. This is the fellowship of Christ's sufferings in which so many others would share. (Cf. Phil. 3:10; Ro. 8:17; 2 Co. 1:5-7; 4:10; 1 Co. 15:31; 2 Ti. 2:3, 11-13; 1 Pt. 4:13) In so saying, He generously gave them a word and a motive that would hold them steady in the years to come. The mere observation that John was not beheaded with James, his brother, by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (Ac. 12:2), but permitted to live to suffer imprisonment (Ac. 4:3; 5:18); and beating (5:40) and at last the persecution of exile on Patmos island at an extremely old age (Rev. 1:9), cannot be interpreted to mean that he did not also experience the suffering the Lord predicted for both dauntless brothers. True, the circumstances of their suffering differed, but their undying devotion to the Lord was identical.

It may be doubted that, at this point, the brothers would have considered beheading or exile to be such precious honors, had they known to what He referred, since it would have meant being stripped of earthly glory and freedom, and being hurled into the grave or miles and years distant from the center of the action. And yet, despite the blunt promise of suffering ahead for these men, it did not even occur to them to back down. They fully intended to maintain their loyal commitment to Him, cost what it might. Only later would they agree that to suffer for the name of Jesus is the source of true joy and privilege. (Mt. 5:10-12; Ac. 5:41; 16:25; 1 Pt. 4:13)

For us, sharing in Christ's suffering may mean the limited cruelty of martyrdom or the long-suffering of daily Christian living, living out a lifetime of self-giving service. This latter discipline, so constant and so full of struggle, is as fully to follow Christ as is the other. We must dedicate ourselves daily to be ready for either.

#### 4. REFUSAL: "God's rules decide places of honor."

**But to sit on my right hand, and on my left hand is not mine to give; but . . . for whom it hath been prepared of my Father.** What, if anything, should be inserted in the space represented by the dots in this elliptical phrase?

1. Does Jesus mean that the right to assign such honor is not in His own hands at all, but is the exclusive right of the Father? Arndt-Gingrich (37) believe that the phrase in question has been shortened from "it is not mine . . . but the Father, who will give to those for whom it is prepared by Him," as if the Greek phrase ran: *ouk emòn . . . allà toû patròs, hòs dósei hoîs hetoímastai hup'-autoû*. This invention of "missing" words, however, could misunderstand how Jesus will reward His followers. (Mt. 16:27; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:22-30; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Ro. 2:16; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8; 1 Co. 4:4f; 2 Co. 5:10; Rev. 22:12; cf. Isa. 62:11)
2. Or does Jesus mean He can give the places of honor only to those for whom they were planned by God? If so, He is saying, "To sit . . . is not mine to grant except to those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." Evidence that "but" (*allà*) can mean "except" comes from Rocci (73) who, among other uses of *allà*, affirms that "in the sense of a restrictive adversative after a negative proposition . . . expression with *ou, oú tis, oudeís, tís*, etc., *allà* can be translated: except, unless, apart from, but." To state Jesus' proposition positively, we have: "I can grant such honors only to those for whom my Father has prepared them."

It really makes little difference, because the fact that Jesus limits His distribution of honors to follow the Father's ordaining means that God has already decided, even if Jesus Himself will make the actual distribution.

The meaning, then, is: "I cannot assign such honors on the basis of patronage and favoritism, or on any basis other than God's principles of perfect fairness." Not caprice, then, or personal preferences, but the eternal will and counsel of God is the standard upon which such judgments are made. Precedence and preference will proceed on this basis established by God, and Jesus has no intention of changing it by nepotism, favoritism or patronage. So Jesus does not, indeed cannot, deny that differences of rank in the Kingdom exist. (See on 18:4.) Rather, He specifies in whose hands rightly rests the judgment about their proper distribution. His principle of precedence is the Father's choice that only those who perform the greatest service for others shall be most highly awarded. This is no esoteric doctrine, but the common principle of loving service that He will repeat in 20:25-28 and which constituted the fundamental basis of the entire message on personal relations. (Mt. 18) So, the only predestination here is the Father's choice of what kind

of character would be judged worthy of honor. It is then up to men to take Him at His word and qualify for the honors by rendering the most useful service in Jesus' name. This is the same kind of predestination seen in our own salvation, i.e. God determined what class of people are going to be saved, and we determine to be in that class. (Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pt. 1:2; 2 Pt. 1:3-11)

This means that, although man must commit himself in total devotion, everything depends upon God whose will determines the distribution of the honors. (Cf. 19:30—20:16) Thus, Jesus stresses His own faithfulness to God's will. God is in total control, hence no man can take this control out of His hands by putting God in debt to him on the basis of supposed worthiness or merits, good deeds or fleshly relationship to Jesus, or anything else. This theme of the total Lordship of God is an important, security-building concept intended to strengthen disciples tempted to throw everything overboard and return to Judaism or the world and make shipwreck of their souls. (See on 10:26-31, 40-42; 11:25-27; 17:5; 20:1-16; Cf. Heb. 10:26-39; 12:25-29; 13:10-16; 1 Ti. 1:18-20; 6:13-16; 2 Ti. 4:10)

So the right to preregister for chief places in the Kingdom is a claim made by human pride, hence unworthy of anyone who understands that his own position in the Kingdom is itself only possible because of the grace of the King and the essential humility of the servant.

### C. THE OTHER APOSTLES ARE JEALOUS OF JAMES AND JOHN (20:24; Mk. 10:41)

20:24 **And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren.** Is not this sulking, small-minded jealousy typical of us all? Their own self-pride moved them to resent the opportunistic pride of James and John who had merely taken unfair advantage to seize what they all coveted! The two brothers had only shown shrewd initiative in expressing the identical desire that motivated the ambition of every one of them! They all wanted to be at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, but James and John had outmaneuvered them. (See on 18:1.) And yet, little did the Ten dream that so far as earthly prizes were concerned, the honors that would fall to the sons of Zebedee would be James' honor of being the first apostolic martyr and John's distinction of having his suffering prolonged.

This unedifying spectacle of Jesus' band of disciples is surprisingly edifying just because of its being true to life. This is not the sort of fanciful saint-forging that a fiction writer would produce in those days. (Check out the apocryphal hack writing being published as "Gospels" in the first century!) Whereas the ancient pagans did depict the sordid lives of even the greatest heroes and their gods, they were not objectively employed in the service of a true living God whose stern standards of truth and righteousness had been drilled into His people for centuries. Such inappropriate pride and selfishness as we witness here must disqualify the disciples for sainthood in the eyes of the creators of fiction. Nevertheless, for the Gospel writers who tell it like it is, this spectacle traces a real situation that actually occurred in the lives of men who later developed into the spiritual giants we so highly respect now.

#### D. JESUS REPEATS HIS PRINCIPLE OF TRUE GREATNESS (20:25-28; Mk. 10:42-45)

1. "Worldly greatness consists in the power wielded over the most people."

20:25 **But Jesus called them unto him**, almost like a father would gather his quarrelling children around him to admonish them. He must stop this incipient fracture in His group at once. Yet His tone is the quiet solemnity of a Man who first controls His own emotions in order to cool the flames of others. Rather than enter into greater detail about the martyrdom and suffering of James and John about which they probably would have longed to know more, Jesus turns the conversation to what must inevitably involve the self-sacrifice of every other disciple. Rather than prophesy the gruesome details of every Apostle's future destiny, and so crush them with information they could not bear, Jesus repeated the concepts that would mature them to face something perhaps more difficult than heroic martyrdom: to face and conquer the daily humdrum of life. Learning to give one's life without reservation to Christ and others in the ordinary service of life is the only way to be mature enough to gain the honors in the Kingdom.

**Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.** Does He intend a parallelism here, or is He describing a hierarchical pyramid?

1. In form, Jesus' words have the sound of a typical Hebrew parallelism which in the second member repeats a concept stated in the first. This explanation has the advantage of finding itself in the company of another parallelism in vv. 26, 27, which begins with "Not so shall it be among you," and the shorter parallelism of v. 28 after "even as the Son of man came . . ." If so, He may intend to indicate nothing more than the picture of any governmental system where people issue orders and expect others to serve them.
2. Or does He mean to describe a hierarchical pyramid? If so, *the Gentiles* at the bottom are ruled by their *rulers* who are themselves subject to the authority of *their great ones*. By an interesting ambiguity involved in "their" and "them" (the third time), it is left unclear whether the tyranny of the subordinates is directed at their own subordinates or at their own superiors. In the first case, He is saying that the abusive treatment shown the people by their kings or emperors is bad enough, but tyrannizing by the royal representatives and time-serving bureaucrats is intolerably worse. In the second, if "them" refers to *the rulers*, then He means that kings and emperors may be masters over the people, but the ruler's lieutenants actually manage those on the throne as "the power behind the throne." In an absolutist oriental monarchy the first sort of despotism would be the case; in a more democratic type of government the latter would be the case. Either way, however, the people are always under the heel of their superiors who repress and oppress them wherever they can.

What is Jesus' fundamental emphasis: power struggle or power structure? Both, because the nouns picture the structure, while the verbs picture the struggle: **lord it over them** (*katakurieúo*, cf. Ac. 19:16: "to master"; 1 Pt. 5:3: "to domineer") and **exercise authority over them** (*katexousiázo*, used only here in NT and apparently unknown elsewhere.)

It is highly significant that Jesus contrasted His own messianic community with the civil government of pagan nations. Since this pyramid of power had been the basis of the disciples' thinking, by reflection He quietly exposed the disciples' spirit as pagan, unrepresentative of the theocratic ideal of Israel, and not at all in harmony with His own thinking. The characteristic most typical of those societies' rulers is that same spirit which motivated His own Apostles in their own power struggle: the lording it over their subordinates

and the exercising authority over them. Jesus is not merely attacking abuse of power, but the concept of power structures itself, even when the individual rulers themselves are relatively benign benefactors of their people. (Cf. Lk. 22:25) While He is perfectly open to civil government as such (Mt. 22:21; cf. Ro. 13:1-7; 1 Pt. 2:13-17), His messianic community is not to be structured along the lines of the secular state.

2. "Greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the number of people you are able to serve." (20:26, 27)

20:26 **Not so shall it be among you.** This is the Lord's final word on the question of hierarchy and power structures in the Church. If everything said earlier (Mt. 18:1-35) had seemed unclear and noncommittal on the question of ecclesiastical hierarchy—although in fact it was not—this sentence cannot be so interpreted. In fact, the servant's attitude is the very antithesis to the type of tyrannical structure typical of pagan rulers, a concept that stresses everything Jesus taught in that discourse on personal relations in the Kingdom. (For fuller notes see on Mt. 18.) If the Church is to be different from the struggle and structure of civil government, the Christian who is the moral opposite of those who tyrannize others, then, is a person who serves them. He follows a policy diametrically opposed to that so characteristic of the unbelieving world. In the Christian community, the duty of serving, paradoxically, falls to those who are its great ones. In fact, if they do not serve, they are simply not great ones! As Gonzàles-Ruiz (*Marco*, 187) said it:

Therefore any Church that is not the image of the State completely turned upside down does not correspond at all to the original plan of its Founder. This is why the worst sin of the Church is that of organizing itself along lines that reflect the image and likeness of the State, or of inserting itself into its structure to become an integral part of it.

Nothing could be clearer, or as little respected, as the Lord's intolerance toward the priestly despotism shown in all versions of Christendom, whether it be the Catholic (Latin or Greek) or Protestant systems, or whether it be the virtual dictatorships exercised over their constituencies by local preachers, editors, elders of churches of Christ who, despite their proclaimed aversion to hierarchical systems

and monarchical bishoprics as practiced by others, nonetheless crack the whip "to maintain the purity of the faith" (meaning: "keep things under my control").

**Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; 27 and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant.** (For fuller notes, see on 18:1 where comment is made on Mk. 9:35.) Are **minister** (*diákonos*, v. 26) and **servant** (*doûlos*, v. 27) synonyms, or do they represent a descending scale at which the ministry and death of the Son of man is the very bottom? (v. 28) If this latter is the case, then, according to Jesus, the lower we go on the scale of human values, the higher we rise in God's judgment!

Whereas the **minister** (*diákonos*) might be thought of as a "servant" free or slave, the **slave** (*doûlos*, from *déo*, "to bind" and *holos*, "wholly") would have been considered as anyone bound to his owner to serve in whatever capacity he could. His lot was as varied as his masters, from the very best to the unspeakably bad, with all shades and grades in between. It is not clear whether the Lord intended these words in their denotative or connotative sense, i.e. the legal and social status of these persons or their resultant attitude and character.

1. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 749, note 713) balks at translating these two words "servant" and "slave," because of the connotative ideas of "lack of freedom, unwilling service, cruel treatment, etc." so closely attached especially to the word "slave." He opts for "servant" for *diákonos* and "humble attendant" for *doûlos*.
2. However, as Bartchy (*First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians* 7:21, 37-120) has shown we are the ones who must revise their concept of "slavery" in the Greco-Roman world of the centuries preceding and immediately following the Christian revelations.

In addition to what has already been written on 18:1-35, we must ask what would the first century Christians have understood Jesus to mean by urging that the only proper attitude in His Kingdom was to identify themselves with the position and character of a *diákonos* or a *doûlos*? To appreciate the position of slaves and freedmen (who were little better than slaves and often crippled by contracts yet to fulfil toward their former master), one must have a clear picture of the Mediterranean world of that century. Scott Bartchy's *First-Century Slavery* is especially helpful in this regard, not only because he furnishes a wide-ranging historical survey of both law and customs in this field, but especially because of the necessary

corrective he brings to our common preconceptions about what it meant to be a slave or a freedman in the times of Jesus and Paul.

So, if we sincerely intend to identify ourselves with the slave class and take Jesus seriously, making ourselves the voluntary slaves of others, it would be very worthwhile to examine what Christian exhortations were addressed to those who were legally slaves as part of a definite, wide-spread social structure in the first-century world. (Study Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Ti. 6:1, 2; Ti. 2:9, 10; 1 Pt. 2:18ff in harmony with 2:16!)

In short, there are no ring-side seats for honored spectators in God's Kingdom, just places of service down beside the King Himself who is busy washing feet, mediating for others and dying for sinners. (Jn. 13:12-17; Ro. 8:29; 1 Pt. 2:21ff)

### 3. "My own life of service and death for others is the standard!" (20:28)

20:28 **even as the Son of man** means that His marvelous self-sacrifice is the standard whereby greatness is to be measured. (See all notes on 18:1-14, studying specifically how everything Jesus affirmed in that section so aptly applied to Himself.) And yet His own supreme example is not set forth here as a mere model of humility. His sentence structure reveals another emphasis: **Whoever would be great . . . and . . . first among you must be . . . even as the Son of man.** Although the disciples refused at that time to accept His "uncomfortable, pessimistic talk about crosses," they must learn that the cross lay not only squarely across His path to the crown, but was also at the heart of His great mission to earth. They had interrupted His talk about death, in order to talk about position and power. He must now interrupt their pursuit of power, to make them see that self-denial and service—EVEN TO DEATH—is the shortest route to real power, to being *first* and *great*. He expected the disciples to learn that His own case furnishes illustration of His personal method of gaining the mastery over men. They must learn the connection between self-giving service and arriving at power in the spiritual world. They must see that, however strange or original it may have seemed to them, His own method for earning His crown is superior to all other methods of receiving thrones, whether it be by inheriting them respectably, or by seizing them in battle, or by base bribery. This is because these latter methods either left the will

of the governed completely out of the account, or, worse, forced or tricked them into compliance against their will. But the uniqueness of Jesus' method lay in His mission to place Himself at the service of mankind, so that men would love Him and willingly submit to Him as their King, and thus He would become Ruler over a people eager to please Him, swept to the throne by their sense of grateful devotion. Even more striking than the originality of Jesus' method, when contrasted with the usual routes to glory, is its unquestionable success. Let us add our "Amen" to the voices of millions of Christians who with all their hearts have echoed the doxology of the Apostle John: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." (Rev. 1:5, 6) Nothing could be clearer than the way Jesus connected self-giving service and the right to rule. Love that sacrifices itself for others has power to conquer and rule over others' hearts, and thus guarantee the kind of sway over others that can be attained in no other way than by girding oneself with the towel of humility and placing oneself at the disposition of others as their servant. The expression, **even as the Son of man**, demonstrates for all time how this King proved the effectiveness of His method by taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and by winning for Himself the sort of sovereignty that we willingly confess today. In short, Jesus applies the pragmatic test to His method and, by His results, demonstrates that it will work for us as it did for Him! This is the reason for His paradoxical ecclesiology and the motivation of His unusual government policy: loving ministry to others is the secret of success and the road to true greatness. So, if greatness in the Kingdom and usefulness to God depends upon being like the King, and sharing His viewpoints and mission, then the greatest distinctions and highest titles will obviously fall to those who are most like Him in sacrificial service even to the point of death for others.

**The Son of man came to give his life a ransom for many.** Whether or not the disciples fully appreciated what it meant to be the son of man come from glory (see notes on 8:20), however, now, after His triumph, this sentence measures the full height and depth of His love. (2 Co. 8:9; Eph. 5:25; 1 Jn. 4:10; Jn. 15:13; Ro. 5:6-11) But even before, the disciples had witnessed nothing but generous ministering to the needs of others on the part of Him whom they had come to recognize as their Messianic King. Had they yet no basis for understanding the King or His Kingdom? He will *give his life*:

His self-sacrifice will be voluntary. (Cf. Jn. 10:11, 15, 18) He was not only sent by the Father, but of His own accord **He came to give His life a ransom**. Whereas we cannot choose to be born nor do we normally choose our own death, Jesus claimed these as acts born of His own free choice.

**Give his life a ransom for many.** (Cf. Isa. 53:4-8, 10-12) Here is the foundation for the expiation for our sins and for our justification: Jesus will lay down His own innocent life in payment for (*antì pollôn*) the lives of many who cannot ransom themselves. (Cf. Ps. 49:7-9, 15) Literally, a **ransom** (*lútron*) is the price paid to free a slave or someone held prisoner for redemption. It may also be an expiation for wrong-doing. (Rocci, 1167; Arndt-Gingrich, 483f) It is the agreed legal equivalent for the persons redeemed. **Many** has two emphases:

1. Potential: **Many**, does not mean "not all," as if we ought to think Jesus did not intend to die potentially for every man. (1 Ti. 2:6; 1 Jn. 2:2) **Many** is the antithesis of a privileged "few" or perhaps the antithesis of the one Human Being who can accomplish this for many, not merely dying for Himself alone. **Many**, here, has the same meaning as that of "many" (*polloí*) in Paul. (Ro. 5:15; 19) Contextually, it is clear that Paul meant "all" (*pántas anthrôpous*). (Ro. 5:18)
2. Actual: and yet, sadly, this word **many**, considered, not as the potential of Jesus' sacrifice but as describing the real number of people who will finally avail themselves of it, in the end, really does mean "not all," (Mt. 7:14)

An interesting question for further investigation involves Jesus' unusual demand in this text that those for whom He would **give His life as a ransom** should consider themselves, not primarily as free men, but as *servants* and *slaves*. The modern reader might ask, "But if He ransomed them, surely they would not thereafter consider themselves slaves in any sense." But it does not work that way. The person who is dearly purchased out of bitter slavery owes his happiness, fruitful employment and present security to his new Master. For a person who owns nothing and owes everything, to repay such a debt of gratitude is only possible through willing personal service. In fact, the decision to ransom this slave may have been based on a contract made with the new Master. Therefore, the ransomed do not move into the insecurity and uncertainty of absolute freedom with its attendant dangers for which the former slave is unprepared

to cope, but into the good service of a kind Master whose slavery is pure joy compared with the alternatives. (Study Ro. 6:15-23, esp. v. 18; 1 Co. 6:19f; 7:22f; 1 Pt. 1:18f; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22—4:1; Philemon 16; cf. Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*.) In fact, the slavery to Jesus Christ is so radically different from that to self, sin and Satan, that paradoxically there is a sense in which the redeemed can be thought of as the only truly "free men." (Study Peter's interesting paradox: "as free men . . . as slaves of God" (*hos eleútheroi* . . . *all' hos theou doúloi*, 1 Pt. 2:16). This fresh understanding of slavery to Christ should turn on new lights in texts where Paul and others willingly declare themselves "bondslaves of Jesus Christ" (e.g. Ro. 1:1) and "your slaves for Jesus' sake." (e.g. 2 Co. 4:5)

What is the picture, then? The world into which Jesus Christ came is a world full of slaves, a world characterized by oppression and abuse of power, a world where might makes right, and back of it all is the devil. But to purchase these slaves from their just condemnation, Jesus did not come to be, together with His Church, merely a new king or emperor or benefactor, but armed with the same sort of structured imperial might as that encountered in the world systems. Rather, to defeat the cruel world power that leaves men its slaves and bring them out of their bondage, paradoxically, He too became a slave to minister and to turn His own life over to suffer the righteous verdict of death for sin, in exchange for the freedom of sin's victims. (Mt. 26:28; Romans; Phil. 2:5-9; 1 Ti. 2:6; Heb. 2:9, 14-18; 9:27; 1 Pt. 1:18f; 2:24; 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:2; 2 Co. 5:14f, 21) To free the victims He Himself became a Victim to end the victimizing. The point? His Church must not present itself as a "Christian Government" as a political alternative to the "demonic world or state governments of the present age." Jesus categorically refused to fight fire with fire. And His Church must live and function and conquer as a community in whose heart the cancer of power—whether ecclesiastical or political—does not exist. It is rather as a fellowship of servants that it will be able, without political ambitions or power structures, to help free humanity from the forces that enslave it. (Cf. González-Ruiz, *Marco*, 189)

NOTE: This concept does not speak directly to the problem of Christians' participation in civil government and the execution of its laws. The Lord is, rather, discussing what His disciple as a private citizen must be in relation to other private citizens and what His Kingdom must be in relation to other world kingdoms.

Ministering in the service of God as a sword-bearing magistrate is already assumed as a valid option. (Ro. 13:1-7) So also is the disciples' responsibility to pay the bills of civil government. (Mt. 22:21) So, Jesus' discussion of pagan rulers does not intend to reject the proper authority of civil government.

What does this magnificent declaration reveal to us about Jesus?

1. Plummer (*Matthew*, 281) asks:

Is not the combination of humility and majesty which is found in this saying a guarantee for its genuineness? Could it have been invented? Who is this, who in the same utterance, and in the most simple and natural way, declares that He is the servant of everybody, and that His single life is able to ransom many? There is no boasting and no manifest exaggeration in either declaration; nothing but a calm statement of fact, made by One who is confident that He is saying the simple truth.

2. Bruce (*Training*, 288) sees it too:

Then this saying, while breathing the spirit of utter lowliness, at the same time betrays the consciousness of superhuman dignity. Had Jesus not been more than man, His language would not have been humble, but presumptuous. Why should the son of a carpenter say of himself, I came not to be ministered unto? Servile position and occupation was a matter of course for such a one. The statement before us is rational and humble only as coming from one who, being in the form of God, freely assumed the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death for our salvation.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. How did Jesus answer the request for chief seats in the Kingdom? What did He mean by His "cup" and "baptism"?
2. In whose hands and on what basis rightly rests the distribution of the highest honors in the Kingdom?
3. Who is the greatest in the Kingdom? How did Jesus illustrate His own answer to this question? Where else is this same question discussed in Matthew?
4. Who asked such a boon? Who aided their request? Why was

this particular person enlisted to word their desire? From what point of view did the request arise?

5. In what respect did Jesus say emphatically that His Kingdom would be different from that of the rulers of the nations of the world?
6. Quote Matthew 20:28 and Luke 19:10. What else did Jesus say at any time about the cause and purpose for which He came into the world?
7. Did James and John prove true to their confident assertion of readiness to drink of Jesus' cup and be baptized with His baptism? If so, how or when? If not, why not?
8. According to Jesus, are there really any chief places in the Kingdom to grant? If so, how are they to be distributed?
9. According to Jesus, what kind of ambition must a Christian have?
10. What does this section have to say to the larger question of power structures and hierarchical control among Jesus' disciples today?
11. List the texts in Matthew 18 which find their practical application in this section.

### Section 53

#### JESUS HEALS TWO BLIND MEN AT JERICH0

(Parallels: Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43)

TEXT: 20:29-34

29 And as they went out from Jericho, a great multitude followed him. 30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the way side, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 31 And the multitude rebuked them, that they should hold their peace: but they cried out the more, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David. 32 And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you? 33 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. 34 And Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes; and straightway they received their sight, and followed him.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose Matthew would include this little miracle-story at this point? Of course, it took place at Jericho just before the Lord ascended to Jerusalem for the Final Week, and Mark and Luke both document it at this point. However, our author omits interesting details provided in the other two Gospels, as if his editorial pen intends to underline one major truth. What is it? The title by which the blind men addressed Jesus has significance in pointing out that truth. What does the title mean, and how does this help to explain why Matthew would be particularly interested in recording this scene at precisely this point in his narrative?
- b. Where did these blind men get the faith they expressed in their plea for help from Jesus?
- c. Why do you think the crowd rebuked these blind men, ordering them to be silent? There may have been several reasons.
- d. Why did the blind men ignore the scolding of the passers-by who tried to silence them?
- e. Jesus usually ordered people to silence when they addressed Him as "Son of David." Here, however, He did not do so. How do you interpret this strange change in policy?
- f. Why did Jesus ask the blind men: "What do you want me to do for you?" when the most perfectly obvious need of a blind man is SIGHT?! (or is it?)
- g. Whereas Luke concludes his narrative by stating that "immediately he received his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God," and whereas Mark, too, says "he received his sight and followed him on the way, Matthew, on the other hand, simply affirms, "Immediately they received their sight, and followed him." Do you think Matthew is just giving a severely simple account, or is he pushing the reader to decide whether, on the basis of the evidence furnished that Jesus is truly the long-awaited Son of David, he too will humbly and joyfully follow Him who is the Light of the blind? Or is this reading more into the text than is there? What do you think?
- h. Why do you think the blind men followed Jesus? Where was Jesus going that would have been so interesting to these newly-healed beggars?
- i. Of what principle(s) in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships

in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

- j. How does this section prepare for the events that follow in chapter 21?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

So Jesus and His disciples arrived at Jericho. As they approached the city, a blind man was sitting at the side of the road begging. When he heard the noise of a crowd going past, he began to inquire, "What is happening?" Someone told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is going by."

Later, as Jesus was going out of the city with His disciples, a vast throng surged along behind Him. Two blind men were sitting at the roadside, one of whom was named Bartimaeus (= Timaeus' son). Upon hearing that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, they shouted out, "Jesus, Son of David, take pity on us!"

But many of those who were in the front part of the crowd sharply scolded them, telling them to shut up. But they yelled even more loudly, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Then Jesus stopped there in the road and called them to Him, commanding others to bring them to Him, "Tell them to come here."

So they called the blind men, saying, "It's all right now. Get to your feet: He is calling you."

Bartimaeus, casting aside his overcoat, jumped up with his companion and made his way to Jesus. When they were quite close, Jesus addressed them, "What do you wish me to do for you?"

The blind men said to Him, "My dear Teacher, we want our eyes to be opened: let us see again!"

Then Jesus, deeply moved with compassion, touched their blind eyes, saying, "Begin seeing again! Go your way. Your faith in me has healed you."

Instantly they were able to see again and began following Him along the road, giving thanks and praise to God. All the others who witnessed the miracle gave praise to God too.

### SUMMARY

Having crossed the Jordan, Jesus and His company of Passover-bound travelers arrived at Jericho. Too late a blind beggar learned

that Jesus had just passed him. Later, as Jesus left the city for Jerusalem, the blind beggar with another blind man, upon learning that the Lord's group was then departing from Jericho, began to appeal to His help, calling Him "the Son of David." Scolded by the travelers nearest them, they only shouted that much louder. Jesus mercifully halted the caravan, called them to Him, asked them what favor they sought. They asked only for sight which He instantly gave them. In gratitude, they sing praise to God and follow Jesus. Everyone else was affected the same way by the miracle, joining in to praise God too.

## NOTES

### III. PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION OF JESUS' TRUE MESSIAHSHIP OF SERVICE (20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Lk. 18:35-43)

#### A. SITUATION: Blind men appeal to Jesus for mercy as "Son of David."

**20:29 A great crowd followed him.** Because several eastern routes converged at the Jordan River just east of Jericho, this city had long been a natural stopping place for festival-bound pilgrims arriving from various directions on their way to Jerusalem. **Jericho** means that Jesus and His company will approach Jerusalem from the east, as "the city of palms" is located 25 km (15 mi.) from the capital, near the ford of the Jordan.

**And as they went out from Jericho.** Mark (10:46) very precisely notes their arrival at Jericho, then, in agreement with Matthew, just as clearly registers their departure and the following miracle. However, because Luke's parallel (18:35) seems to locate the healing incident "as he drew near to Jericho," rather than upon His departure, several attempts have been made to produce an intelligent harmony of the facts so as to eliminate any possible accusation of error. It should be noticed, first of all, that the presence of problems is not evidence of inauthenticity, but undesigned proof of the correctness of the facts narrated. For had the Evangelists perversely desired to foist a falsification off on the world, they would have taken more care to eliminate such a slip-up. Again, the very existence of problems in harmonizing these three Synoptic texts is proof of the independent

drafting of these Gospels. If these accounts were copied from a common source, as some affirm, how may these obvious differences be explained, especially where the divergence is so great as to cause accusations of outright contradiction? On the other hand, if we find that a reasonable explanation of the apparent contradiction can be found, what had at first seemed to be a contradiction becomes, instead, evidence of the truth of the testimony. What are the possibilities?

1. Matthew and Mark clearly agree that the miracle occurred at the departure from Jericho. Luke alone organizes his material in some other fashion. Now, if it be correctly assumed that two witnesses are sufficient to establish any fact (Dt. 19:15), the former two Synoptic writers must be judged to be relating the objective, chronological order of the facts. Further, if we may assume Luke's fundamental accuracy, we may judge that he has done some theological editorializing in the organization of his facts. This must be concluded from the fact that, following the Lucan narrative of the blind man's healing which apparently takes place "as he drew near to Jericho" (18:35), we have the continuation: "He entered Jericho and was passing through" (19:1), at which time Jesus encounters Zacchaeus. Therefore, unless we are to accuse Luke of deliberate misrepresentation of history, we must attribute to him the intention to set aside strictly chronological considerations for what may have had greater theological importance for his purpose. (See below under 4b.)
2. There is also evidence that Luke does not really locate the healing on the east entrance of Jericho:
  - a. He simply mentions that the blind man was sitting by the roadside begging as Jesus drew near to Jericho. (Lk. 18:35)

Although some writers note the possible existence of two or even three Jerichos in Jesus' day, because of its being built, destroyed and rebuilt on different sites (See Unger, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, 146-148, 243; Pfeiffer (ed.), *The Biblical World, A Dictionary of Biblical Archeology*, 305f), hence the scene of the miracle could be located between the various locations as Jesus left one Jericho and approached another Jericho, however certain questions arise:

- (1) Would the older sites have been inhabited and called simply "old Jericho," or "old city"?

(2) In that day would not the Herodian Jericho have been the more famous city of that name? (Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XV, 4, 2, 4) If so, were there two sites involved in our story, it would be thought certain that some distinction would have been made, such as "new city" (Neapolis). So, until archeological evidence demonstrates conclusively that more than one site of Jericho was inhabited in Christ's day, it is better to opt for the conclusion that only one city-site was involved in our story.

- b. Then, from the noise people were making as they passed, the blind man concluded that a multitude was going by, so he began asking what this meant. He is then told that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." The crowd was already passing by him at the time he learned the significance of this particular multitude. Hence, some time is lost for him to start calling to Jesus for mercy. The answer of the people in the crowd who say, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by," is not fatal to this hypothesis, because they could still say it, even if Jesus had already gone by, because it would be meant in the sense that the group travelling with Jesus is passing by, Jesus being the most important personage in the entourage.
- c. The fact that the crowd's passing was already in progress at the time he first learned that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by," taken together with the fact that, when he began to implore Jesus' help, it is surprisingly "those who were in front (who) rebuked him," points to a change of the blind man's position with respect to the crowd. For, if the ones in front had already passed him on the road to Jericho and were thus closer to the city are the ones who rebuke him, then they must have turned completely around and, inexplicably ignoring the calmness of the people at that moment passing in front of the shouting Bartimaeus, begin to rebuke him for his impertinence! On the contrary, the rebuke by "those who were in front" may be more reasonably explained by some change in the relative positions of Bartimaeus and the crowds, a fact omitted by Luke as unimportant for his purpose. But what was the change in positions? Matthew and Mark supply the missing information? Consider the following harmony:

## MATTHEW 20:29-31

## MARK 10:46-48

## LUKE 18:35-39

29 And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him.

30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the roadside

When they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Have mercy on us. Son of David!"

31 The crowd rebuked them . . .

46 And they came to Jericho;

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude.

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside,

47 And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48 And many rebuked him . . .

35 As he drew near to Jericho a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging;

36 and hearing a multitude going by, he inquired what this meant.

37 They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

38 And he cried, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

39 And those in front rebuked him . . .

3. The harmonization of the three accounts, reflected in the "Paraphrase/Harmony," is based on the following steps:

- a. The party in which Jesus was travelling approached Jericho. Jesus and His disciples were in the lead ahead of the others who would thus be strung out along the road behind them. (Did Jesus keep up His pace ahead of the others even after the Passion Prediction and His rebuke of the selfish ambition of the Twelve? Cf. Mk. 10:32) If so, at least Jesus and His disciples passed the blind men before the latter could react. (Lk. 18:35) As the main body of the multitude with its hubub of voices and shuffling feet began to come by, he began to make inquiry about what was happening, too late to make contact with Jesus. (Lk. 18:36f) This much is seen as a separate fact that occurred before Jesus entered into Jericho.

WEAKNESS: is it likely that a sharp-eared blind man could miss the soft tread of 26 feet as Jesus and the Twelve pass by him, when he was seated "by the roadside begging" (Lk.

18:35)? Is it likely that absolutely no one in Jesus' immediate group said a word as they approached and passed the blind man to enter Jericho? And, if the blind man heard them and asked for alms, is it likely that Jesus and His group completely ignored his appeals?

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

1. Jesus may have been walking alone in silence, ahead of the group, and so was not detected by the blind man. It may have been that He knew that He could heal the man later in circumstances that would accomplish more good. He may therefore have deliberately ignored the man this time, in order to reach that higher goal.
  2. Then, when the Twelve and others passed, their noise attracted the blind man's attention and he asked the meaning of the noise. Upon learning that Jesus' group was passing, he began calling, but too late to make himself heard by Jesus personally who had already gone by. The disciples and others do not disturb Jesus to call Him back to see what the blind beggar wanted.
  3. So, Jesus and His group got clear into Jericho before the blind man could successfully make his request known.
- b. Then, while Jesus stopped in the city to be the guest of Zachaeus (Lk. 19:1-10), the blind man, who by this time had completely lost contact with Jesus' particular group, may have reasoned that they would likely rest in Jericho before the final ascent to Jerusalem. This fact would give him ample time to find his way to the west side of town where he could wait for their departure and accost them as they left Jericho for Jerusalem.
- (1) Did this blind beggar take time to locate another blind beggar he knew, to share with him the hope of recovering his sight too? This would perhaps help to explain Mark and Luke's interest in Bartimaeus, whereas Matthew mentions two blind men.
  - (2) That a blind man could "find" anything or anyone and move so deftly around a city crowded with pilgrims is no problem for a beggar who has no doubt worked that city for years, deriving his only income from begging. He would naturally have learned to make his way around this ideal place for begging, since Herod the Great had built this city as a new capital and it became the resort for the rich from Jerusalem. And, because of its ideal geographical location as the last

stopping place for pilgrims bound for Jerusalem, beggars could hope for some alms from the pious among them who accounted alms as highly meritorious. In fact, on how many other occasions had Bartimaeus met the crowds coming from the east on one day, to beg from them, and then moved around to the west gate the next day to ask alms from them again as they left?

- c. Then, when he once again heard the movement of many people next day and asked the meaning of the sounds, he cried out to Jesus for the first time as He left the city for Jerusalem. (Mt. 20:30; Mk. 10:46b, 47; Lk. 18:38)
4. The legitimacy of Luke's reorganization of the materials need not be questioned.
  - a. As a literary device his style is a procedure completely vindicated by the deliberate style of Moses in composing *Genesis*. That is, even as Moses so often completed a given person's history immediately upon mentioning him before returning to take up that of another more prominent figure, even though the former was not yet dead, so here too Luke may be thought of as desiring to complete the blind man's story after the first notice, in order to return to narrate Zacchaeus' story. He succeeded thus in preserving the unity of the story of healing by finishing it before the visit with Zacchaeus, although the healing actually occurred thereafter. Then, having disposed of the healing incident, Luke omitted any mention of it after Zacchaeus, proceeding rather to the Parable of the Pounds. (Lk. 19:11)
  - b. Why did Luke put the blind man first? This may be the wrong question. The real question may be: why did he desire to put Zacchaeus' story last? Perhaps for theological, rather than chronological considerations. (Matthew does a lot of this too. See on "The Problem of Order in Matthew's Narration," Vol. II, p. 1ff; "What is Matthew's Order or Plan of Presentation?" Vol. I, pp. 4-6) Accordingly, Luke may have wished to give particular emphasis to the salvation of Zacchaeus. However, he did not desire to ignore the healing of the blind man, because of its well-established importance for a correct understanding of Christ, and certainly because of its place in the historical information Luke had gathered from his sources. (Cf. Lk. 1:1-4) Since he alone narrates the salvation of Zacchaeus before Jesus' arrival at Bethany for the beginning of the Final Week events, and since he concludes Jesus' reaction to

Zacchaeus' decisions with the words: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:9f), it may well be that he chose this method to underline Jesus' purpose for going to Jerusalem, even as Matthew and Mark state the death-mission of Jesus in the preceding section (20:28; Mk. 10:45). He may also have considered the salvation of Zacchaeus as illustrating, a bit more vigorously than the healing of the blind men, the astoundingly merciful condescension of Jesus. So he arranged his materials, so that, as the reader pondered the self-revelation of Jesus at Jericho, the last thing upon which his mind would linger is the amazing grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ who can so gracefully and graciously win the incredibly unworthiest of sinners, a chief tax collector!

There have been other attempts to harmonize these same details. (Cf. Plummer, *Luke*, 429f) However, the above explanations seem to be the simplest, most cohesive and least problematic.

**20:30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the way side.** Were there two, as Matthew affirms, or only one, named Bartimaeus, as Mark and Luke have it? Both, because where there are two, there is at least one! Matthew recorded the objective fact that there were two such beggars, but the names were not important for his narration, whereas Mark named one of the two and then carefully translated his Aramaic name into Greek, as if something connected with the man or his name would be important for his readership. (Was Bartimaeus and/or his father, Timaeus, a well-known disciple in Christian circles of Mark's and/or Peter's acquaintances?) Another motive for noticing this blind man may have been the high quality of his trust in Jesus (cf. Mk. 10:50), whereas the other man was perhaps less spectacular, less memorable for his expression of faith.

**Two blind men sitting by the way side.** Because Jericho was the winter palace of Herod and resort for the rich from Jerusalem, it is more than understandable that any one should place themselves by the roadside to beg. Moreover they could especially hope for alms during this period, because of the heavy traffic of Passover pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem via Jericho. Their deplorable situation, arising as it does out of their physical handicap, is the more pitiable, since they had to depend upon the capricious generosity of passers-by. It is remarkable that neither Matthew nor Mark affirm that they were now begging. If the above-suggested harmonization of the

Synoptics' data is correct, the two blind men, convinced that Jesus' coming would bring them sight and relief from all future begging, calmly await His arrival, whereas Luke, the only Evangelist to affirm that Bartimaeus was begging, only affirms this *before* the blind man learned that Jesus was in the neighborhood. No longer begging, their entire attention is directed toward regaining their sight. The single-mindedness of their straining to learn of the near approach of the Messiah rebukes those fools who, although their only Source of spiritual light and life is passing by as the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed, divide their attention between the immortal value of their soul and their busy collecting a few pennies by the wayside! These blind beggars, customary objects of public charity, knew when to sacrifice temporal, material gain for grander blessings. O my soul, are you really earnest about receiving the blessing of Christ that you will consider it so important and so urgent that every other problem must wait until you have settled this momentous question?

**When they heard that Jesus was passing by.** They could determine that a multitude was passing by the growing murmur of voices talking and laughing and by the scuffle of feet. From some passerby they learned that their only Hope was drawing near. **They cried out, saying, Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David.** That they understood what we do by the title, *Lord*, is doubtful. Since *Lord* (*kúrie*) is also the standard form of respectful address for persons with whom one is not familiar (= "Sir, Mister"), it may not indicate special faith in Jesus as Lord of all. What can be affirmed is that their understanding is greater than those who think of Jesus as "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Mt. 16:13f). Others might refer to the Son of David as merely "Jesus of Nazareth" (Mk. 10:47; Lk. 18:37), a man differing from others only in hometown. But the bold faith of these blind men asserts itself when they unashamedly entitle Him *Son of David*, the Messiah. (See on 1:1-17, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22.)

By now, Jesus' Davidic lineage is known, but more significantly, His ample qualifications for this Messianic title are common knowledge among disciples. Even these isolated beggars in a city where Jesus had probably never before preached, know His name and fame. How significantly is this event placed! Jesus is ascending to Jerusalem to suffer and die, to be defeated—as men deem it (20:17-19; Lk. 18:34; Mt. 20:28)—and yet He is the Son of David, the Messiah of the prophets. Even though He is about to face the decisive suffering that would complete His earthly mission, He does not hesitate to

stop to help these blind men who address Him as *Son of David*. He does not forget to serve men by healing their bodies nor to do the far more important things, such as dying for them too, because both are at the heart of His true mission, two facets of the same loving obsession.

20:31 **And the multitude**, i.e. "those who were in front" of the crowd moving toward the beggars, **bebuked them, that they should hold their peace**. What motives could have produced this reaction? Did they suppose that this raucous shouting was out of character for the high dignity of Jesus? Were they irked that these tatter-demalian mendicants were using inflammatory language loaded with embarrassing, political implications that could lead to trouble with the Jerusalem authorities who regularly vacationed at Jericho? In their own blindness to Jesus' mercifulness and true Messianic dignity, did they merely suppose that the blind beggars, by this piteous yelling, were only asking that the great Rabbi accord them alms? Or are they merely angry that their shouting interrupted their own conversations? If so, the people are far less concerned about the needs of these unfortunates than they are about their own comfort. Are there some slit-eyed enemies of Jesus in this crowd, who resent anyone's attributing Messianic dignity to Jesus by the use of such titles? Were there friends who, hoping to stage a Messianic demonstration in Jerusalem, hurriedly shush up this premature acclamation? Were there disciples crowding around Jesus, even now straining to pick up His every word, who resented this vigorously noisy interruption of their concentration? Whatever the cause, these cold-hearted, presumptuous people have more concern that everything operate smoothly than that two suffering human beings should receive the blessing of their lives! Some might have growled, "The participation of ragged beggars lowers the spiritual tone of our pilgrimage! We're on our way up to Jerusalem to worship God: neither we nor Jesus can be bothered with your problems now. We have our schedule to meet and our program to follow. Perhaps the Teacher could work you into His schedule when and if He returns this way sometime after the Passover. Don't call us—we'll call you!" These pitiless patrons of orthodoxy were despising "little ones who believe in me" (18:10), forbidding and blocking their way to Jesus. (Cf. 18:6-9; Mk. 9:38f)

**But they cried out the more.** This frustrating hindrance only increased the intensity of their determination to receive help. Unlike the rich young ruler, these undiscourageable believers would not be

rebuffed by setbacks and baffling handicaps. Their persistence evidences their conviction that *the Son of David* is their only hope and help. What spirit: the greater the resistance encountered, the more they throttle their rising despair and struggle to overcome it and gain their goal! They feared that the opportunity of a lifetime was slipping through their fingers, so they grasped it the tighter lest it be forever lost. (Cf. the Syrophoenician woman's pluck and persistence, 15:21-28)

**B. RESPONSE:** A miracle of mercy proves Jesus to be the Messiah.

**20:32 And Jesus stood still.** Whereinsofar He was the central figure in the westbound caravan now, when Jesus stopped, He drew instant attention to Himself and what He is about to do. By this single action, He halted the thoughtless crowd plunging sightlessly past two blind men who need help. Despite the din and hubbub of people's voices, He too heard the passionate cry of human need over there on the edge of the road. A person can hear what he is listening for!

**Jesus stood still, and called them,** but, because of the crowd noise ("What are we stopping for?"), He apparently could not make Himself sufficiently heard by the blind men themselves, so He gave two quick orders: "Call him!" (Mk. 10:49), or better yet, "Bring him to me!" (Lk. 18:40). The reason Jesus did not personally leave His place in a merciful gesture to save the blind men the effort of having to feel their way forward to Him, may have been to let their anticipation grow into confidence in His power to heal them. At this point people in the crowd encourage the blind men: "Take heart; rise, He is calling you." (Mk. 10:49) What a rebuke is thus handed to those who had rebuked the blind men!

Mark (10:50) provides a vivid touch of human realism to Bartimaeus' faith: "Throwing off his mantle, he sprang up and came to Jesus." His mantle is the long overcoat so essential to the protection and comfort of the inhabitant of the Middle East. Why he threw it off is a mystery, but the eloquence of the fact that he did is not. If this blind man casts aside his most precious article of clothing (cf. Dt. 24:13; Ex. 22:26, 27) and risks disorientation in a crowd of strangers, he has only one solid hope of refinding it later: he can go looking for it afterwards, after David's Son has given him his sight! If Jesus should fail, his one hope of breaking out of his dark

world would be gone anyhow, so what comfort could an old overcoat offer against the chilling disappointment of a world in which the one Man who had seemed to be gifted with God's power had suddenly failed in this case? But He would not fail! What is an old, dusty overcoat to a man with EYES who can SEE to work and earn a thousand suits of clothes? But why did he throw it off? Could he not have worn it? Did he consider it a hindrance in reaching Jesus through the crowd? More likely, since an overcoat might be laid aside when the wearer must begin strenuous exercise, such as walking or running, his casting it aside here may suggest his hurry and earnestness to get to Jesus as quickly as possible.

**And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you?** There is no partiality with Jesus. Note how He turns His full attention equally to blind beggars or wealthy rulers. (19:16ff) **What will ye?** The men had asked for an unspecified expression of His mercy. "The Lord therefore in His royal majesty asked Bartimaeus to name the mercy, thus suggesting to him the fulness of the treasury of power and grace to which he came." (McGarvey, *Fourfold Gospel*, 561) **What will ye?** What a question! And yet, Jesus needs to ask it, for even though it is roughly the same request made by the mother of James and John (cf. 20:21; Mk. 10:36), He has no fear that these blind men will abuse His generosity. They would not ask for gold and glory, honor and positions of power in the Kingdom. Rather, they will shame the Apostles by paring away from their request all those superficialities, and seize upon the one essential that will bless their life more than any other.

Because His intelligent question is not intended to seek information from men so obviously in need of sight, it is clear that He means to imply, "What do you believe that the Messiah can do for you?" The Lord's query, rather than elicit information, aims to draw public attention to what He, who has just been repeatedly addressed publicly as *Son of David*, is about to do. Whereas these men had been beggars asking alms earlier (Lk. 18:35), is that the extent of their asking pity of Him? Let the crowd pause for their answer and witness His reaction.

**20:33 They say unto him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened.** This simple request is the result of countless hours of sightless meditation upon the meaning of life. All that is extraneous and superfluous has been eliminated: this is rigorous reduction to the essential. It goes straight to the point: nothing less than sight will do! Were the Lord to ask us what we need specifically when we pray for His

grace, would our answer readily reflect our self-knowledge, our real needs and our long-range goals? Or is there much vagueness and unreality to our requests? If so, it may be that we receive not specifically, because we ask not specifically. (Jas. 4:2c) Let us learn to answer with true insight the Lord's question: "What will ye that I should do for you?"

Matthew eliminates many interesting details in this story which are included by Mark and Luke. May we not ask if it is his point to lay the essential facts before his reader, as if to ask, "Dear Jewish reader, as you contemplate Him whom these sightless men hail as the Messiah, *the Son of David*, Him who not only accepts this high title, but majestically proves His right to wear it by answering their prayer, cannot their prayer become yours? — **Lord, that our eyes may be opened!**?"

20:34 **And Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes.** The warmth of Jesus' compassion for these blind men stands out in marked contrast with the cold, heartless hindering by the crowds. He heard their piteous cry, felt deeply their need, suffered with them their hurt, was thrilled by their persistence that pushed their abilities to the limit, and was touched by their irrepressible, unembarrassed faith in Him. No wonder He willingly showed Himself to be the Rewarder of those who by faith diligently seek Him! (Heb. 11:6) Mark (10:52) and Luke (18:42) record His words: "Receive your sight; go your way; your faith has made you well." Absent from His words is any order to be silent. He does not bother to recommend circumspection now. Since the final hour is about to strike, the earlier concern about ill-timed, wrong-headed publicity now has little if any reason to exist. In fact, the entrance into Jerusalem which will occur shortly, will be nothing but the most public proclamation possible that He is indeed the Son of David. (See on chapter 21.)

**As He touched their eyes, straightway they received their sight.** With this single, majestic, yet warmly human, act, He fully justified their confidence in Him and the appropriateness of their use of the glorious Messianic title, "Son of David." Without any direct word and by His own tacit acknowledgement, He let the full impact of this miracle ripple over the multitude. Naturally, this sign of Jesus' true Messiahship would not be lost on people sensitive to Isa. 29:18 and 35:5 in their relative contexts. (See notes on 11:5.)

Although Jesus had said, "Go (your way)," Matthew says they **followed him**. Naturally enough, they chose His way. This is not

disobedience, but grateful loyalty, because their reaction means: "Lord, your way is now our way!" These two blind men who had formerly had little hope of traveling clear to Jerusalem, except with someone patiently guiding them the 25 km (15 mi.) uphill trip, now march spiritedly along with every other pilgrim on the way to worship God. No wonder their exuberant joy pours itself out in unabashed praise to God! (Lk. 18:43) Their infectious enthusiasm and the exciting effect of the miracle opened the mouths of their fellow travellers who also took up God's praise for the miracle they had witnessed. These penniless beggars, rather than seek first a stable income to care for their creaturely necessities, seek first the Kingdom of God in the personal discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

Matthew concludes the final section of Jesus' public ministry before the Last Week with this significant tag line: **They received their sight and followed him**, almost as if to nudge the reader: "And you, does this miracle by the Son of David say anything to you? If so, let it be written of you, as it is of them: They received their sight and followed Him!"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Who called Jesus "Son of David"? What others in Christ's ministry also called Him this?
2. Why did they call Jesus this? What did they mean by it?
3. What difficulties did Bartimaeus have in making his request known and in coming to Jesus?
4. What difficulties are there in the accounts about the blind men?
5. How did Jesus perform the miracle of healing their blindness, i.e. with words, acts, clay, etc.?
6. What text(s) in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 find their practical application or illustration in this section?

### DO YOU HAVE THE WORD IN YOUR HEART?

#### Matthew 19, 20

Who said the following? To whom? Why? Under what circumstances? Be sure to give all various forms in different gospel accounts, all possible manuscript readings, translations and interpretations.

What do you think is the true meaning?

1. "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister."
2. "So the last shall be first, and the first last."
3. "Lord, have mercy on us, thou son of David."
4. "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."
5. "Why askest thou me concerning that which is good? One there is who is good: . . ."
6. "There are eunuchs, that made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake."
7. ". . . for to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven."
8. "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me."
9. "Who then can be saved?"
10. "Whoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery."
11. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."
12. "If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments."
13. "Ye who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

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