

# KINGDOM ENTRANCE

*MATTHEW 19:13-30*

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever done something that was terrifying, or scary? Especially, the kind of thing where you have to put your wellbeing and safety in the hands of someone else?

I had a situation like that just recently. This summer, our family took a trip up to Put-In-Bay on South Bass Island up on Lake Erie. South Bass Island is just 3 miles off the coast of northern Ohio. To get to Put-In-Bay, you have to take a brief 18 minute ferry ride. But, on that particular day the waters of Lake Erie were anything but calm. They were full of huge white caps, smashing against the ferry pier and rocketing 20-30 feet into the air. It was so bad that it was flooding the pier, and the water was coming up the bottom edge of the cars waiting to board the ferry. It was looking really bad out there.

As we were waiting in our van, with a line of other cars to make our way to the island, we could watch the ferry boat coming and going. But, that didn't help us much. We could see the ferry bobbing up and down and tipping back and forth...with what appeared to be a cavalier approach to the seriously choppy waters. We began to have second thoughts. But, we had a vacation planned and we decided to go for it. We saw the captain successfully navigate the waters 2-3 times while we waited. So, we drove our van through the waters on the flooded pier and onto the tightly packed ferry...right next to a giant camper.

The ferry eventually released from the pier and immediately we could watch the shoreline bounce up and down, the waters of Lake Erie were apparently trying to smash our little ferry boat into the water. Meanwhile, the camper next to us was wobbling back and forth in response to the waters beneath us. It was tense. It was scary. But, we had to trust the captain of the ferry boat. We had to trust that they knew what they were doing, and could confidently get us to our destination. And, they did. We arrived safely on the shores of South Bass Island a little wet, but safe and sound. We trusted the years of experience that the ferry captains had built up. We were dependent on someone outside of ourselves to navigate, protect, and deliver us to our destination. We had faith, evidenced in our action of driving onto the ferry, that the captain and his boat were the only safe way to our destination.

And this is the kind of sub-theme that runs through our text today. Let's look together at Matthew 19:13-30 and see how the author shows us the different kinds of people who Jesus interacts with and how they relate to their need of him.

*Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away.*

*And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

*And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*

— Matthew 19:13–30 (ESV)

## A CHILDISH DEPENDENCE

*Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away. — Matthew 19:13-15*

This is the classic coloring page scene (or flannel graph for us older folks) that we love to portray. It is certainly heartwarming and wonderfully encouraging to know that Jesus cares for these precious little ones. But, before we jump to all the things this text has been used to support, let's look at why Matthew has this short but important interaction with Jesus. And, why it appears right here in his gospel. There is more going on here than a simple blessing of children.

Young children in this time were not viewed the same way that much of our modern culture thinks of children. In the words of Michael Green, "Children in ancient society...were there to be seen and not heard. They had no rights, no status. They did not matter very much until they grew up."<sup>1</sup> These children were not loved, cherished or beheld like they are in our day. So, why would Jesus go against the culture when the disciples scold the parents and try to shew them away? Why does Jesus say, "Let the come...and do not hinder them"? Jesus says this because they serve as examples of the people that the

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<sup>1</sup> The Message of Matthew, by Michael Greene

kingdom belongs to. Jesus says, "...for to such belong the kingdom of heaven." What is it about these young children that Matthew highlights for us in his gospel? Why even include this brief interaction at all?

Let's consider the example of a young child and see what we discover. And, yes kids, we're going to be talking about you for a moment, just like the Matthew does. Children cannot provide for themselves, especially very young children. An infant without a mother to nurse it, will die. A young child who doesn't have their diapers changed will develop wounds and sores. Young children need someone to care for and provide for them. They are completely dependent on someone else to provide for them. I'm going to say this again, because we can't miss this aspect of the example: young children are unable to provide for themselves. They can't feed or dress themselves. In times of trouble, they can't defend themselves. Relatively speaking, they are helpless. And I'm sure many parents were deeply aware of this child-like helplessness as your families were getting ready to come to church this morning.

So, why am I spending so much time drawing this point out? This short, interaction could have easily been left out, but Matthew decided to include it. It's good for us to try and understand why it's here. Based upon it's position, I believe that Matthew is trying to get us to see the helplessness we have before God's condemnation and judgement. We need a savior. We need Jesus. We need someone to provide for us. We can do nothing to save ourselves. These children were probably the last humans that would be expected to inherit the kingdom, but they are the perfect examples of the kind of desperate need we have for a savior.

As Matthew transitions from this scene to the next, in a final act of compassion and grace, Jesus lays his hands on them and then continues along his way. But let's not forget this truth. Let's not forget what Matthew has chosen to show us right here, right now in the story. Because, Jesus' interaction with these children is deeply connected to the next section...

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF POSSESSION

*And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. — Matthew 19:16-22*

Up to this point in Matthew, we've seen several instances of demon possession. People being controlled by evil spirits and acting in ways that hurt themselves. Or people who have some physical deformities that prevents them from living a full life. These people are broken and poor. They need a savior. They need redemption. They need restoration. But here, we see what appears to be very different kind of person. We see a man coming to Jesus who has "great possessions".

This man addresses Jesus, calling him “teacher”. I’m not going to over emphasize this point, but how he chooses to address Jesus the Messiah is revealing about what he thinks. This is the fourth time in Matthew that someone has come to Jesus and addressed him as “Teacher”. Each time, it was used by the scribes or Pharisees to address Jesus. Simply by this title, we should have a clue as to what’s truly going on here.

And with this address, the man asks Jesus what he can do to secure his way to heaven. Ironically, Matthew records how Jesus redirects the man from “what must I do” to the “one who is good”. Jesus’ words are pointing the way to eternal life. It’s not about what, it’s about who. But, Jesus lets the man continue. If the standard is “good”ness then a person must be perfect, as evidenced by keeping the commandments. The man asks yet another question: “Which ones?” Which commandments are necessary to be kept? Jesus begins quoting from Moses’ writings, commonly known as “The Law”. But, after listing 5 of the expected commands from what we know as the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:12-16), Jesus shows the breadth and depth of the perfection that is needed. He quotes from Leviticus 19:18. The standard isn’t keeping “10 simple rules”, the standard is much, much higher. To have (or to earn) eternal life, a person must perfectly keep all the laws. Leviticus something like 600 individual commands, on how you must live and how you must deal with any violation of these commands. The standard is perfection. Perfection means the entire law must be kept!

Now, what’s interesting is that Jesus has left out the three commands: the first is about Yahweh being the only God in their life (a person’s only object of worship), the second is the command about the Sabbath, and the third deals with the numerous varieties of coveting (Exodus 20:1-17). Yet, in a moment of sheer pride and arrogance the man proclaims he’s kept them all. He’s earned his right to be in heaven. The man who has everything, believes he has purchased his spot in heaven. So, perhaps to confirm his seat in the Kingdom to come he asks, what’s left?

At this point, Jesus shows the man his true standing before God. Jesus essentially says, “If you would be perfect...” (perfection being the standard), then you should have no problem trading your reliance on everything you have in this world...for me. Again, Jesus redirects us from “what” to “who”.

The man suddenly realizes his situation, and with sorrow...walks away. This man may not be possessed by demons, but he certainly is possessed by his possessions. The things he owns, own him. And the worst part about this is that Jesus’ gift is free and open to him. Jesus has offered it. But, this man is unwilling to let someone else provide for him. This man is unwilling to be child-like in his dependence on the Messiah to save him.

You see, the standard to earn salvation is impossible for us to meet. A person must be truly and completely perfect in God’s eyes. And, there’s only one human who has ever walked this earth who was perfect (1 Peter 1:19). That is the only human who will ever be perfect. And his name is Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans that in our humanity we have earned (Romans 6:23) our way to hell, and there is nothing we can do to reverse that. We are dead (Ephesians 2:5). But, God has moved on our behalf by sending his son Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice that we could not be. By looking to him and trusting in his perfect life, complete death and glorious resurrection, we can be saved! We don’t have to experience unimaginable,

eternal suffering! We can have eternal life in glory with Jesus! But, it takes a humble heart. It takes a heart that's willing to depend on someone else. Someone named Jesus. Jesus calls you to come to him. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to confess your sins, turn from them and cling to Jesus as your only hope?

And, if you're here today and you have already done that, are you still resting in his work? Or have you let the importance of 'good works' cloud your total and utter dependence on Jesus? If you have, confess it, turn from it, and behold the glory of Jesus.

But, this isn't where Matthew ends the story. He doesn't just show us our desperate need for Jesus. He also shows us how the world's lies permeate culture. Look at how the disciples react to Jesus in the next few verses...

## THE TRULY RICH

*And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. — Matthew 19:23-30*

After the encounter with the rich man, Jesus turns to his disciples and relays a deep and sinister truth about obsession with earthly riches. This rich man, and those like him, who put their trust, hope and future stability in the riches they can earn and count, have great difficulty turning to Jesus. And, you see that Jesus repeats himself. The original listeners would have perked up and leaned in as Jesus says the same things two different ways, repeating himself for emphasis. The second time he uses a short illustration: a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

Now, many years ago, I was taught that "the eye of the needle" was a very small gate in the wall of Jerusalem and that camels had to get on their knees to pass through this gate. It was possible, but it took great effort on the part of the person guiding the camel to coax it through the gate. While this is a nice story, it's historically unreliable. And furthermore, it doesn't seem to fit with the verses that follow.

In these verses, Jesus is showing us that those that depend on what they can earn or accomplish in this earth, will need a miracle to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is literally impossible to earn (or work) your way to heaven. This would have been quite the shock to those hearing, as exemplified by the disciples response. They are essentially freaking out at this point. They were "greatly astonished". When they heard these words, and realize that someone as privileged and well-to-do as a rich person will have great

difficulty entering the kingdom of heaven...they are left to wonder who, then, can get in?! Jesus, anticipating his future suffering and death, simply responds that the impossible things are possible with God. It's God that works to bring us to him. It's God that breaks the heart of man and draws them to himself. It's God that sent his one and only son to make the impossible...possible.

This isn't the first time the disciples (and the crowds) have heard a message like this. Earlier in Matthew 7:13, Jesus told the crowds that we must enter through the narrow gate. It's this narrow, a hard gate, that leads to life. When we're dealing with the rest of eternity, the stakes are high. What is more difficult than to let go of what we can see, smell, taste, touch, and earn...to trust in someone else to save us and secure our eternal rest? Only this kind of gate, this kind of faith saves. Only this kind of faith provides real hope.

Now, Peter is in the background, and you can almost hear the wheels turning in his brain. If rich people enter through great difficulty, then what about poor people? What about those kind of people who have given everything up to follow the Messiah. People...like..."me"? Now, before we jump onto Peter for asking such an obviously self-focused question, notice Jesus' response. When Peter asks, his question about what the disciples will have, Jesus provides a rich answer (that lacks a rebuke).

The disciples of Jesus will be elevated to thrones, judging Israel. Yes, this poor, rag-tag group will be lifted from their lowly positions, to ones that are over the pious religious leaders of the day. If I can put it this way, the reign of grace will overcome the reign the law. Now there are so many side-discussions we can get into in this text ranging from New Covenant illusions to future kingdom structures. But the basic premise of what Jesus is saying here is that there is an incredible reversal that's taking place as Jesus walks the earth. And for Matthew's audience and us today, we can rejoice in that reversal. Those who trust and rely on earthly means of hope and salvation will not be those who enter the kingdom of God. But, there isn't just blessing for the disciples, there is blessing for all who sacrifice the things of this world to believe in Jesus turn from the things of this world for salvation. For many, it requires an intentional and difficult release of earthly possessions, relationships, and observable evidence to rely on the work of Jesus alone for salvation. We must trade all of what we can see, taste, touch and earn, for hope in a risen Savior named Jesus Christ. He is the *only* way. And, by sacrificing those things, we earn immeasurable riches and blessing, and eternal life. (Ephesians 1:3-11)

Your status and your standing on this earth do not determine your status and standing before an almighty God who demands justice for the human race that has rebelled against him. What a scary thought! Yet, the sweet words of Jesus still ring in our ears. *"Let the little children come to me...for to such belongs the kingdom of God."* Jesus calls us to come. Jesus welcomes us to put our faith in him. Jesus offers a light burden and an easy yolk. (Matthew 11:30)

## REFLECT AND RESPOND

So, where do you find yourself in a passage like this? Are you working to earn your salvation? Are you possessed by the things of this world? Are you desperately clinging to Jesus for your salvation and hope? Are you filled with humility and gratitude for what Jesus has done? Or are you filled with passion and

pride for the things of this world? Are you unwilling to trust Jesus and let him be the King of your eternity? Are you wavering between any of number these? Have you given up and surrendered to these false, earthly assurances or beliefs? Or, are you wrestling and struggling against them?

Whether you are young or old, this message is for you. (Yes kids, this message is for you too.) Whether you haven't yet submitted to Jesus' work, or you've been walking faithfully with the Lord for decades, this message is for you.

The message of the Gospel is for every day. The truth in the Gospel is the only way to life (John 14:6). The world may not care about eternity, or even deny it's existence, but Jesus tells us that judgement and it's destruction are coming (Matthew 13:36-43). Jesus invites to you "come" and find rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30). Are you willing to come to him? Jesus doesn't shove our cars onto the ferry against our will. We must willingly obey his call to come to him. Are you willing to trade your temporarily earthly riches, for faith and trust in him to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Are you willing to act in faith? Repent of your sins by turning away from them and following Jesus. Seek forgiveness for your sins, confess Jesus as your master, and start walking in the newness of life.

If you're listening today, and you've already given your life to the Lord, are there areas of life where you are still clinging to what we see, hear, hold and control? Are there places and situations that still tempt you to faithlessness? Repent, and pray that God will strengthen your faith through the truth of His word.

Faith doesn't come from what we observe or count in this life. Faith comes by knowing what the Scriptures say, choosing to believe it's message is true for you, and then living that trueness out in your life. Are you willing to drive your car onto the ferry, and rest in the work of the captain? We must act in obedience to Jesus' call to come to him. We must rest in what he has done. The rest that puts us in the wonderful arms of our Savior.