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The Gospel According to Matthew

It's All of Grace – a Hard Lesson to Learn

November 24, 2019

Sermon Text: Matt 20:1-16

Scripture Reading: Matthew 19:27-
20:34

In this present life and world, things operate in a way that usually make sense to us. That is what Job's friends tried to tell Job. You do *this*, and *that* happens. The world functions this way. Work, merit, and reward –

- Work and receive a paycheck
- Don't work and you get nothing
- Do your best and the best will come to you
- Eat healthy and you will be healthy

- Study hard and receive academic accolades
- And when it comes to religion, be good, say your prayers, tithe, attend church regularly, and you will receive a payoff from the Lord. Fail to do these things and He will come down on you.

Now, there is actually quite a bit of truth in these statements. The Bible even warns the sluggard of the consequences of his laziness, and the Lord does tell us to be good, say our prayers, give generously, attend church regularly, and so on. Eating healthy does have a positive effect and so on.

Nothing is certain of course because this world is fallen. Things aren't right and sometimes we work hard, yet get nothing or we do our best and eat healthy, yet still get sick. There are many people who aren't good, who don't pray, who never go to church, and everything seems to be going quite well for them. But generally we abide by the assumption that we *earn* and

then *receive* as a result. We reap what we sow in other words. And that is even how the Old Covenant functioned, right? *Do this and live. Don't do this and you will die.*

But the lesson Jesus would have us learn, as He sets it out here in Matthew, is that *things are much different in His kingdom*. Our thinking requires a complete new re-boot. Much of the New Testament concern this very issue. It is why the Jews, for instance, kept wanting to bring the Old Covenant together into the New Covenant. But it cannot be. An old patch cannot be sown on a new garment, nor can new wine be put into old wineskins. The two are incompatible. And *we* have far more of this thinking in us as well that we realize, do we not?

Let's review this parable then before we move on.

1. In response to Jesus' teaching (in connection with the rich young ruler) that it is, humanly speaking, impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom, Peter asks a question.
2. The question is – “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” That is, what reward will there be?

3. Jesus answered and said that the Apostles' reward would be great, as will it be for *everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms* to follow Him.

And then Jesus concluded with the real point he wanted them to get:

But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

When Jesus moves on (in this 20th chapter) to tell the parable of the landowner hiring laborers throughout the day, *He is still illustrating and teaching this same principle*. We know this because the parable ends this way:

Mat 20:16 So the last will be first, and the first last.”

It really is a result of what Jesus tells the complaining workers:

Mat 20:15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

In other words, what Jesus is teaching Peter and *us*, is that His kingdom is not based upon works and merit, but upon grace from which proceed His kindness and generosity to us *which is entirely undeserved, unearned,*

unmerited. Surely this is true of everything we enjoy in Him now, and it will be so then when He returns. The Lord delights in making the last first and the first last:

1Co 1:26-29 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27) But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (28) God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (29) so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

So the rewards that await us in the fullness of the kingdom of heaven are *all* incredible – for everyone. Beyond imagination. A new heavens and earth, a new creation, a new Eden where only righteousness dwells. Every trace of the curse washed away. And *how the Lord rewards each of us* is totally of grace, absolutely unmerited so that no one can boast. Furthermore, *no one will complain*, unlike these first workers complained. There will be no jockeying for position, no seeking of greatness – only and all praise will be given to Christ because it is all of him.

Our thinking about greatness therefore requires quite a lot of sanctification. We will even be surprised by the Lord’s generous grace on that Day:

Mat 25:34-41 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (35) For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, (36) I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ (37) Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? (38) And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? (39) And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ (40) And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (41) “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

See it? The wicked come to Him just certain that they had merited great reward because of all the “great” things they had done. But it turns out

that what the Lord considers “great” is radically different.

Many times now you have heard me encourage you (and I suppose I do it to encourage myself too!) regarding our small numbers here. We are surrounded by supposedly “Christian” teachers and preachers, counselors, experts who regularly equate numbers with success or failure. Do you understand that this is the very thing the Lord would have us get a grip on? It is absolutely wrong of us to covet a worldly concept of “greatness” for ourselves and be all downcast because somehow so many would consider us a failure. *The Lord’s real blessing even in this present life is surely much different than most of us might believe, and we need to have our thinking on these things corrected.*

So the last shall be first, and the first, last.

Over and over again the Lord tells us this very thing:

Luk 13:29-30 And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. (30) And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

There is one more point that Jesus is making here for Peter’s instruction. God chose Abraham and from Abraham He brought forth the Jewish nation. He made the Old Covenant with Abraham’s physical descendants and even in the New Testament we see things playing out in this order:

Mat 15:24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Mat 10:5-6 These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, (6) but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Christ went to the Jews *first*. They were first, in this sense and the Gentiles were last. But what Peter and his fellow Jews needed to learn was that the kingdom of God is not preferential to the Jews. There is no seniority in the kingdom.

And many people need to learn this same truth today. Any teaching that the physical, earthly nation of Israel is foremost in Christ’s kingdom is absolutely wrong. And yet much of evangelicalism has been teaching this for decades. It does great harm and even promotes a kind of racism in the church.

Let's move on then to this next small section of chapter 20 – which though small is quite remarkable:

Jesus Predicts His Death and Resurrection

Mat 20:17-19 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, (18) “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death (19) and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”

This is not the first time Jesus had told the disciples these things. Remember?

Mat 16:21-23 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (22) And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” (23) But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Here is the point I want to really drive home to us now:

The Bible is a closed book to every human being until and unless the Lord opens it to them. His Word remains foolishness to us unless by His Spirit our blindness is healed.

And right here in these disciples we have a perfect example of this. Here is what we would think would have been a fundamental, foundational “ABC’s” truth to the Jews: the Messiah must take our sins upon Himself and be put to death and rise again on the third day. The Jews’ own scriptures said so over and over again in many ways.

And yet they didn’t get it. Until....well, let me show you:

Luk 24:13-35 That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, (14) and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. (15) While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. (16) But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

(17) And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. (18)

Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” (19) And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, (20) and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. (21) But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened.

(22) Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, (23) and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. (24) Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

(25) And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! (26) Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (27) **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning**

himself. (28) So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, (29) but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them.

(30) When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. (31) And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. (32) They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, **while he opened to us the Scriptures?**” (33) And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, (34) saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” (35) Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the *breaking* of the bread.

And here is the point, though we could say much more about these things:

The Bible is a closed book to us until and unless the Lord, by His Spirit, opens it to us.

It’s true. If you are a Christian, then there was a point in your life, perhaps

it happened over time, that suddenly this book became alive to you. Before that it was either jibberish or, even if you acknowledged it to be God's Word because that is what you were taught, you really could not read it with understanding. This was true of you:

2Co 4:3-6 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (4) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (5) For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. (6) For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And again:

2Co 3:15-17 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. (16) But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (17) Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

I want to ask you a question as we end this morning. Is there a "veil" over the

Bible that is blinding you to the glory of Christ? When you read the Bible or hear it taught and preached, what is your response? Can you remember anything that you heard? Are there times when you can say "I see it!"? Or are you, quite frankly, *bored with it all*? Can you say this:

Psa 119:12-16 Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! (13) With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. (14) In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. (15) I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. (16) I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

This is much more than mere memorization of lots of Bible verses, you see. What we are talking about is the work that the Lord, by His Spirit, does in us when He regenerates our hearts and saves us. Until then, the Bible is a closed book to blind eyes.

If this is you. If your eyes are blind to God's Word, then there is one, vital, crucial message for you to hear:

You must be born again.