

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

MATTHEW 19:23-20:16

THE main values of this section are indicated in the words of Jesus recorded in verses twenty-six and thirty of chapter nineteen, taken in conjunction with those found in verse sixteen of chapter twenty, **“With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible . . . but many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first . . . So the last shall be first, and the first last.”**

These verses bring into immediate prominence our Master’s deductions from His teaching; but the section cannot be intelligently understood save as we remember its relation to that which has preceded it.

In this section the King turned again from the crowd to His own disciples. The paragraph begins, **“And Jesus said unto His disciples,”** and it is directly connected with the case of the young ruler.

All that our Lord said to His disciples concerning riches and the Kingdom of God; and all that He said in answer to a question which Peter propounded, grew out of the coming of the young ruler, and our Lord’s dealing with him. The teaching goes far beyond the case of the young ruler, and far beyond all similar cases; but it begins there; and we certainly shall not understand our Lord’s attitude when He spoke of riches, neither shall we understand His parable, if we forget these two preliminary matters; first, that He was talking to His own disciples; and secondly, that He was speaking to them in the light of what had happened with regard to the young ruler, and of the attitude of their minds resulting from His attitude toward the young ruler.

We may, then, divide our study into two parts:

- The first, a comparatively brief, and yet a most important one, Christ’s comment on the case of the rich young ruler, and the resulting conversation.
- Then secondly; Christ having settled the difficulty suggested by the disciples, Peter raised a new question:
“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” and Christ answered him.

First, Christ’s comment on the case of the rich young ruler and the resulting conversation.

We may read an entirely false meaning into the words of Christ concerning the rich young ruler unless we are careful to catch the Master's tone. Although the fact is not recorded here, one of the other Evangelists makes the very interesting declaration that when the rich young ruler had said to Jesus, in answer to His presentation of the twofold table of the Decalogue as the standard of measurement, Master, all these things have I observed from my youth, "**Jesus beholding him, loved him.**"

Now with that love in His heart, Christ turned to His own disciples and said, "**How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!**"

That was a severe word, but there were tears in it, there was pity in it, there was love in it. We shall do no violence to this text if we change it slightly, and read "It is very difficult for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven."

And when He repeated the same thing with a new emphasis, there was still the same tone and the same spirit, the tone and spirit of regret, and sorrow, and love, "**And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.**"

Why is it difficult for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven?

Here again we need not indulge in speculation. Let us go back to the King's own wonderful Manifesto the Sermon on the Mount.

In His first sentence He set the door open, and revealed how men may enter into all the blessedness which He described. "**Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.**"

Now over against that fundamental assertion put those tender, regretful words of Jesus, It is hard work for a rich man to enter in. Why? Because wealth means power, and power is far more likely to create pride than to create poverty of spirit. It is very difficult for a wealthy man to be poor in spirit; not impossible in the economy of God; but very, very difficult.

Jesus had seen the going away of that rich young ruler, and the cry of His heart was full of sorrow, for He loved him.

It is more than hard, it is practically impossible. "**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.**" possibly by the "needle's eye," our Lord referred to the small gate of a city, through which no camel could pass except by being unloaded, and bending in order to gain entrance.

It is a figure intended to teach the impossibility, so far as the man himself is concerned.

It is impossible for any man who is possessed of wealth which gives him power, to become poor in spirit, and learn the lesson of an absolute submission in his own strength.

Now notice the disciples' question.

When Jesus had said this thing, and said it with a sob and a regret in His voice, the disciples were astonished exceedingly, saying, "**Who then can be saved?**"

Here we may wrong the disciples if we are not careful. The usual, and popular, and yet superficial interpretation of this is that they meant to say, "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?" - that they were each looking to the time when rich and influential men would come into the Kingdom the more easily because of their wealth. But probably that would be to charge them with baser materialism than that of which they were really guilty.

One would rather believe that when Christ said that, they saw very deeply into the heart of His meaning, and saw that He intended to teach that absolute poverty of spirit, freedom from the desire to possess for selfish purposes, lay at the wicket-gate of the Kingdom; and that they said in effect, in one of those confessions of the heart that men suddenly make oftentimes, and hardly know they are making them.

There is not one of us that would not be rich if we could; and if the desire to possess wealth, and the determination to do it if we were able, prevents us coming into the Kingdom, who can be saved?

These disciples were in all likelihood more honest than we often are. They recognized that if they could have possessed the young man's wealth, they would; and they recognized that Jesus Christ in His statement of difficulty was not dealing with a class after all - He never did deal with a class - but that He was getting down to the common facts of human nature and human peril; and they said, "**Who then can be saved?**"

Now carefully notice our Lord's answer, which is an answer to the whole question, and not to a part of it.

The question is this "If a rich man cannot be saved, who then can be saved? Who then, in view of these terms and these requirements, can be saved at all; what hope is there of any man's salvation?"

Christ's answer was to the question concerning the salvation of man; and not merely to that concerning the salvation of a rich man "**With men this is impossible;**" no man can be saved out of his own will, by his own determination, whether he be rich or poor, bond or free, "**But with God all things are possible.**"

This word of Christ was not simply His declaration that a rich man cannot be saved by the power of men; but that with God he can be saved. In a moment He had risen from that first ground of viewing the wealthy class; into the larger ground of recognizing the underlying humanity of all men.

One other thought as to emphasis here. Our Lord did not say, to men this thing is impossible, to God all things are possible.

There is a very peculiar value in the preposition which He used. With men impossible, with God possible. If a man co-operates with men, makes their maxims his, makes their methods his, salvation is impossible. So long as a man lives upon the plane of humanity alone, and loses his touch with God, and recognition of Him, he cannot be saved. The material level of life will have material ideals, a material goal, and material failure. But with God; that is the man who has linked his life to God will find it possible, be he wealthy or be he poor, to enter the Kingdom and be saved. So the whole theme of human salvation lies by suggestion within this statement of Jesus.

Now let us consider Peter's comment and the answering instruction of our Lord.

Peter's question went back undoubtedly to the case of the rich young ruler, and we are simply compelled to understand it thus, and to put a resulting emphasis upon the passage.

“Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”

Jesus had said to the ruler, **“If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me.”**

Peter said, We have done it; what is the treasure we are to have?

The subject of the possibility of human salvation had gone out of Peter's mind. The Lord had settled that, and now we have a new subject.

Peter was, in his deepest thinking, putting himself and others into contrast with the young ruler. It is as though he said, “A young man came to Thee, O Master, with great wealth. You told him what to do, and You promised him treasure in heaven, and he has turned his back upon Thee, he has not been obedient. But, Master, we have been obedient, we have left all to follow Thee; what treasure are we to have?”

Now mark the answer of Jesus, and let His answer rebuke any tendency in our soul to be angry with Peter on account of his question, for the Lord was not angry with him.

The answer of Jesus moved within two distinct realms;

- First, a definite answer to his question about reward;
- Secondly, a warning against what is revealed in his asking the question.

He said to him in effect, You have asked Me what you shall have, I will tell you, **“Verily”** mark the word of authority **“I say unto you, That ye who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of His glory.”**

He took one long glance ahead over the centuries to the day which He described as **“the regeneration.”**

These men were to share in His authority in His Kingdom which is that of regeneration. That was His first answer to them. But His answer was broader. Not only ye, but all others who shall suffer loss, all those people who in the coming days shall forsake **“houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”**

So that our Lord did not rebuke Peter’s question, but answered it.

It is as though He said to them, “Is it true you have left all to follow Me? If you want to know what you shall have, here is My answer, as to you particularly, the twelve first messengers of My love. My Kingdom is the day of regeneration and restoration, and when I have won the victory, you shall be administrators sitting upon thrones, and judging; and all who suffer loss, turning the back upon property, and friends, and love, and relations, shall enter into great possessions. I did not speak idly to the young ruler; whoever sacrifices for Me shall win a hundredfold.”

But now notice the word of warning.

“But,” said Jesus, **“many that are last shall be first; and the last shall be first.”**

Then followed the parable, and it ended with these words, **“So the last shall be first, and the first last.”**

Notice carefully these two statements, and the relation of the parable to them.

Christ warned His disciples by saying to them; **“Many that are last shall be first; and the last shall be first.”**

Then He illustrated the meaning of His words by a parable, which was a parable to His own disciples. We must not take this parable and make it of general application.

John Ruskin, in his book, *Unto This Last*, has absolutely missed the meaning of it. There is an application of it to the social order which will be realized when that order becomes Christian. But within the Christian Church it is a parable concerning precedence in the matters of reward. It is a parable directed against Peter’s implication of superiority over the young ruler.

“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”

We are the first of Thy disciples. That man has turned his back, and even though he comes back presently at the eleventh hour, we are first; **“What shall we have?”** There are many first that shall be last, there are last that shall be first. So our Lord would teach these men the truth concerning precedence in His Kingdom, and He would correct their implication of superiority.

The figure of the householder was here used by Jesus of Himself. He had used it upon one occasion of His own disciples, in chapter thirteen.

He used it in several parables of Himself.

The whole application of the parable is to service, and the reward of service for men in the Kingdom.

- There is no question here about salvation, no question about entering the Kingdom.
- There is no thought about equal payment for unequal work.

If we attempt to base upon this parable the teaching that if a man lives and loiters through ten hours, and comes in at the eleventh, he is on equal rights with the man who has worked from the beginning, we are absolutely unfair to the other parables of Jesus.

If we build upon this parable a doctrine of social order, we must also include the parables of the talents and the pounds, for all three are needed to have a perfect picture of social service.

This parable is intended to teach one simple truth, that a man's reward will be, not according to the length of his service, not according to the notoriety of his service, but according to his fidelity to the opportunity which is given him.

The men at the beginning of the day entered into a covenant and an agreement. The Master of the vineyard went out later in the day, saw others standing idle, and sent them in. When He said, **"Why stand ye here all the day idle?"** their answer was, **"Because no man hath hired us."**

That is why they had not been at work before, they had not had their opportunity. When He created opportunity by sending them in, then in that last hour they were true to the only opportunity they had, and therefore their reward was as great as the reward of the men that had been at work twelve hours. It is as though He said to Peter, to revert to our illustration, if that young man comes now, though he has been long delaying, his reward will be as great as yours, if he is faithful.

Yes, but why did not the Lord give him the opportunity before? That is not in the parable. If we take the other parables we find in that of the pounds, that He gave to every man a pound. That teaches that there is an opportunity for every man. If we want the doctrine of opportunity we find it there, not here.

It is absolutely unfair to read into any parable something for which the parable was not used.

- He first corrected the false standards of comparison, such as length of notoriety of service;
- He then revealed the true standard of reward that of fidelity to opportunity.

Here is a man to whom is given the opportunity to speak to thousands upon thousands of people the great word of God. It is a great opportunity. But here is a woman living away off upon the mountain, who never saw a city in her life, but has wrought with God in the training of two or three children. When that man and woman stand for final reward, they will each have their penny if they have been faithful. This is so in all Christian service.

So in conclusion we have no right to take this parable and use it in application to the social questions of unregenerate men.

It is impossible to do so without violating the sense of justice. Christianity has no pity for those who, being unfit remain so, in spite of the opportunity for fitness which He creates.

It is a false message to the age which says that Christianity will take hold of the unfit man and nurse him and take care of him, when by response to her evangel he can be made fit.

- If his unfitness is the unfitness of a physical limitation for which he is not to blame, Christianity will take hold of him, and love him.
- But if the unfitness is a moral disease which Jesus Christ can correct, then Christianity is sterner than Hebraism in refusing to feed him or help him until he have taken advantage of the dynamic of Jesus Christ.

The one plain meaning of this parable is that those highly privileged will not receive wage according to privilege, but according to fidelity. Or again, those whose privilege is less, will not receive less wage if they are true to the opportunity which comes to them.

Consequently, the great word to each one of us is a word that warns us against being proud of anything we have done in the past and imagining that by virtue of a greater opportunity we are entering into a greater reward. It is a word that drives us back to the whole day, or the one hour of opportunity, in order that we may fill it to the full with consecrated toil, and so enter into the reward which He gives to faithfulness.

~ end of chapter 54 ~

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