



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Nineteen

XI. Matthew 18:1-20:34 - The Community of the Messiah Revealed (Fourth Discourse) (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nineteen

Continuing this discourse, Jesus teaches extensively that divorce, except in cases of adultery, went against God's original intention for marriage, something that was intended to last for the lifetime of one of the spouses. Jesus taught that any subsequent remarriage following a divorce that was not due to sexual immorality would begin in adultery, although after that it should be seen as a legally binding marriage for life.

Contrary to the social norm and even the natural reaction of his own disciples, Jesus blessed the children that were brought to him, reiterating his previous teaching that the Kingdom belonged to such as these.

A rich young man approaches Jesus to ask how he can inherit eternal life. After agreeing that he had kept God's law, he was then told by Jesus that, if he wanted to be perfect, he should give his wealth away to the poor. This was something that was beyond him and he went away grieved. Jesus went on to teach his disciples how hard it is for those who rely on worldly wealth to enter the Kingdom and how great the rewards are for those who do.

XI.b Matthew 19:1-20:34 - Valuing the Kingdom community

The great Galilæan ministry has now ended, and Jesus and his disciples begin the momentous final journey to Jerusalem. In response to testing by the Pharisees, Jesus explains the sanctity of marriage (vv.3-12), and reveals the tragedy of the rich young man (vv.16-22), in contrast to the gracious reward awaiting those who accept his call and follow him (vv.23-30).

This leads to the parable of the vineyard workers, that reveals the faithfulness of God to all who answer his call, no matter when it comes in life (Matthew 20:1-16).

Jesus then gives his third prediction of his death (Matthew 20:17-19), and sets an example for community sacrifice, suffering and service (Matthew 20:20-28).

As he and his disciples begin their ascent into Jerusalem, Jesus mercifully heals two blind men in Jericho (Matthew 20:29-34).

XI.b.i Matthew 19:1-12 - Teaching about Divorce

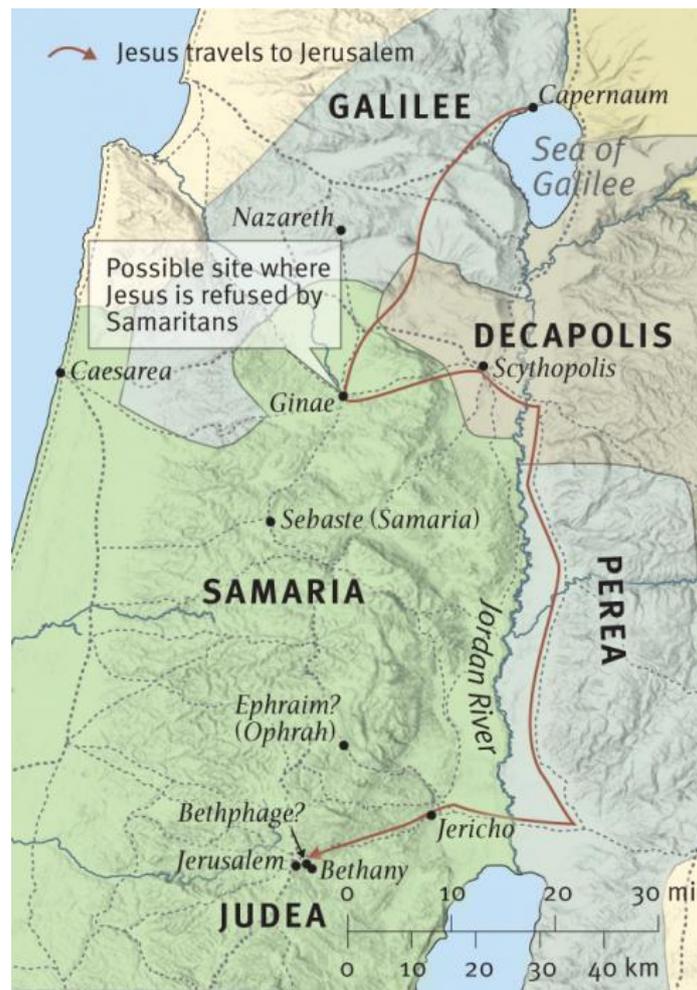
During Jesus' time, divorce was rife in Jewish society, as well as in the Greco-Roman world generally. Jesus teaches that divorce was never intended by God but is allowed by his grace in extreme cases, normally when one spouse engaged in an extramarital affair.

Jesus uses both the creation account to show that marriage is meant to be for life and then the law to show that Moses only allowed divorce due to the hard-heartedness of some of the Jews, who would send their wives away almost on a whim for the most insignificant of reasons, or even for no justifiable reason at all.

¹ When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judæa beyond the Jordan.

Matthew 19:1

Judæa beyond the Jordan is most likely Perea, the area just east of the Jordan River between Samaria and the Decapolis, whose population was largely Jewish.



The map indicates the most likely route that Jesus took to Jerusalem

He left Galilee. Jesus would not return to Galilee until after his resurrection: <<*But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you*>> (Mark 16:7), and: <<*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus*>> (John 21:4).

Luke's Gospel shows that Jesus initially headed south into Samaria but was turned back as he was going to Jerusalem and they opposed him for it: <<*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village*>> (Luke 9:51-56).

Jesus would have been well known as a teacher by the Samaritans and they would not have welcomed his determination to claim the temple in Jerusalem as 'his Father's house' despite the tremendous opposition he faced there from the religious leaders. It is possible the Samaritans would have wanted him to then turn to their temple instead but of course he could not. Refer also to comments made on Luke 9:52 for the rationale behind the Samaritan thinking.

² Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.

Matthew 19:2

Large crowds followed him. Jesus' fame had quickly spread, due mainly to his healing ministry in Galilee, for they clearly brought their sick and he cured them.

Although not recorded in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus had worked in Judæa on a number of occasions although his primary mission field had been in Galilee. Yet when he came south he was still just as popular with the ordinary people and met continued resistance from the religious leadership.

³ Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?'

Matthew 19:3

Some Pharisees came to test him. The religious leaders tried to get Jesus to incriminate himself through misinterpreting or better still opposing the law. Perhaps provoked again by Jesus' indisputable signs, they tried to lure him into a debate on the sorts of issues on which they had sharpened their own debating skills, believing they had the ultimate understanding of the Scriptures.

Divorce. There was a significant debate between the various Pharisaic schools of teaching on the correct interpretation of Moses' divorce regulations, which state: <<*Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house*>> (Deuteronomy 24:1). The prophet spoke forcefully on

this topic: <<You ask, ‘Why does he not?’ Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless>> (Malachi 2:14-16).

For any cause. The two main schools of Pharisaic teaching debated the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1, in which a man finds any matter of indecency in his wife and hence divorces her. The School of Shammai interpreted Deuteronomy Chapter 24 as indicating that a man could divorce his wife for the cause of unfaithfulness; the School of Hillel understood the passage to mean that a man could divorce his wife for any cause whatsoever, even spoiling his dinner. In practice, both schools agreed that the law at least often granted the man a right to divorce, regrettable as divorce was.

This topic is dealt with in some detail in the document on marriage that can be found on the website. Refer also to the comments made on Mark 10:1-12.

⁴ He answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female”, ⁵ and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?’

Matthew 19:4-5

He answered. In response to this trap by the Pharisees, comes forth the law of Christ on marriage and divorce, which is clearly in accordance with the will of God and not the misguided interpretations that men had placed upon the law.

Have you not read. The Pharisees prided themselves on their knowledge of and adherence to the Scriptures. Jesus knew they would have read them thoroughly on hundreds of occasions. What he is really saying is ‘you have not understood what you have read!’ Jesus had challenged their understanding before, for example: <<Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless?>> (Matthew 12:5), and would do so later to the Sadducees: <<And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God>> (Matthew 22:31).

The one who made them said is a strong affirmation of the divine inspiration of the OT Scriptures, because Jesus goes on to quote words from Genesis that are not attributed to any speaker: <<So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them>> (Genesis 1:27), and: <<Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh>> (Genesis 2:24), and attributes those words to God. In this statement, Jesus is also affirming the creation account, something that even modern Christians sometimes believe to be a myth in the face of modern science. Both biblical and scientific accounts of creation are in fact complimentary and not contradictory.

God had always intended that family bonds be of the utmost importance, whether that is between husband and wife as seen here, respect for parents: <<Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you>> (Exodus 20:12), or the wider family of community: <<Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, 'Look, we are your bone and flesh>> (2 Samuel 5:1).

⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Matthew 19:6

What God has joined together implies that marriage is not merely a human agreement but a relationship in which God changes the status of a man and a woman from being single, i.e. they are no longer two, to being married and thus one flesh. From the moment they are married, they are unified in a mysterious way that belongs to no other human relationship, having all the God-given rights and responsibilities of marriage that they did not have before.

Becoming one flesh includes the sexual union of a husband and wife, but it is more than that because it means that they have left their parents' household: <<**a man shall leave his father and his mother**>> (v.5), and have established a new family, such that their primary human loyalty is now to each other, before anyone else except God. The Genesis principle from which Jesus draws this application goes beyond opposing divorce; it opposes marital disharmony altogether. Indeed, the purpose of the Deuteronomy Chapter 24 law itself was probably to check haste in divorce, as it required the man to go through a legal process in the presence of witnesses, probably priests or Levites, hence it provided some legal protection for the wife who, once cast out, would have to either seek another husband or rely on a male relative taking her into his home. Marriage requires a mutual spirit of love, understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Let no one separate. Jesus avoided the Pharisaic argument about reasons for divorce and went back to the beginning of creation to demonstrate God's intention for the institution of marriage. It is to be a permanent bond between a man and a woman that joins them into one new union that is consecrated by physical intercourse, a theme continued from Genesis 2:24.

⁷ They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' ⁸ He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so.'

Matthew 19:7-8

Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her? The religious leaders believed they have sprung their well conceived plot, at least in their misguided thinking. However, Jesus would show that they were proof texting rather than reading Scripture in light of God's whole plan.

Because you were so hard-hearted should not be understood to mean that only hard-hearted people would ever initiate a divorce. Rather, it means there was hard-hearted rebellion against God among them, leading to serious defilement of marriages. Israel had earned a reputation for being hard-hearted and stubborn: <<*Know, then, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people*>> (Deuteronomy 9:6), <<*For I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. If you already have been so rebellious towards the Lord while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death!*>> (Deuteronomy 31:27), and: <<*But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart*>> (Ezekiel 3:7). The presence of sin in the community meant that some marriages would be seriously defiled and irretrievably damaged, and God therefore provided divorce as a solution in those cases.

Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. The Pharisees had asked why Moses commanded divorce (v.7), but Jesus corrected them, showing that divorce is not what God intended from the beginning, and that even when it is allowed, it is permitted only on very specific grounds but never required.

At the beginning it was not so points back to God's original intent that marriage would be lifelong and between one man and one woman. There is no provision made by God for same gender marriages.

⁹ **And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.'**

Matthew 19:9

Every phrase in this verse is important for understanding Jesus' teaching on divorce. The trap that was set by the Pharisees was to see if Jesus would contradict the Law of Moses. What he did was to show that he upheld the will of God in all matters and that it was their misunderstanding of the Scriptures and man's follies that were the problem with regard to divorce.

Whoever divorces his wife. Divorces is the Greek word *apoluō*, which always means divorce in contexts concerning marriage. Some commentators have claimed that *apoluō* means 'separates from' or 'sends away' in this verse, implying separation but not divorce. However, this is not persuasive because:

- a. This word has not been shown to include the sense of separate in any other contexts concerning marriage.
- b. The same word clearly means divorce in the Pharisees' question in v.3, i.e. the current dispute among Jewish rabbis was about divorce not separation, and therefore it should be understood to have the same meaning in Jesus' response to their question in vv.8-9.

Roman law permitted either party to divorce the other; Jewish law permitted only the husband to divorce his wife, regardless of the wife's wishes. God's ideal was always that couples should avoid divorce; the preservation of a

marriage depends on both wills, however, and one partner can sometimes end a marriage unilaterally against the other's will.

Except for unchastity or sexual immorality is the Greek *porneia*:

1. This implies that divorce and remarriage on the grounds of sexual immorality are not prohibited and thus do not constitute adultery. This is the one exception Jesus makes to the requirement that marriage be lifelong, for sexual immorality grievously defiles and indeed corrupts the 'one flesh' union of v.5.
2. The parallel passages in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 omit except for unchastity but that was probably because everyone, whatever their position in Jewish disputes over divorce, assumed that divorce was allowed in the case of adultery, i.e. the question of divorce because of adultery was not at issue in the immediate context in Mark Chapter 10 and Luke Chapter 16. But Matthew includes this fuller account of Jesus' words, with the exception clause, perhaps to prevent any possible misunderstanding in other contexts, and perhaps to explicitly situate Jesus' teaching within the context of the Jewish debates, for the benefit of his Jewish-Christian audience. Also note that Matthew sometimes includes clarifying exceptions not included by Mark and Luke; e.g. Mark 8:12b quotes Jesus saying: <<**no sign will be given to this generation**>>, whereas Matthew 16:4b states: <<**but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah**>>.
3. Some have claimed that *porneia* in this context refers to a very narrow, specific kind of sexual immorality, either sexual relations among close relatives or sexual immorality discovered during the betrothal period. Those who hold this position then argue that divorce in any other case is always prohibited, or else if divorce is allowed, remarriage is never allowed. But *porneia* had a broader range of meaning in ordinary usage, i.e. immorality and infidelity, referring to any sexual intercourse that was contrary to the moral standards of Scripture and nothing in this context would indicate that this should be understood in such a restricted sense. Refer also to comments made on Matthew 5:31-32.

And marries another commits adultery has several aspects to consider:

1. If a divorce is obtained for any reason other than, i.e. except for, sexual immorality, then the second marriage begins with adultery, i.e. is sinful in God's sight. Jesus is prohibiting divorce for the many trivial reasons that were used so frequently in the 1st Century, leading to widespread injustice, especially for women whose husbands suddenly divorced them.
2. The first part of the clause implies that the second marriage, although it begins with adultery, is still a marriage. Once a second marriage has occurred, it would be a further sin to break it up. The second marriage should not be thought of as continually living in adultery, for the man and woman are now married to each other, not to anyone else. They would need to genuinely ask God to forgive the sins they had committed, seeking also his blessing on their new union.

3. If the exception of sexual immorality occurs, then the implication is that remarriage to another does not constitute adultery and is therefore permissible without the need for repentance by the innocent party.
4. Divorce, it must be remembered, is permitted but not required in the case of sexual immorality. Since God's intention is that marriage should be for life (vv.4-8), this provides good reason to make every reasonable effort to achieve restoration and forgiveness in the marriage before taking steps of dissolution through divorce. This makes Jesus' teaching fundamentally different from all of 1st Century Judaism, which required divorce in the case of adultery, as did Roman law, which is strange given some of their common practices.

¹⁰ His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' ¹¹ But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.' ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

Matthew 19:10-12

After hearing Jesus nullify most of the popular grounds for divorce, the disciples overreact and say, it is better not to marry than to run the risk of a lifelong unhappy marriage, for marriages were arranged by parents and couples were never left alone before the marriage ceremony making it difficult for couples to come to really know each others' character.

Not everyone can accept his teaching is best understood as referring to that statement it is better not to marry. Jesus explains that what they have said is true, but only for those to whom it is given, namely, for eunuchs. This would include those without the capacity for sexual relations, either through a birth defect or castration, and those who have chosen a life of abstinence. Celibacy is an acceptable alternative to marriage, confirmed by Paul with additional advice: <<*This I say by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion*>> (1 Corinthians 7:6-9). Both marriage and celibacy have their own benefits, and both should be considered as gifts. In his letter to Corinth, Paul demonstrates he is happy that God has given him the gift of being content with remaining unmarried, since this permits single-minded devotion to the Lord's work, apparently there have been many others who followed this path: <<*It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb*>> (Revelation 14:4). These were eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Paul recognised, however, that his situation is not the norm. Remaining unmarried is a

gift that many others do not have. It has long been a requirement of priests in the Roman Church to abstain from marriage or sexual activities.

Jesus' reference to celibacy through the illustration of physical eunuchs would have been in stark contrast to Jewish thinking, for such men were forbidden from the covenant community: <<**No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord**>> (Deuteronomy 23:1). Yet Jesus was only reiterating the promises of God that the Jewish traditions had chosen to ignore: <<**For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off**>> (Isaiah 56:4-5).

Although some sectarians in the wilderness may have preferred celibacy, mainstream Jewish society regarded marriage and childbearing as solemn responsibilities. Therefore, celibacy was a metaphor of shame and sacrifice testifying to the value of the Kingdom of God for which someone might pay such a price. By embracing both shame and temporary self-control, Joseph to a lesser extent, models the nature of this demand: <<**When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus**>> (Matthew 1:24-25).

Let anyone accept this who can. Jesus always knew there would be many elements of his teaching that some would find difficult to accept given their traditions and narrow interpretations. He would encounter this on several occasions even among his own disciples: <<**When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you?'**>> (John 6:60-61).

XI.b.ii Matthew 19:13-15 - Jesus Blesses Little Children

A number of young children are brought to Jesus to receive his blessing upon their lives, a common rabbinic tradition in Israel. Since children held little status in wider society, the disciples tried to prevent them from being brought to Jesus as they saw this only as a distraction to his real work. Jesus then taught on the importance of being accepting towards all.

¹³ Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them;

Matthew 19:13

Lay his hands on them was a traditional manner of blessing children in Israel, especially when passing on a blessing from one generation to the next: <<**But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn**>> (Genesis 48:14), or for equipping people for

ministry: <<So the Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him'>> (Numbers 27:18), <<Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders>> (1 Timothy 4:14), and: <<For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands>> (2 Timothy 1:6).

The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them i.e. the parents or guardians, as the disciples saw this as an unwanted distraction. The disciples failed to understand what Jesus' Kingdom is really about - caring for the weakest, rather than engaging in political or military triumphalism.

¹⁴ but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Matthew 19:14-15

It is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs. Children serve as a metaphor of the humility necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. Refer to comments made on Matthew 18:2-6.

There is some debate among both scholars and believers generally as to which children are in the Kingdom. Some believe it to be all children, and indeed adults with a learning disability, until they reach an age where they can make their own profession of faith; others believe it to be only the children of believers who are covered under the profession of faith by one of their parents at least. Still others say that no one is saved until they make a personal commitment to Christ, irrespective of their age or ability to comprehend.

He laid his hands on them. Before he went on his way, Jesus complied with the requests of the adults who had brought their children to him. For these little children to receive Christ's blessing was a blessing indeed, for they may even have received the Holy Spirit just from his touch: <<For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring>> (Isaiah 44:3), although He probably only comes when they make their personal profession of faith.

XI.b.iii Matthew 19:16-30 - The Rich Young Man

Many examples of faith in the Bible are acts of desperation; few are the acts of self-satisfied individuals, for they fear they have more to give up and lose. Ultimately, one who would receive the Kingdom must not only obey like a trusting child but also relinquish worldly possessions and cares, acknowledging the absolute authority of Jesus as their King.

Jesus conversed with a pious young man who wished to enter into the Kingdom and claimed to have always obeyed God's laws, yet rightly considered there must be something else he should do. When Jesus said he needed to give his wealth away to the poor in order to be perfect, he went away dejected.

Jesus then taught his disciples that it was very difficult for the wealthy and socially elevated to enter the Kingdom because of what they were required to give up in this life but those that did so would receive great rewards from God.

16 Then someone came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’

Matthew 19:16

Someone came to him. Verses 16-22 have been called the parable of the Rich Young Ruler since he is rich (v.22), young (v.20), and a ruler: <<**A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’**>> (Luke 18:18). He may have been a religious lay leader, quite possibly a Pharisee because of the diligence he displayed in following the law. He was certainly not a Sadducee as he believed in eternal life.

After addressing Jesus as Teacher, a title of respect, he asked what good deed must I do to have eternal life? Eternal life is virtually synonymous with expressions such as: <<**enter the Kingdom of Heaven**>> (Matthew 5:20b), and being ‘saved’ in v.25; it is the first occurrence of this expression in Matthew, although it is used in: <<**And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life**>> (Matthew 25:46), as well as in v.29 of this chapter. In the parallel accounts of Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23, the wording of the question and answer differs somewhat, but there is no contradiction and it seems to be a case of different Gospels reporting different parts of the same conversation.

Mark offers a slight variation on this opening dialogue: <<**As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’**>> (Mark 10:17), as also noted recently in the quote from Luke 18:18. Jesus then used the opportunity to rebuke the man for calling him ‘good teacher’, for God alone is good. Thus he wanted the man to realise that the title was not appropriate unless he would come to saving faith, recognising the deity of Jesus as God incarnate.

17 And he said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’

Matthew 19:17

There is only one who is good. Only in understanding God as infinitely good can the young man discover that human good deeds cannot earn eternal life.

If you wish indicates that the choice is to be made by the individual who is called. A personal response is required.

Enter into life is a shorthand version of saying ‘enter into a covenant of faith with God through Jesus his Christ in order to receive the free gift of eternal life in the Kingdom of God’.

Keep the commandments. Jesus is not teaching that good works can earn eternal life, for in vv.21-22 he will show the man how far short he falls of keeping the first commandment: <<*you shall have no other gods before me*>> (Exodus 20:3), and the first of the two greatest commandments, which are that: <<*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*>> (Deuteronomy 6:5), confirmed by Jesus himself: <<‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’>> (Matthew 22:36-40). But obedience to the law is also an expression of belief in the truly good God who is the source of all good, including eternal life. Scripture elsewhere clearly affirms that salvation is a gift of God’s grace received through faith, and not by works. For example, Paul writes: <<*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life*>> (Ephesians 2:8-10), showing that salvation is a gift of God and not achieved through the abilities of people, otherwise they would get the glory, and the work they do is a result of salvation, not a method of achieving it.

¹⁸ 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; ¹⁹ Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

Matthew 19:18-19

Which ones? Jesus gives a representative list of laws, including five commandments from the second half of the Decalogue as recorded in both Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:7-21, and the second of the two greatest commandments: <<*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:18).

²⁰ The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these; what do I still lack?’

Matthew 19:20

I have kept all these. The man implies he has kept not only these, but the entire law, which they represent. This was something that Paul as a Pharisee claimed as well: <<*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*>> (Philippians 3:6). The young man too views his obedience to the law as complete, but he still senses that something is lacking. Many Jews knew the laws but were not really doers of the laws, something Ezra determined he would be as an example to his people: <<*For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel*>> (Ezra 7:10). For the law had said: <<*The Lord your God will raise up for you a*

prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet>> (Deuteronomy 18:15). God had kept his promise but this young man, like so many others, did not listen when they had the chance to do so: <<*Let anyone with ears listen!*>> (Matthew 13:43b).

What is undoubtedly true of this man, Paul and so many modern disciples is that their adherence to their religious rules and traditions, whatever they may be and how ever rigorously applied in their lives, become meaningless and of no value unless the person comes to true saving faith in Jesus as the Christ. Had that man realised this, he would not have claimed to have kept all the laws but to have actually broken them all: <<*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*>> (Romans 3:23).

²¹ Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

Matthew 19:21

If you wish to be perfect. Jesus knows the man's wealth has become his means to personal identity, power, and a sense of purpose in life; that it has become the idolatrous god of his life. Jesus' strategy is to turn this man from focusing on external conformity to the law to examining his heart, in order to reveal his true ruling god.

Ultimately, it is only Jesus who is perfect. He is the one who has earned eternal life. Therefore, the only way others can access it is to follow Jesus by faith: <<*and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*>> (Hebrews 5:9). This is a commandment passed on to all who would believe: <<*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us*>> (1 John 3:23).

Give the money to the poor. The man had no doubt given some money to the poor, as the giving of alms was considered a pious duty, especially among the Pharisees. But Jesus called him to give everything away, exchanging the god of wealth for the eternal treasure found in following Jesus, i.e. the call ultimately is come, follow me, as the one true God.

And you will have treasure in heaven. Jesus' response was in line with his teaching during the Sermon on the Mount: <<*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal*>> (Matthew 6:19-20).

Jesus' ultimate answer to the question posed in v.16 <<*what good deed must I do to have eternal life?*>>, is to follow him, no matter the personal human cost.

²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Matthew 19:22

Went away grieving. Even though he wanted eternal life (v.16), the young man could not bring himself to cease worshiping the ruling force in his life, his great wealth, along with the possessions and social status that it provided. His actions prove that, although he was happy to have a teacher, he did not want to have a Lord over his life.

What should have been recognised here is that Jesus was not turning this man away from the Kingdom. He may have laid a heavy burden of discipleship on him but it was the man who refused the offer and walked away. Thus he bears responsibility for his own actions and ultimate eternal destiny. Paul gave such a warning to the Corinthian Jews who rejected his Gospel message: *<<When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'>>* (Acts 18:6). What is lost to history, but known in the Kingdom, is whether that young man came to realise his error and repent, for it is never too late in this life to accept Christ and return to God.

Dietrich Bonhöffer, martyred by the Nazis, pointed out the difference between some modern disciples and the rich young man in this story. Jesus stood before him and did not allow him to reinterpret the Master's words in a more convenient manner. Bonhöffer claims that the man's honesty in rejecting Jesus' command was better than the disobedience that pretends to be obedience today.

One thing that can be said in the man's favour is that, once he realised he could not meet the standards of becoming a Christian, he walked away. There are many like Demas who profess Christ and yet their profession turns to hypocrisy when the lure of the world becomes too attractive to them: *<<Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry>>* (2 Timothy 4:9-11). The message from Scripture is clear: *<<Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God>>* (James 4:4), and: *<<Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world>>* (1 John 2:15).

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 19:23

It will be hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Wealth is both deceptive and intoxicating: it fools a person into thinking that he or she is self-sufficient apart from God; and the rich person wants desperately to hold on to that supposed self-sufficiency. The general attributes of the 'rich' are the opposite of those of a 'child'. Refer to comments made on Matthew 18:1-5 and vv.13-15 here.

²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

Matthew 19:24

There is no evidence for the popular interpretation that there was a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of the needle, which camels had to stoop to their knees to enter. Such an interpretation would miss the point: it is not merely difficult for the wealthy to be saved; without God's grace it is impossible (v.26).

Some commentators take the analogy of the eye of the needle to mean the narrow road into the Kingdom: <<*For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it*>> (Matthew 7:14), and the rich man as the camel, a beast of burden weighed down by his possessions: <<*Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them, 'Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!' How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?*>> (Habakkuk 2:6).

A camel was the largest land animal in Palestine, and the eye of a needle was the smallest opening found in the home. Jesus paints a picture of something impossible in order to illustrate that even the seemingly impossible is possible with God. The bible includes other metaphors to allude to things that are impossible: <<*Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil*>> (Jeremiah 13:23); where Ethiopians is a modern translation for the people identified by the Hebrew word *Cushites*.



Camels were common forms of transport

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?'

Matthew 19:25

Astounded. Wealth was often equated with God's favour and blessing as recorded in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. If the rich cannot enter the Kingdom then the disciples are left to ponder then who can be saved? They were clearly thinking along the lines that if Jesus held such strict guidelines for the privileged rich, who paid alms to the poor, then the guidelines must be even stricter for the rest of humanity. They still did not understand Kingdom principles: <<*But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first*>> (v.30).

²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

Matthew 19:26

For mortals it is impossible. For the wealthy to shift their primary allegiance to God is humanly impossible for they are usually so reliant on the perceived self-sufficiency and comfort it provides them with, but for God all things are possible, as evidenced by the conversions of rich men like Joseph of Arimathæa: <<*When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathæa, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus*>> (Matthew 27:57), and Zacchæus, the chief tax collector in Jericho: <<*Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'*>> (Luke 19:9-10). Of course, there are many wealthy or financially secure people who are also dedicated disciples. Such people can both enjoy comfortable lifestyles and use their wealth and status for the advancement of the Kingdom.

It should be noted that it is not just the wealthy that are impacted by wealth, for many people caught up in consumer society strive increasingly for more things that are not essential either to sustain life or indeed to improve it. The problem is that man has set his values differently to God's, thus there is more stress, more ill-health, higher crime rates and increasing incidents of social intolerance and disorder right around the world, caused by man's insatiable demands for more of everything, except perhaps of God. Yet it could still all be changed, at least for those who place their trust in their creator God: <<*The Lord said to Moses, 'Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not'*>> (Numbers 11:23), and: <<*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted*>> (Job 42:2). It seems to be easier for the poor for they perceive they have less to lose and more to gain, but it is not so, for all have everything to gain. Ultimately, God will not save people in their worldliness but from it.

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'

Matthew 19:27

We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? In response to Peter's self-seeking and perhaps self-pity, for he had given up his business interests to follow his Lord: <<*When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him*>> (Luke 5:11), Jesus acknowledges the rewards that his disciples will receive. But his parable in Matthew 20:1-15 will be a subtle rebuke, indicating they were still looking at the Kingdom from the wrong perspective.

Although his disciples here had made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus, including sacrificing their previous lifestyle, they were constantly being taught that further tests would always be placed upon them. Sometimes disciples will endure the test and sometimes not, just as the rich young man walked away rather than to give up his wealth. Later Jesus' disciples would abandon him in the face of danger despite their protestations to the contrary: <<*All of them deserted him and fled*>> (Mark 14:50); most exemplified by Peter: <<*And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!'*>> (Luke

22:33). Although Peter did deny his Lord on that occasion, he later fulfilled this vow, showing that not every test has to be passed the first time.

Many of the early Jewish converts especially faced rejection by their families for their commitment to serve Christ. This would have caused them great pain in their culture particularly. The Scriptures reveal that such sacrifice was widespread in the early church: *<<For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting>>* (Hebrews 10:34), perhaps less so today for the majority in the western world at least. Although there are still many who do dedicate their lives to God's service, whatever the personal cost.

²⁸ Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Matthew 19:28

The renewal of all things or the new world is Greek *palingenesia*, which literally means renewal or regeneration. The term occurs in the NT only here and in: *<<he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit>>* (Titus 3:5). In Titus it refers to present, individual regeneration, but here it looks forward to the future end-time renewal of the world, as described also by Peter: *<<But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home>>* (2 Peter 3:10-13). This was a concept that his original listeners would have been familiar with: *<<For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind>>* (Isaiah 65:17), and: *<<For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain>>* (Isaiah 65:22). Refer also to Revelation Chapters 21-22.

You who have followed me is the only requirement for eternal life if done so in genuine faith. It is not the intrinsic value of the sacrifice that is of merit for, although the disciples had given up everything and the rich man was asked to give up more in terms of wealth, Jesus identified that the widow's mites were of greater value than all the other sacrifices because it came from the heart and was all she had: *<<A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out*

of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on’>> (Mark 12:42-44). Jesus will further clarify the simple requirement of having faith to follow him: <<*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour*>> (John 12:26), which is surely sufficient reward for anyone!

Judging the twelve tribes of Israel. God had spoken through his prophet: <<*Will you judge them, mortal, will you judge them? Then let them know the abominations of their ancestors*>> (Ezekiel 20:4), and he also promised: <<*But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever – for ever and ever*>> (Daniel 7:18).

Following the renewal of all things, the twelve apostles, except for Judas who would later be replaced by Matthias, whose selection is recorded in Acts 1:12-26, will participate in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth. In the new Kingdom of God, all who have faithfully followed Jesus become recipients of the promises made to Abraham and are therefore part of the new spiritual Israel: <<*As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God*>> (Galatians 6:16).

In Matthew’s context the lesson extends beyond the Twelve; those who sacrifice now and become least in this age will inherit the place of honour in the coming age. The disciples’ reward in the Kingdom will be commensurate with their sacrifice.

²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.

Matthew 19:29

Will receive a hundredfold. Those who have given up the god of their lives to follow Jesus will receive abundant reward and the other Synoptics add ‘in this age’, refer to comments made on Mark 10:29-30 and Luke 18:30, and will inherit eternal life. This confirms that eternal life is an inheritance as well as a free gift, and must not be considered as an earned reward.

³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Matthew 19:30

But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first indicates the mindset that a disciple needs. Those willing to humble themselves in order to put the needs of others before their own will be exulted over those who look first to their own desires or even needs. It also shows that, just as Jacob crossed his hands to bless the younger son of Joseph above the elder, refer to comments on v.13; or as Paul comments: <<*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*>> (1 Corinthians 1:27). Refer also to comments made on Matthew 20:16.

In the final analysis, it is better to be last in this life than in the next, although the promises of God do allow for a good life on earth as well as throughout eternity: <<*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*>> (John 10:10).