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Sermon

Eternal Life: Purchase or Gift

Matthew 19:16-20:16; Jonah 3:10-4:11

20th September 2020

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In a recent Zoom homegroup Bible study, I made the striking comment: “The amazing thing about John Chapter 14 is that it comes after Chapter 13!” That is obvious but I meant that the chapter break makes us think of each chapter independently whereas in fact the events carry on directly. The earlier chapter sets the scene for the latter.

It is true again today – the gospel reading is to be Matthew 20:1-16 and that comes after Matthew Chapter 19. There is a direct connection. We know this because it introduces the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard with “For the Kingdom of heaven is like...” The word “for” connects to what went before. Derek Prince used to say, “If there is a ‘therefore’, find out what it is there for.”

So, what is the context of this parable? Why did Jesus tell it? Before we hear the parable, we are going to hear the context.

[Matthew 19:16-30]

The rich young ruler asked Jesus what good thing he must do to have eternal life. This sounds very much like a transaction. Do this one thing and you will live. Jesus answered by citing the social part of the Ten Commandments and adding, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Did you notice anything odd about the list of commandments? Jesus put “Honour your father and your mother” last. Was that to draw attention to it? A wise teaching method, helps people work things out for themselves.

Still the man thinks that he has met those standards. Did he notice there was something missing from the commandments? Did you? There is nothing about relationship with God. And the last of the ten is omitted – “Do not covet.” Now Jesus puts his finger on it. This man’s god is his wealth. To break the bondage of Mammon over him, Jesus tells him to give it away and follow him. Sadly, the man would not and went away.

This is not saying that money is bad. Rather it is a bad master. Paul wrote to Timothy, it is “the love of money is the root of all evil.”¹

¹ 1 Tim 6:10

Then you heard Jesus comment to his disciples, "... it is hard for a rich man to 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 man to enter the kingdom of God." [vv23-24]

Now people often baulk over this saying but it is not ridiculous. *Gamla* is a word in Aramaic and Syriac which has four meanings: (1) camel; (2) beam; (3) rope; and (4) anything which is larger than the given object. "Camel" here should be "rope." Indeed some Greek manuscripts do have rope rather than camel.

Whichever meaning you take, it is impossible for a camel, a rope, a beam or a large object to go through the eye of a needle. But knowing that Aramaic word has these meanings helps us understand that Jesus is not being ridiculous in his saying.

Well this idea that a rich man would have difficulty getting into heaven was a real surprise to the disciples. The prevailing idea was that rich people were blessed. Surely they had eternal life! Job was rich; Abraham and Joseph were rich; David and Solomon were rich. Once again, Jesus turned their ideas upside down.

So if this man was not sure of eternal life – who could be saved? Note that Jesus' answer is to this question, "So who can be saved?" His answer? "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." He is speaking about everyone now. The whole basis of the discussion is wrong – "what one good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is impossible. You can't buy eternal life. With God it is made possible as a gift.

Michael Green writes, "Jesus knows how to bring believers into the kingdom. It cost him everything he had to come and see us. If there had been any other adequate way, he would have taken it. Because we could not save ourselves from our sins, Jesus came to do just that. ... This is the death knell to 'justification by works'..."²

Then Peter asked about the status of the disciples who had left everything to follow Jesus. They are told that they, peasant fisherman, poorly educated, despised Galileans will sit beside Jesus when he is enthroned. They will judge the tribes of Israel.

Everything will be topsy-turvy from the normal expectations of life and culture. Jesus sums this up with the statement: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. [30]

And that is the lead up to our gospel reading!

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like ...

[Matthew 20:1-16 – the workers in the vineyard]

In the story the Landowner was generous. He was fair in that everyone got what they expected or more. But the hearts of those who had worked all day resented the inequality, because they thought in terms of earning rather than gift.

Jesus had the landowner comment on this in the story. Because I am generous are you envious. The underlying Greek reads, "Because my eye is good, is your eye evil?" A 'good eye' is idiom for generosity, while an 'evil eye' in that culture is idiomatic for being envious.

We need to watch our hearts and their reactions like this. We don't want to develop an evil eye – an envious attitude. It is what Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount when he talks about money.

Matthew 6:21-23 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes

² Green, Michael, 2000, "BST: The Message of Matthew", IVP, Leicester, p210

are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

The Old Testament reading from Jonah shows a problem of attitude. He has been used mightily by God as a prophet. It was a dangerous assignment to challenge the dominant power in the region to repent but they had repented. But Jonah did not want Nineveh to repent, he wanted them punished. He was angry that they had escaped immediate judgement. And he appreciated neither the mercy God had shown them nor the shelter of the plant.

In the parable and for Jonah, there is a problem from comparisons. There is a saying – “comparisons are odious.” It points to the danger of envy. The Bible warns us against envy. To envy is to want what someone else has. There is a distinction between envy and jealousy. To be jealous is to want what is your own. So God is jealous for our worship because it rightly belongs to him and him alone. But envy is wanting what is not ours and resenting the fact that someone else has it. It is close to coveting where we desire someone else’s property.

One way we can fall for this is recompense for work. When people volunteer, they often put in hours with a positive attitude. Sadly, I have observed if they are then paid for the same work, their attitude can change so nothing is given beyond the paid hours and a sense of entitlement develops. Logically, why would we not still give what we were happy to give before and be glad that to help us out there is some payment for it?

As followers of Jesus, we need to serve the Lord out of gratitude for what he has done for us. As someone said, “The Rewarder should fill our hearts not the reward.”

The Parable has application to many situations:

The Pharisees might complain that after all their striving for perfection, common ‘sinners’ would also be in the Kingdom.

Jews might have complained that they were the chosen people and these gentiles are coming into the church.

The disciples might complain that they had given up everything and others who did believe during Jesus’ earthly ministry were welcomed freely.

Church members of any age could complain that they had built the church fellowship and now these new members are crowding in and making changes.

To all such attitudes the parable gives a firm rebuttal. Our standing in the Kingdom of God does not depend on our merit or doing some good thing, our efforts but on God’s generosity giving us what we do not deserve as we trust Jesus to save us.

As you probably know, I was twenty when I was saved. My mother came to Christ about 5 years before then. Before that our family were uncommitted church goers. When my mother was saved, my father started to attend church, became regular and served as treasurer for years. However he was embarrassed if we talked about Jesus, he didn’t want to pray or read the Bible.

After about 17 years, he had secondary cancer and one day I stopped in to see my parents on the way from work and he had the news it had reached his liver. That night, Helen and I went out to dinner with a Christian couple and at the end of the evening, they prayed for Dad. Our host said he had the sense there was bondage over my father. We didn’t know what it was, so he said, “Well let’s break it anyway!” So he prayed simply in Jesus’ name breaking the bondage or curse over my father. That was a Friday night. The next week, Dad started to pray with my mother in the morning. Then my cousin in Taranaki heard in prayer, “Go and see your father and your uncle for something has broken in the heavenlies.” On the strength of that he drove up to Auckland and saw my father. He was able to lead him to the Lord.

The change in my father was dramatic. He was constantly talking about the Lord, praying out loud, quoting from the Bible. Exclaiming in praise and thanks, “Bless you Jesus, thank you Lord...” For a fortnight he was like that and then he died. He had been like a sky rocket blazing in the sky for a short time and then was gone.

My father was like one of the late-in-the-day vineyard workers. He was saved, not because he had earned it but by God’s grace. And he was thankful.

I rejoice, that someday, I will see him again and although I have already followed Jesus for 44 years, eternal life for both of us is simply a gift from the generous heart of God.

Dr Michael Wilkins writes,

Why is it “more blessed to give than to receive”? Why does “God love a cheerful giver”? Why was the poor widow’s mite while less financially, actually “more than all the others”? In each case, it is because the gift came out of the fullness of a grateful life lived in God’s presence.

A faithful giver can surrender his or her entire being to others as a gift of grace. The next time you plan an afternoon off to spend with your child, or go out of your way with a word of encouragement to your secretary, or offer a day at the local homeless shelter, or make a sacrificial gift to your missionary friends so that they can perform their own gift of ministry, make sure that each gift operates out of your conscious reliance on God’s grace in your life.³

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies.
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³ Wilkins, Michael, 2004, *The NIV Application Commentary – Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p676-7

