

Matthew 19:1-20:15

Overview

We are in the third and last section of Matthew’s gospel (Figure 1, chart), which is built around four announcements of his passion (16:21-21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:1-2). We are in the second of these four sections, which in turn is divided into two parts by geography and participants (Figure 2, chart). We’ve just finished his private instruction to the disciples, which takes place in Capernaum. Now as the little party sets out for Jerusalem to attend the passover, they are joined by great multitudes (19:2), and the Lord’s teaching is more public.

The multitudes give the Lord another opportunity to demonstrate his healing power, and so confirm once again that he is the deliverer promised in Isaiah 35:4-6. But they also stimulate three interactions with the Lord. In each case, someone from the multitude engages the Lord. In each case, the Lord responds, not only to the petitioner, but also to the disciples, providing them with instruction that will be important for their future life and ministry. These instructions follow a pattern that recurs frequently in the Bible, the Three Choices to love the Lord with all of our heart (avoiding the pride of life), and with all of our soul (avoiding the lust of the flesh), and with all our abundance (avoiding the lust of the eyes).¹

Heading South

19:1 And it came to pass, *that* when Jesus had finished these sayings, he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan; **2** And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there.--The geographical notice marks a division of the text.

¹ A detailed study of the Three Choices is available at www.cyber-chapel.org/ThreeChoices.pdf

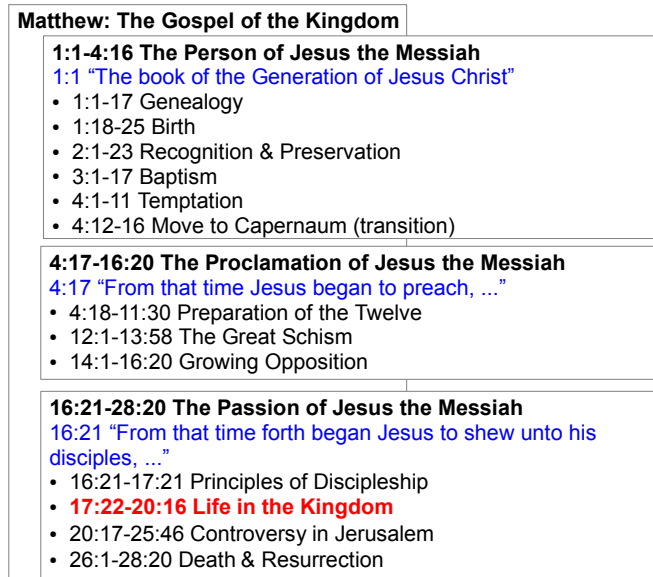


Figure 1: Structure of Matthew

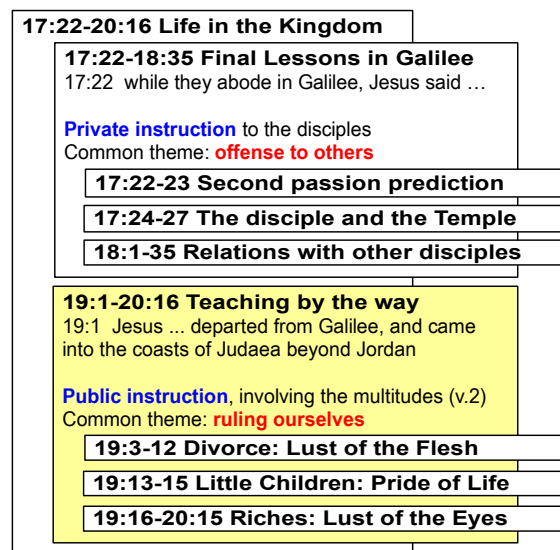


Figure 2: Structure of the Second Passion Prediction Section

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It also sets the stage for the first episode, the discussion with the Pharisees.

Figure 3 (chart) shows the Lord's journey south (solid blue line), along with two alternatives he could have taken (dashed blue lines).

The westernmost route is the Via Maris, the Way of the Sea, the superhighway of the day, but a long detour.

The central route, the ridge route along the crest of the mountains, leads through Samaria. It is the route our Lord took moving north in John 4, when he met the woman of Samaria. At that time, the Samaritans were responsive to his message, but Luke reports that this time, when he tried to take this route, he was rebuffed:

Luk 9:51 And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, 52 And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. 53 And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.

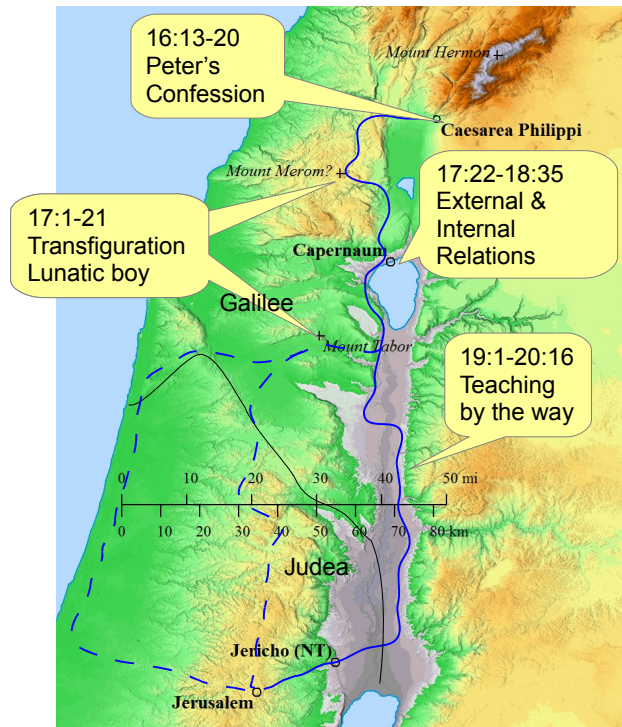


Figure 3: The Journey to Jerusalem. Dashed lines show alternative routes south.

So he takes the eastern route, which has political consequences. When Herod the Great died in 4 BC, his territory was divided among his sons. Herod Antipas, the murderer of John the Baptist, inherited a discontinuous territory: Galilee to the west of the sea, and the eastern bank of the Jordan corresponding to the ancient territory of the Ammonites, opposite the territory of Judaea (Figure 4, chart). The other two routes would quickly have taken the Lord out of Herod's territory, but the eastern route leads through Perea, the territory east of Jordan, under Herod's control. And this sets the stage for the first of the three interactions in this section.

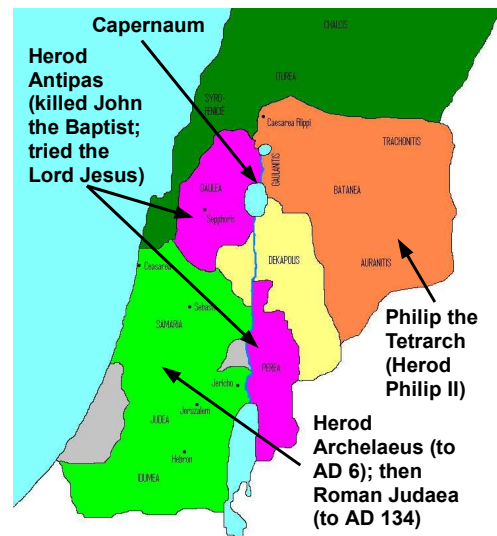


Figure 4: Palestine under the Herods

**19:3-12, Divorce and Remarriage:
Lust of the Flesh**

Recall that Herod Antipas put John the Baptist to death

because John spoke out against his adultery with Herodias, who was previously married to his brother Philip. Both Antipas and Herodias divorced their spouses to marry one another. John condemned this remarriage, leading Herodias to hate him and eventually engineer his execution.

The Lord spent much of his time in Capernaum, which was in the territory of Antipas, but that might have been perceived by his adversaries as his home turf and a dangerous place to challenge him. Now he is on the road, away from his friends and neighbors. The Pharisees' question may be motivated partly by the hope of getting him to say something that would antagonize Herod and lead to his arrest. The presence of "great multitudes" increases the chance that news of anything he says along the road will be picked up by Herod's security forces.

3-9, Responding to the Pharisees

3 The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him,--Throughout Matthew, this verb indicates temptation to sin. The Pharisees continue the work of Satan. Just what is the sin to which they tempt him?

and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?-- "For every cause" reflects a debate over divorce between two great rabbis in first-century Judaism. Hillel and Shammai. Hillel taught that a man could put away his wife for any cause, while Shammai taught that divorce was justified only in the case of extreme uncleanness, such as adultery.

Their question has two ulterior motives. First, they probably know his strict position on divorce, from the Sermon on the Mount, which forbids all divorce and remarriage. If they can get him to repeat this teaching in Herod's territory, they may be able to get Herod to take him off their hands.

But something deeper is going on. The Pharisees are asking the Lord to align himself with one side or the other of this debate. They want him to take sides in their own partisan struggles.² The temptation that they put before him is to ally himself with existing power structures rather than bearing witness for the truth.

They use this strategy elsewhere as well (chart). In John 2, he chases the moneychangers out of the temple. The temple precincts were under the control of the Sadducees, a rival faction to the Pharisees. In response to his action, in John 3 a leader of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, comes to him, offering fawning approval for his action:

Joh 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

The Pharisees recognize his popularity and the power of his miracles. They approve of his attack against their rivals the Sadducees, which suggests that he is sympathetic with their side, and they

² Gill's comment on this passage deserves attention.

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want him to take sides with them against the Sadducees.

We will see yet another example in a few chapters:

Mat 22:15 Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in *his* talk. 16 And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any *man*: for thou regardest not the person of men. 17 Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?

When the Romans took over direct control of Judaea in AD 6, they imposed a poll tax, which was highly unpopular with the Jews. A minority party, the Herodians, supported the Roman authority, but most opposed it. The Lord is being invited to take sides in this argument. Of course, if he does, he will either be vulnerable to a charge of treason (if he opposes the tax) or alienate most of the people (if he endorses it).

In each of these cases, the Lord is being invited to align himself with an existing political or theological division—Hillel vs. Shammai, the Pharisees vs. the Sadducees, the Nationalists vs. the Herodians. In each case, if he chooses sides, he will immediately gain a host of allies for his cause, but also alienate himself from those on the side that he rejects. More importantly, he will have allowed others to define the terms of his ministry.

These three examples are important to us in the current political season. Satan would like us to align ourselves with the power structures of this world. The simplest example is the historical alignment of evangelical Christians with the political right over the past forty years. But the example of our king, the Lord Jesus, is to bear witness against all of them. Hillel or Shammai, Pharisees or Sadducee, Zealot or Herodian, Republican or Democrat, all these human power structures are ultimately under Satan's control. God is sovereign, and will accomplish his purposes, but we must not let ourselves be fooled into thinking that one option is somehow more Christian, more godly, than the other. It is seductive to think that we can harness the power of human movements to advance our Lord's purposes, but such a strategy compromises the independence of his message, and is sinful. Our public position during times like these must be to direct people's attention away from earthly power structures and toward the true king, the Lord Jesus. This is why the Pharisees' question constitutes a "temptation."

4 And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read,--What a great rebuke to those who focus their attention on anything but the Scripture! They delighted in detailed rabbinical arguments. He takes them back to the Scripture.

that he which made *them* at the beginning made them male and female, 5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?--LXX from Gen 2:24; the "for this cause" is in Genesis, where it refers to Adam's summary of Eve's origin from Adam's body in v. 21 (chart).

Gen 2:21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; 22 And the rib, which the

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LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. 23 And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. 24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Moses makes two points.

1. Eve was made from Adam's body. She is physically a part of him.
2. Therefore whenever a man and a woman marry, she becomes a part of him, as though a missing rib were restored.

6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh.--He reiterates the conclusion that Moses already drew from the history of creation: that marriage in general creates a new entity, "one flesh." This expression summarizes Adam's statement, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." Throughout the OT, this is how people describe a kinship relation.³ When Laban recognizes Jacob as his relative, he says,

Gen 29:14 And Laban said to him, Surely thou *art* my bone and my flesh. And he abode with him the space of a month.

We usually describe kinship in terms of a "blood relation," but the Hebrews see it as a "flesh and bone relation." Moses' point is that marriage establishes a kinship relation between two people that is as close as a physical brother and sister. Marriage is not just a contract or covenant between two people. It is a new physical reality.

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.--The Lord explains this new reality as something that God has created. Any attempt by people to disrupt it is an attempt to overthrow the work of God. It is as violent as if one were to tear open a man's side and pull out his rib.

7 They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?--The Pharisees understand that the Lord's statement rules out divorce entirely. But the OT does talk about divorce in Israelite society. Of several passages they might have cited,⁴ they choose Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy 24, which in our version reads (chart):

Deu 24:1 When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: **then let him write her a bill of divorcement**, and give *it* in her hand, and send her out of his house.
2 And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's *wife*.
3 And *if* the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth *it* in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her *to be* his wife; 4 Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that *is* abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not

3 This point is due to Wenham. See also Jud 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1; 19:12, 13 (MT 13, 14); 1 Ch 11:1.

4 Consider also the prohibition of divorce in specific cases, Deut 22:19, 29; and the prohibition for priests to marry a divorced woman, Lev 21:14.

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cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.

In this reading, the passage contains three laws. The first, in v. 1, contains explicit instruction to “write her a bill of divorcement.” The second, in v. 2, authorizes the woman to remarry. The third, in vv. 3-4, forbids her to return to her first husband.

But this is not the most natural way to read the Hebrew text.⁵ The grammar lends itself much better to a single command:

Deu 24:1 When a man hath taken a wife, and married her,
and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some
uncleanness in her,
and he writes her a bill of divorcement, and give *it* in her hand, and send her out of his
house,
2 And when she is departed out of his house, she goes and becomes another man's *wife*,
3 And the latter husband hates her, and writes her a bill of divorcement, and gives *it* in
her hand, and sends her out of his house;
or the latter husband dies, which took her *to be* his wife;
4 **Then** her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife,
after that she is defiled; for that *is* abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not
cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.

In addition, when Jeremiah paraphrases the law 800 years later, he paraphrases it as a single law, not as three:

Jer 3:1 They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another
man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted?

So our Lord is disagreeing with their statement that Moses “commanded” the giving of a letter of divorce. He chooses another verb to explain what Moses has in view?

8 He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives:--Moses did not command the issuance of such a letter. He suffered it. That is, he made provision for what to do if it happened. Deuteronomy 24 says, “If a man divorces a woman, then here is what you may or may not do.” But he never authorized divorce in the first place.

but from the beginning it was not so.--Now the Lord returns to his original point, from Genesis 2. When a man and a woman marry, they become one flesh, physical kin to one another, and that transaction cannot be undone.

9 And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.--Two details about this verse require attention: the exception, and the nature of adultery.

⁵ See *Except for Fornication* for a full discussion of the parsing of these verses.

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First, consider the exception, which appears only in Matthew. Mark and Luke repeat the Lord's teaching, but without any exception for fornication. This clause is widely understood today as authorizing divorce and remarriage in the case of impurity on the part of one partner. It is claimed that such impurity dissolves the marriage bond, allowing remarriage.

This understanding is wrong, for several reasons that I discuss at length in my book. Notice just one, in this verse (chart): the exception is attached only to the first clause, not to the second. Fornication enables the husband to put away his wife and remarry without adultery, but it does not allow anyone to remarry the divorced wife. Marriage to the divorced wife is adultery, period. But how can that be, if the fornication dissolves the marriage bond?

To understand the Lord's words, we need to study the OT law of marriage. First, we should understand the relation between fornication and adultery (Fig, chart). We represent this by showing how instances of adultery (in the circle) relate to those of fornication (in the rounded square). Fornication is any sexual sin. Adultery is a specific kind of fornication: infidelity to the marriage bond. So the exception is very broad.

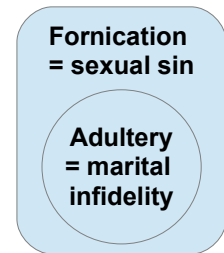


Figure 5:
Fornication
and Adultery

Next, we have to understand the penalty in the OT for fornication, including adultery. This law is outlined in Deuteronomy 22. Many situations were punishable by death. These include:

- Concealed, premarital impurity (not adultery)

Deu 22:20 But if this thing be true, *and the tokens of virginity* be not found for the damsel: 21 Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall **stone her with stones that she die**: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you.

- Postmarital infidelity = adultery

22 If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then **they shall both of them die**, *both* the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.

- Impurity during betrothal

23 If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; 24 Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you.

Finally, we need to understand that in Matthew, the verb "put away" is not the Greek verb used throughout the LXX (εξαποστελλω) to translate "put away" in the Hebrew Bible, but a different verb (απολυω) that was common in secular society of the first century. This verb was indeed

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used to describe divorce, but it is also used, in both the LXX and the NT (and in secular Greek as well), to describe physical death (chart):

Gen 15:2 And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go **[middle of ἀπολω]** childless, and the steward of my house *is* this Eliezer of Damascus?

Num 20:28 And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there in the top of the mount: and Moses and Eleazar came down from the mount. 29 And when all the congregation saw that Aaron **was dead [LXX was put away]**, they mourned for Aaron thirty days, *even* all the house of Israel.

Luk 2:25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name *was* Simeon; and the same man *was* just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 Lord, now **lettest thou thy servant depart [put away thy servant]** in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

So the Lord grounds his teaching firmly in the law of Moses (chart). He cites Genesis 2 for the one-flesh relation. He insists on a correct reading of Deuteronomy 24 as permitting, but not commanding, divorce. The exception clause is a pointer to a third OT passage, Deuteronomy 22. There is a way to “put away” a wife and still be free to remarry: if she is put to death for fornication. In this case, you are certainly free to remarry. But if you put her away in any other way, and she remarries, that constitutes adultery.

So what is the Lord saying? Divorce followed by remarriage is adultery, period. No human decree can sever the one-flesh bond that God establishes in marriage. The only case in which a man may put away his wife and remarry without adultery is if she is guilty of death according to Deuteronomy 22. If he “puts her away because of fornication,” by enforcing the law’s penalty of execution, then of course he is free to remarry, for there has never been any question that death ends the marriage bond. That is the only exception.

This explanation not only fits the verses in Matthew, but also explains the lack of the clause in Mark and Luke. Proper understanding of the exception requires knowledge of the law of Moses. Matthew assumes that his readers have a deep knowledge of the OT, but Mark and Luke are written for Gentile readers. If they were to include the fornication clause, their readers would think they were talking about a legal divorce rather than death by stoning—ironically, the very misunderstanding that most Christians make today!

The second point that requires attention is who is guilty of adultery. Throughout the OT, it is adultery for a man to take the wife of another man, but I know of no passage that condemns a man for having more than one wife. In the OT, it is adultery for men to share a single woman, but not for women to share a single man. But here the Lord uses “adultery” to describe a man who takes a woman other than his original wife. The Lord is making the offense symmetrical. In fact,

in Mark 10:12, he anticipates the situation where a wife divorces her husband.

10-12, Clarifying to the Disciples

10 His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with *his* wife, it is not good to marry.--His disciples are shocked at his extreme position. If indeed there is no way to leave a marriage other than death, perhaps it's best not to marry in the first place. They would do far better to remain single than to encumber themselves with a relation that cannot be ended.

The disciples' sentiment echoes throughout the history of the church, where it is often assumed that being celibate is more holy, more righteous, than being married. But the Lord rejects this position. He reminds them that meeting God's standard requires God's enabling.

11 But he said unto them, All *men* cannot receive this saying, save *they* to whom it is given.

12 For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from *their* mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*.--Of the innate drives that keep our biological machinery running, the drive to reproduce is one of the strongest, and one that very easily gets out of control. It requires a special gift from the Lord to live in purity as a single person.

Paul shows awareness of our Lord's teaching from this passage, in 1 Corinthians 7 (chart). He begins,

1Co 7:1 Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: *It is* good for a man not to touch a woman.

The Corinthians have written him a letter, and apparently they are suggesting that they should live in celibacy so that they can devote themselves to the Lord. They are taking the position of the disciples: "It is not good to marry." He responds to them gently, agreeing that in principle the idea is attractive. But almost immediately he counters:

2 Nevertheless, *to avoid* fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.

Then, in v. 7, he makes exactly the case that the Lord does in vv. 11-12,

7 But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that.

God has equipped some believers to live singly and avoid the distraction of a family, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

So the first episode deals with controlling the lust of the flesh, and loving the Lord with all of our soul, our life force. His words to the Pharisees warn against yielding to the lust of the flesh by putting away one wife to marry another. But his words to the disciples warn against making oneself vulnerable to the lust of the flesh by deliberately avoiding marriage without the Lord's special enabling. And he emphasizes that they can only make the right choice through God's

gift, a theme we shall see repeated in the other two episodes that take place along the road (Figure 2, chart).

13-15, Blessing the Children: Pride of Life

13 Then were there brought unto him little children,⁶--Matthew emphasizes the passivity of the children. They were brought unto him. They could not come on their own initiative or under their own power. As in each of the other episodes, we are reminded of the need for divine enabling to make the correct choice.

that he should put *his* hands on them, and pray:--The gesture is one of committing them to the Lord for his care. Compare Israel's blessing of the children of Joseph (chart):

Gen 48:14 And Israel stretched out his right hand, and **laid *it* upon Ephraim's head**, who *was* the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh *was* the firstborn. 15 **And he blessed Joseph**, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day, 16 The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

Notice the two features of laying his hands on the heads of the children, and praying that God would bless them.

The Lord himself was the object of such a gesture as a baby.

Luk 2:25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name *was* Simeon; and the same man *was* just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 **Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God**, and said, 29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Here, Simeon does not convey a blessing to the Baby, but recognizes him as the one whom God has sent to deliver him and others, and offers his blessing to God.

Or recall the action of the church in Antioch toward Barnabas and Saul:

Act 13:2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me

⁶ In his parallel to this passage, Luke describes them using the term βρεφος, which describes a nursing infant. This term does not necessarily mean that the children were not able to understand: in some cultures, children are not completely weaned until 2 or 3 years of age (cf. 2 Macc 7:27 "O my son, have pity upon me that bare thee nine months in my womb, and **gave thee suck three years...**")

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Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. 3 And when they had fasted and **prayed**, and **laid their hands** on them, they sent *them* away.

A later verse in Acts explains the significance of the action:

Act 14:25 And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:
26 And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been **recommended** to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.

The gesture was intended to seek God’s blessing upon the work to which he had called them.

In the same way, it is appropriate for parents to “recommend” their children “to the grace of God” with prayer and the laying on of hands.

and the disciples rebuked them.--They view the Lord as too important to be bothered with such matters. Compare their attitude to Canaanite woman and her daughter (chart):

Mat 15:21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, *thou* Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. 23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.--The meaning of his words should be clear to the disciples after his detailed teaching on the “little ones” in ch. 18, while they were in Capernaum and before they set out for Jerusalem. He is not saying that little children are automatically saved, but reminding them that children exemplify the humility and dependency that should characterize all citizens of the kingdom.

Note the parallels between the two passages (Table 1). In both cases,

- we are being told what is required for citizens of the **kingdom of heaven**;
- the Lord focuses on **little children**;
- citizens of the kingdom are described as **similar** to these children;
- the little children do not take their place by their own power or under their own initiative, but as the result of **passive** verbs: they “are converted” (18:3) and “brought” (19:13).

18:3 Except ye be converted , and become as little children , ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven .	13 Then were there brought unto him little children ... 14 Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.
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Table 1: Comparison of 18:3 and 19:14

In ch. 18, the question at hand was prestige:

18:1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

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Here, they are annoyed at the intrusion of little children. They consider themselves above having to deal with these little ones.

In both cases, the disciples are wrestling with the pride of life, an overbearing sense of their own importance and the irrelevance of others.

The disciples are preoccupied with prestige. Even in the face of his repeated reminders of his coming humiliation, they repeatedly show their desire for prominence in the kingdom (chart).

- After the Lord first announces his passion (16:21), Peter rebukes the Lord for even thinking that he would be killed. Peter cannot conceive that someone as important as God's promised king would allow himself to be humbled in this way.

16:21 From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. 22 Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, **Be it far from thee, Lord:** this shall not be unto thee.
- After the second announcement (17:22-23), we hear the disciples' question in 18:1.

17:22 ... Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: 23 And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry. ... 18:1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, **Who is the greatest** in the kingdom of heaven?
- After the third (20:17-19), the mother of James and John tries to negotiate special privileges for her sons in the coming kingdom:

20:17 And Jesus ... said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, 19 And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify *him*: and the third day he shall rise again. 20 Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping *him*, and desiring a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, **Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left,** in thy kingdom.

Luke tells us that even at the last supper, they were arguing over their relative status:

Luk 22:23 And they began to enquire among themselves, which of them it was that should do this thing. 24 And there was also a strife among them, **which of them should be accounted the greatest.**

In ch. 18, the Lord addressed this problem using the object lesson of a child. Here he takes advantage of the request from the parents, and the disciples' inappropriate attitude, to repeat the lesson. The characteristic of the "little child" that the Lord requires, according to 18:4, is humility.

Matthew 19:1-20:15

Matt 18:4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The true believer recognizes that spiritually he is a little child. In the physical domain, a little child does not seek preeminence over others, but recognizes his dependence on more mature people. The Scriptures teach that believers should have the same attitude of humility and dependence.

Let's consider two ways in which a child shows her dependence, and in which believers should show their dependence (chart).

A young child cannot provide his own food, but hungers for nourishment. The Scriptures teach,

1Pe 2:1 Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, 2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:

Notice the contrast between the believer's hunger for the word of God and prideful behavior. It is only when we lay aside "envies" and the attitudes associated with them that we can take the place of little children, desiring and profiting from the milk of the word.

As another example of the attitude of dependence and submission of a young child, consider how attached children are to their parents, and how they naturally look to more mature people for help, guidance, and security. Even so, believers should show respect and deference to those who are more mature in the faith:

1Th 5:12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. *And* be at peace among yourselves.

Heb 13:17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that *is* unprofitable for you.

1Pe 5:5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

In the church of Jesus Christ, leadership is not demanded by the proud or imposed by the powerful. Rather, it is elicited by the needs of the little children, and provided with loving patience by those with more experience in the faith. Instead of asking the Lord to give one of them preference over the others, the disciples should have been manifesting the humility of a child.

The focus of this exhortation is on the need for the disciples to take a humble position, rather than seeking positions of prestige and putting those lower down in their place. But if there are little children hungry for teaching, somebody must feed them. If there are little children who seek guidance and direction, somebody must care enough to be available to them. So it's

Matthew 19:1-20:15

important to consider the responsibility that rests with more mature believers to provide for these needs (chart).

In his first letter, at the end of his first missionary journey, Paul writes to the Galatians,

Gal 4:19 **My little children**, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,

His attitude toward the believers is that of a father toward his children. During his second journey, from Corinth, he writes to the Thessalonians, whom he had evangelized earlier on that trip, and expresses the same sentiment:

1Th 2:7 But we were gentle among you, **even as a nurse cherisheth her children**: 8 So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. 9 For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. 10 Ye *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: 11 As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, **as a father doth his children**, 12 That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

Note the sacrificial attitude that he expresses: “we were willing to have imparted unto you ... our own souls.” This is not a pride that seeks greatness, but a spirit of sacrificial service in imitation of the Lord Jesus.

Later, he expresses himself in the same way to the Corinthians,

1Co 4:14 I write not these things to shame you, but as **my beloved sons** I warn *you*. 15 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *have ye* not many **fathers**: for **in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel**.

John uses the same language toward those whom he has nurtured in the gospel, and repeatedly mentions that he has written to them, feeding them with the word of God:

1Jo 2:1 **My little children**, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. (also 3:18)

Peter sums up both aspects of the relation that we have been discussing. First he exhorts the older believers to “take the oversight,” doing the work that needs to be done and not hiding behind an excuse of humility. But in their exercise of this work, they are to remember constantly that they are not “lords over God’s heritage.”

1Pe 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 **Feed** the flock of God which is among you, taking the **oversight thereof**, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over *God’s* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

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Then he exhorts the younger believers to take advantage of the sacrifice that the older ones are making, and to respect their place in the assembly.

5a Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder.

But in conclusion, he is very clear that both attitudes are to be characterized by humility:

5b Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. 6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: 7 Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

The imagery of the little child, has an important implication. Physically, children do not decide to be born. Their birth is something determined by their parents, and they can claim no credit for it. In our passage, they did not come to the Lord under their own power, but were

Ecc 11:5 As **thou knowest not** what is **the way [path]** of the **spirit**, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of **her that is with child**: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

Joh 3:7 ... ye must be **born** again. 8 The **wind** bloweth where it listeth, and **thou** hearest the sound thereof, but **canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth**: so is every one that is **born** of the **Spirit**.

brought (v. 13). Spiritual birth is no different (chart). What is needed is not that we convert (on our initiative and by our strength), but that we be converted (Matt 18:3). The new birth results from a moving of God's Spirit that we cannot understand (John 3:8; compare Eccl 11:5). Overcoming the pride of life, like overcoming the lust of the flesh, requires a gift of God.

15 And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.--Having explained the importance of the little children, he does as the parents requested. And so may we. While there is no basis in Scripture for infant baptism, this passage provides excellent grounds for the dedication of children to the Lord with prayer for them and for their parents.

19:16-20:15, Entering the Kingdom: Lust of the Eyes

The third episode that Matthew records as the Lord travels south with his disciples arises from the question of a young man who is concerned about his spiritual destiny. The section has three parts: his discussion with the inquirer, instruction to the disciples, and a parable.

16-22, Responding to an Inquirer

16 And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?--Note his selectivity: "What good thing ...?" He seems to think that there is a "silver bullet," one righteous act that he can carry out to earn eternal life. Surely there is one single act that will do the trick.

The double use of "good" highlights his point. He recognizes Jesus as an example of goodness,

one who surely will receive eternal life, and he wants to achieve that same goal. So he asks the good master about the most important good deed.

Compare the role played in some peoples' minds by the sacraments, or the distinction between venial and mortal sins, etc.

17 And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is none good but one, that is, God:*⁷--That is to say, "Do you really understand the implications of what you are saying?" No one other than God can truly be good. This should lead him to two conclusions:

1. If he really does recognize that Jesus is good, he must grapple with his deity.
2. He will not be able on his own to achieve goodness, since he is not God.

He is guilty of two errors: thinking too little of the Lord Jesus, and thinking too much of himself. The Lord seeks to correct both of these.

This relation between goodness and God is a central theme of this episode, as we shall see.

but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.--Having just told the young man that only God can qualify as good, he reminds him of the standards that God has set. The plural "commandments" stands in stark contrast to the question, "What good thing..." Contrary to the young man's request, he tells him that he must keep all of the commandments. There is no single "silver bullet."

18 He saith unto him, Which?--There is a Greek word that means simply "which?" (τις). This word has more the sense of "what kind?" As in his original query, he is trying to be selective.

Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.--The Lord's first answer (vv. 17-19) is striking, particularly in light of what Matthew later records about his comments on the law in chapter 22 (Table 2, chart, first two columns).

Mat 22:35 Then one of them, *which was* a lawyer, asked *him a question*, tempting him, and saying, 36 Master, which *is* the great commandment in the law? 37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

In this later interview, the Lord summarizes the ten commandments using two other texts from the law . He sums up the first four commandments, dealing with our duty to the Lord, with Deut 6:5, calling it "the first and great commandment," then summarizes the last six with Lev 19:18.⁸

7 Vv. 16-17 have several interesting variants, but the MT is both broad and ancient, and we follow it.

8 The wording in Matt 22:37 follows the Greek translation of the day, differing in some details from the Hebrew text.

Matthew 19:1-20:15

Exodus 20	Matt 22:35-40	Matt 19:18-19
3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.	37 Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. (Deut 6:5)	
4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, ...		
7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain;		
8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ...		
12 Honour thy father and thy mother:	39 Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Lev 19:18)	e. 19 Honour thy father and thy mother
13 Thou shalt not kill.		a. Thou shalt do no murder,
14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.		b. Thou shalt not commit adultery,
15 Thou shalt not steal.		c. Thou shalt not steal,
16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.		d. Thou shalt not bear false witness,
17 Thou shalt not covet ...		



Table 2: What did the Lord leave out in Matt 19:18-19?

Now compare both Exodus 20 and the later summary in Matthew 22 with our text. The Lord enumerates the first five of the last six commandments, though in a different order. He omits “Thou shalt not covet,” and instead summarizes those he does mention with Lev 19:18.

It is strange that in telling the young man what God expects, he summarizes the secondary theme of the law, but omits the primary one. But our Savior “knew all *men*, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). He knows from the outset what the young man is missing. He knows that the young man is scrupulous in his duty toward his neighbor, so he begins with those commandments. But he also knows that the young man is in bondage to the lust of the eyes. His wealth is his idol, so he cannot love God completely, as the first four commandments require. And predictably, that weakness will lead him to covetousness, so the Lord leaves out that final commandment.

The young man claims to have observed these carefully, and yet is still not at peace. He senses that something is missing. No wonder—he is neglecting the first and great commandment!

20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?--Now the Lord directs his attention to the commandments that are missing in vv. 17-19—not by listing them, but by pointing out something in his life that is incompatible with them. The summary of the first four is Deut 6:5, which includes the requirement to love the Lord with all of one’s abundance. The Lord knows that the young man doesn’t do this, and gives him a command to help him realize this. He is like a skilled doctor, who doesn’t tell the patient abstractly, “You have inflammation of the latissimus dorsi,” but instead pokes you in the side and

says, “Does it hurt here?”

21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect,--The young man is seeking a single, silver bullet. The Lord is confronting him with the need to conform to all of God’s commandments. By challenging him with perfection, he recalls his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (chart),

Mat 5:48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

These are the only two verses in Matthew that use this Greek word τελειος, “whole” or “complete.” In 5:48 the standard of this perfection is God, and in this episode the standard of goodness is also God. The Lord’s call is for his people to be godly, “god-like.”

As the disciples recognize in the next paragraph, this standard is humanly inaccessible. But our understanding of the three choices, and the contrast between Eve’s failure in the garden and our Lord’s triumph in the wilderness, shows us the secret. People can only live god-like lives when they are indwelt, possessed, and controlled by God the Holy Spirit. This is what the prophets promised concerning the New Covenant, and what the NT expects in our lives:

Eze 36:27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.

1Co 2:15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

Rom 8:4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.--The young man loves his wealth more than he loves God. He will not surrender his abundance to serve the Lord. He is undone by the lust of the eyes.

19:23-20:16, Instructing the Disciples

23-29, In Dialog

As in each of the other two episodes, the Lord concludes by making the point clear for his disciples. First he addresses the group as a whole, and then he responds to a specific question from Peter.

23-26, to the Twelve

23 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.--The difficulty faced by the rich man is that he already has his god, whom he must give up in order to follow the Lord.

Matthew 19:1-20:15

Paul generalizes this principle: any advantage that we have will lure us away from the Lord (Table 3, chart). In particular, compare 1 Cor 1:26, “not many,” with the Lord’s caution, “shall hardly,” and the saying that transitions between this section and the next in 19:30, “many that are first shall be last.” In both cases, it’s not impossible for a person of privilege to be saved, but it is exceptional, because the benefits they already enjoy are an idol that they must let go before they can worship the Lord.

Matt 19:23 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a **rich man** shall **hardly** enter into the kingdom of heaven.

1Co 1:26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that **not many wise** men after the flesh, **not many mighty**, **not many noble**, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the **foolish things** of the world to confound the **wise**;

and God hath chosen the **weak** things of the world to confound the things which are **mighty**;

28 And **base things** of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: 29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

Table 3: Paul's Echo of 19:23

24 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.--The parable is not describing the need to unload the camel before entering a small door into a walled city, but setting forth something completely impossible.

25 When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?--As in the discussion about divorce, they find the Lord’s demands impossible.

26 But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.--In the first episode, the Lord emphasized the need for a divine gift to overcome the lust of the flesh and love God with all of one’s life force. The imagery of conversion and new birth implicit in the second episode shows that overcoming the pride of life and loving the Lord with all of our heart is also the work of God, and now he emphasizes that the same principle is true of the lust of the eyes. We can only love God with all of our abundance in the strength that he gives us.

Does the Lord’s instruction to the young man mean that all believers must sell what they have and give it away in order to be saved? That clearly was not the universal understanding of the early church. Indeed, in Jerusalem it was a common practice (chart):

Act 4:34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, 35 And laid *them* down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

But it was viewed as voluntary, not a requirement for reception into the fellowship, as Peter makes clear to Ananias:

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Act 5:4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?

And in Corinth, a very different pattern for charity was followed: individuals remained in control of their own wealth until a special need arose:

1Co 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. 2 Upon the first *day* of the week let every one of you lay by him [by himself] in store, as *God* hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

Paul gives the general principle in his own testimony:

Phi 3:4 Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: 5 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, *of* the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; 6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. **7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.** 8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ, 9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

He had to give up “what things were gain to” him. In his case, it was not money, but it certainly was prestige in the Jewish community, an up and coming Pharisee, a student of Gamaliel. The challenge he faced was not the lust of the eyes, but the pride of life. To love the Lord with all his heart, he had to give up that ground of boasting.

The Lord’s instruction to the young man is surgical, based on his specific diagnosis. Those with the same disease need the same treatment the Lord prescribed for him; those with a different idol need to give up whatever that idol is—in Paul’s words, “what things were gain to me.”

We should also note that when we do see charitable distributions in Acts, they are not broadcast to the world’s unbelieving poor, but focused on needy believers.

27-29, to Peter

27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?--Peter continues to reflect a worldly attitude, the expectation that the Twelve are in some sense better than the others because of their sacrifice.

The Lord’s response has three parts: the special position that awaits the Twelve, a general promise for all who forsake all to follow the Lord, and the general statement of v. 30 that expands into the parable.

28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the

regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.--First, the Lord reminds Peter of the persistent theme in Scripture that the saints will rule with the Lord in the coming kingdom—after a time of great suffering (chart).

Dan 7:25 And he [the Antichrist] shall speak great words against the most High, and shall **wear out the saints of the most High**, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time. 26 But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end. 27 And **the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High**, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

2Ti 2:12 If we **suffer**, we shall also **reign** with *him*: if we deny *him*, he also will deny us:

Rev 20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and *I saw* the souls of **them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus**, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received *his* mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and **reigned with Christ** a thousand years.

Note relation of sacrifice and suffering to each of these. The coming kingdom is not more blessing piled on the heads of this world's nobility, but a respite from the persecution and rejection we are to expect in this age. As he will summarize in v. 30, those who have been last will become first.

29 And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold,--Second, the Lord makes clear that the promise of reward for those who sacrifice for the Lord is not limited to the Twelve. It extends to "every one" who forsakes this world.

The parallels in Mark and Luke make clear that the reward here promised is not in the coming kingdom, but now (chart):⁹

Mar 10:29 And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, 30 But he shall receive an hundredfold **now in this time**, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

9 Methodologically, it is important to note that this saying comes in all three synoptics in the same point in the narrative: after the instruction to the rich man, and just before the third passion prediction. This synchrony allows us to identify it as the same instance of the saying, and thus to draw on Mark and Luke in understanding the Lord's intent that this reward is in the present age. Otherwise, we might be dealing with slightly different sayings in different settings, and it might in fact be the case that the hundredfold return in Matthew was not for this age. Insistence that similar sayings in different settings in the synoptics must represent the same original saying is the Q error (as manifested, for example, in Jeremias's handling of the parables).

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Luk 18:29 And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, 30 Who shall not receive manifold more **in this present time**, and in the world to come life everlasting.

How can this be “in this present time”? The answer must lie in the love and care of believers for one another. Recall our Lord’s words at the end of ch. 12, where he gives an example of giving up “mother and brethren,” and receiving far more in return.

Mat 12:46 While he yet talked to the people, behold, *his* mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. 47 Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. 48 But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? 49 And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! 50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

The church takes the place of the people and things we abandon to serve the Lord. We see many examples of this in the NT (chart).

We have already noticed that the church in Jerusalem practiced community of goods:

Act 2:44 And all **that believed** were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need.

Act 4:32 And the multitude of them **that believed** were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any *of them* that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

Note that both are said of those **that believed**. The modern progressive movement wants to appropriate this beautiful care of believers for one another to a universal duty of humans toward one another, but without the prerequisite of faith and accountability to the elders of the local assemblies. This notion is completely contrary to both the OT and NT. In both testaments, charity is focused on the people of God, and if unbelievers benefit, it is because they are closely associated with believers (in the OT, the “stranger within thy gates”).¹⁰

Paul’s Christian ministry as recorded in Acts both begins and ends with providing material charity for poor believers in Jerusalem. As the synagogue hardened its opposition against the church, believers in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religion, would feel especially keenly the loss of family and property, as they would be ostracized by the society. After Paul’s salvation, he disappears into Tarsus for a while, until Barnabas recruits him to help in the church at Antioch. There, his first recorded ministry is on a charitable mission to Jerusalem:

Act 11:25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: 26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were

¹⁰ A study on this subject is available at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/Giving1986.pdf>

Matthew 19:1-20:15

called Christians first in Antioch. 27 And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. 28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: 30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Toward the end of his ministry, much of the third missionary journey was occupied with receiving an offering from the Gentile churches, again for persecuted saints in Jerusalem:

2Co 8:1 Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; 2 How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. 3 For to *their* power, I bear record, yea, and beyond *their* power *they were* willing of themselves; 4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and *take upon us* the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. . . . 13 For *I mean* not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: 14 But by an equality, *that* now at this time your abundance *may be a supply* for their want, that their abundance also may be *a supply* for your want: that there may be equality: 15 As it is written, He that *had gathered* much had nothing over; and he that *had gathered* little had no lack.

Rom 15:25 But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. 26 For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. 27 It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.

We call one another, brothers in Christ. This is more than a title. It expresses a relationship that is stronger than our physical relations, as our Lord made clear in ch. 12.

and shall inherit everlasting life.--Once again, God's future blessings are promised to those whose salvation shows in their lives.

19:30-20:16, In a Parable

The last verse of ch. 19 is the third part of the Lord's answer to Peter, but also forms an inclusio with 20:16. It really is a transition between the two sections, both answering Peter and introducing the parable.

30 But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last *shall be* first.--This saying cuts two ways.

In favor of Peter, it confirms him for not pursuing worldly prominence. "Good for you, Peter. You have indeed left all to follow me, and you will not go without your reward, and so will all who place me first." In this sense, it summarizes the principle that those who suffer for Christ in this life will rule with him in the kingdom to come.

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But we should note the beginning particle, “but” (δε). While this is not a strong adversative, it does mark a discontinuity, and the conjunction “for” γαρ that begins ch. 20 suggests that the saying has more to do with the parable than with the previous story. Peter and the other disciples, while willingly taking the last place in the world’s standards, continue to be preoccupied with their status in the kingdom of heaven. In conjunction with the following parable, this saying is a rebuke to Peter. “Don’t be so proud about what you have given up for me. Position in the kingdom is something that comes of God’s grace, not of your effort.”

20:1 For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man *that is an householder*, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.--In third-world cultures it is not uncommon for day-laborers to offer their services in the marketplace.

2 And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.--The salary is in line with what we know from other sources—a denarius, a silver coin about the size of a dime. Note that the salary is agreed in advance.

Ancient records indicate that a laborers pretty much lived hand to mouth.

the Mishnah calculates that a person needs a minimum of 200 denarii per year in order to exist ... One denarius could buy 10 to 12 small, flat loaves of bread; 3 to 4 denarii 12 liters of wheat (from which one could make about 15 kilograms of bread) or a lamb; 30 denarii a slave’s garment; 100 denarii an ox.¹¹

Recall that the boy at the feeding of the 5000 had “five barley loaves, and two small fishes” (John 6:9), which was either his own lunch, or more likely the disciples’ lunch. So missing a day’s work meant going hungry.

3 And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way.--Repeatedly throughout the day, the husbandman engages other workers. Unlike the earlier ones, though, they work without agreeing on the salary. He simply says that he will give them “whatsoever is right.” We should note the Greek word used here—δικαιον (Strong G1342), which means “just” or “righteous.”

5 Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? 7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us.--The answer seems obvious, but it invites a further question: “Why didn’t anybody hire you?” Were these men late in arriving to the market? Were they sickly, or weak? Their answer suggests that they were undesirable in some way. Nobody wanted them.

He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, *that shall ye receive.*--As the day passes, the householder’s actions become less and less understandable.

11 Luz, U. (2001). *Matthew: a commentary*. (H. Koester, Ed.) (p. 530). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

What good does it do to hire somebody for the last hour of the day, particularly since he intends to pay him a full day's wage? Why not just wait for the next morning? He is driven more by care for those who will have no income for the day, than by economy in managing his own business.

8 So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them *their* hire, beginning from the last unto the first. 9 And when they came that *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny.--There was no agreement with these individuals about what they would be paid. They worked purely on the basis of trusting the householder to give them "whatsoever is right," again, "righteous."

10 But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more;--Why do they make this assumption? Of all the workers, they are the only ones with a fixed contract, and their contract was for a penny.

and they likewise received every man a penny.--The householder keeps his contract.

11 And when they had received *it*, they murmured against the goodman of the house, 12 Saying, These last have wrought *but* one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.--Their complaint shows the wickedness of their hearts. They are motivated by covetousness, the point of the tenth commandment.

13 But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?--He kept his contract with them.

14 Take *that thine is*, and go thy way:--Note two details of his command:

- "Take" = ἀρῶ, "take up." The offended workers have "received" their money (v. 10), but now are represented as leaving it on the table, or even casting it on the ground in disgust.
- "Go thy way." Most commentators pass over this detail as incidental. But he doesn't tell the other workers, who did not complain, to leave. And the summary he gives in v. 16 suggests that this is a central point of the story. The ungrateful, jealous workmen are sent away from the Lord's presence. They do not appreciate his gracious attitude; they have no place in his household or his workforce.

I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.--"I will" = "I want to." The reward for those who came late is completely of the master's mercy.

For that matter, those who came early were also there of grace. The householder didn't have to hire any of them. They were all unattached laborers, dependent on the choice of the householder, which makes it even more unreasonable for some of them to complain at the end of the day.

15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?--The agreement with the later workers was that he would pay them what is δικαιοσύνη, righteous. But now he describes his actions not as righteous, but as good (charity). Trench notes that there is a difference between the two, reflected in Romans 5:

Rom 5:7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man

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some would even dare to die.

A man might keep the law superficially, appearing righteous, and yet be cold and indifferent to the needs of others. A good man is one who engages our sympathy and who relates to other people.

Contrast what was promised to the late workers, “that which is δικαιοσ” (vv. 4, 7). He promises justice, but gives goodness. And this contrast lies at the heart of our relation with God. He owes us only what is just, but he gives us what is good.

v. 16 derives two conclusions from the tale:

16 So the last shall be first, and the first last:--He now repeats the saying with which he summarized his discussion with the disciples in 19:30.¹² Among the believers, there is no preference based on merit. All is of grace.

There are two changes from the earlier instance of the saying.

First, the “many” is gone. Originally, he left the door open for some who were first to avoid the last place. But now it is a general principle: positions will be reversed in the kingdom. The greatest is the one who serves the most,

Mat 18:4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Second, the order of the terms has changed. In 19:30, he started with “the first,” making the statement a *warning* to those in positions of prestige. Here, he starts with “the last,” making it an encouragement to those who are downtrodden.

In context, the main point of the parable is that the Twelve should have no preconceptions about their position in the kingdom because they have been with him from the first.¹³ Those called early in the Lord’s ministry are not necessarily senior to those who come later. Paul may have this passage in mind when he writes (chart),

1Co 15:7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. 8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which *was bestowed* upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

12 A saying very similar to this appears in another context in Luke, Luk 13:28, with reference to the gentiles entering the Kingdom of God before the Jews, but that is not the context here. As with the two versions of the parable of the sheep and the shepherd, the Lord often uses a particular illustrative form in different settings and with different meaning.

13 A similar saying appears in a different context, in Luke 13:30, where it focuses on the expectations of the Jews and their frustration when the Gentiles enter the kingdom while they are cast out. Note that coming “last” in Luke doesn’t mean a delayed entry, but in fact complete rejection. Is the saying used differently in the two cases, or in view of v. 16b, should we emphasize the rejection here as well?

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And earlier in 1 Corinthians, he writes, again with likely reference to this teaching,

1 Cor 4:9 For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. 10 We *are* fools for Christ's sake, but ye *are* wise in Christ; we *are* weak, but ye *are* strong; ye *are* honourable, but we *are* despised. 11 Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; 12 And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: 13 Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, *and are* the offscouring of all things unto this day.

for many be called, but few chosen.¹⁴--The attitude of the earlier workers is incompatible with true salvation; some who work in the vineyard in fact will not enter into eternal life. There are many who are attracted by the Lord's teaching, who even labor for him and enjoy the benefits of association with a godly company, who yet are without the pale of salvation.

Mat 7:22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Alford quotes 2 John 8 as “the key to the parable”:

2Jo 1:8 Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.

Comparing the Three Episodes

Table 4 summarizes the parallels across the three episodes.

Our Lord's hours on the road toward Jerusalem are his last opportunity to instruct the disciples before the storm of hatred from the temple hierarchy breaks over his head, and he becomes preoccupied with that final confrontation. It

Choice	Soul: Lust of Flesh	Heart: Pride of Life	Abundance: Lust of Eyes
Outsiders	Pharisees	Children	Young man
Disciples	10-12	13-14	19:23-20:15
Divine enabling	19:11 But he said unto them, All <i>men</i> cannot receive this saying, save <i>they</i> to whom it is given .	19:13 Then were there brought unto him little children ... 18:3 Except ye be converted , and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.	19:26 But Jesus beheld <i>them</i> , and said unto them, With men this is impossible ; but with God all things are possible.

Table 4: Comparing the Episodes Along the Way

14 This saying appears also in 22:14, after the parable of the wedding feast. Because it is lacking in κ and B at this point, most modern versions omit it. But CNTTS documents the omission after these in only two mss, one of the 8th and one of the 9th century, while the fuller version is ubiquitous, from the fourth century (a) on. Critics omit it because (they say) it doesn't make sense here—but in that case, why would it ever have been imported?

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is striking that his instruction follows the Three Choices. These principles are central to the work he has for them to do. If they are to serve him effectively, they must, in God's strength, love the Lord with all of their heart, all of their soul, all of their abundance.

Notes

Καὶ ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ ὄχλοι πολλοὶ

This expression appears 5x in Matt, the last of which uses the singular rather than the plural. (ακολουθεω and οχλος appear together also in 14:13 and 21:9, but without πολυς, and in a different construction.)

Matt. 4:25 And **there followed him great multitudes** of people from Galilee, and *from* Decapolis, and *from* Jerusalem, and *from* Judaea, and *from* beyond Jordan. *Just after beginning of the second major section of the book, at 4:17*

Matt. 8:1 When he was come down from the mountain, **great multitudes followed him.** *Beginning of the miracle section.*

Matt. 12:15 But when Jesus knew *it*, he withdrew himself from thence: and **great multitudes followed him**, and he healed them all; *In the middle of the opposition chapter, as part of his withdrawal.*

Matt. 19:2 And **great multitudes followed him**; and he healed them there. *Beginning of the journey to Jerusalem; perhaps marks shift from private time with disciples from 17b onward*

Matt. 20:29 And as they departed from Jericho, **a great multitude** followed him.

What is the significance of each of these...and of the shift to the singular in 20:29?

In each case, he is moving, and “followed” has the literal meaning of accompanying him. See Kinsbury JBL 1978.

The singular in 20:29 contrasts with “they departed,” which reflects the Lord and the disciples.

Note in each case that the multitude follows “him,” not “them.”

Singular:

- This expression also in 26:47, of the multitude that came with Judas!
- See Cousland, p 35 (pdf 50), note 19, for catalog of instances. P. 37 discusses the differences, but concludes (p. 38-39) that “it is best, therefore simply to conclude that Matthew provides no sufficient basis for distinguishing between the singular and the plural forms of οχλος.”

Echoes of the Sermon on the Mount in the Wayside Episodes

The first and last of these clearly recall teaching in ch. 5-7.

- The prohibition on divorce in 19:9 closely parallels 5:32.

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- The demand for perfection in 19:21 echoes 5:28 (the only other verse in Matthew to use τελειος).

How about the episode with the little children? The strongest links of this section are of course with ch. 18. There is no verbal link as direct as with the other two episodes. The attitude of meekness enjoined in 5:5 might reflect a childlike attitude (though I can find no verse that combines these).

What is the Final State of the First Workmen in 2:1-15?

The first workmen are offended when they learn that those hired later will receive as much as they. The householder's response to them (v. 14) sends them away, an instruction he does not give to the others. What does this mean?

Many commentators assume this is just part of the dressing of the parable, with no correspondence in the underlying spiritual lesson. Schaff: "This does not necessarily imply that the first were finally rejected, receiving only the temporal good they bargained for." Most pass it by. France justifies this attitude: The command "comes naturally in the setting of the story for workers going home at the end of the day. All have been paid and all, presumably, go home." (p. 752 note 28). It is almost universally assumed that the pay corresponds to receiving the kingdom, and all get paid.

But France does cite Via's commentary to the contrary, and Murray (*Jesus and the Kingdom of God* p. 119) agrees with Via.

Among older commentators, some do see rejection here. Of course, this means that it is the denarius that is the window-trapping of the parable, and the dismissal more to the point.

John Trapp: "A fearful sentence. David blesseth himself from those men of God's hand, which have their portion here, and that is all they are to look for, Psalms 17:14.

John Gill: "out of my sight, give me no more trouble on this head; which looks like a dismissal from his service, and after privileges; and was true of many among the Jews, who were only nominal professors, and from whom the Gospel and ordinances of it were taken."

Ellicott:

The tone of dismissal is natural and intelligible in the parable. The question, What answers to it in God's dealings with men? is not so easy to answer. If the "penny" which each received was the gift of eternal life, did those who answered to the murmuring labourers receive that, or were they excluded by their discontent from all share in it? Was the money which they received as "fairy-gold" that turned to a withered leaf in the hands of its thankless possessor? The answer is, perhaps, to be found in the thought that that reward lies in the presence of God to the soul of the disciple, and that this depends for its blessedness on the harmony between the character of the believer and the mind of God. Heaven is not a place, but a state, its happiness is not sensual but spiritual, and those who

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are in it share its blessedness in proportion as they are like God and see Him as He is. It is only perfect when their charity is like His.

This question must be considered along with the final saying in v. 16, which though very well attested textually is rejected by many modern commentators as not fitting into the parable. But if v. 14 really is intended to indicate that some of the workers, by their ingratitude, are excluded from the householder's fellowship, the final saying makes a great deal of sense. All were called; all worked in the service of the householders, but some, notably those who made an explicit deal, find themselves sent away. This is the line of interpretation that I have followed in the body of the exposition.