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Matthew 19:13 - 20:16

The Economy of the Kingdom Runs on Grace

When I was 14, just a freshman in high school, I started working for my own pocket money. I began with just doing odd jobs here and there: mowing the lawn for neighbors or helping pull weeds in flower beds. When I turned 16 and got my license, I got my first “real job” - making and delivering pizzas. I quickly learned some lessons about how the *world* works: as a general principle, the harder you work and the better job you do, the more you get paid; or, at the very least, the more you *should* get paid.

This is just a basic principle for how the world typically works, isn't it? if you want to eat and have your needs and wants met, then you need a job to earn money. If you want to keep your job or make money, then you need to work harder. If someone is better at certain kind of work, then they generally get paid more to do it. It's simple economics, isn't it? And when hard work doesn't seem to pay off, or someone who is lazy or under-qualified gets the job or promotion when they don't deserve it, we immediately feel a sense of injustice don't we?

And so, most of us learn to value *hard work* and *earning our keep*, and feel ripped off when we don't get what we deserve. But here's the problem: all too often, we try to take this principle of how *this world works*, and we try to apply it to *the Kingdom of God*, as if that's how it works, too. Most religions throughout history have involved some sort of idea of humanity *earning* favor or blessing from the god or gods through their own works and efforts. But we all know that's not how the true God of the Bible operates; that's not how the gospel of Christ works. Yet even as Christians, who profess faith in the free grace of the gospel of Christ alone as sufficient for salvation - we can still be so prone to operating under *functional legalism*, can't we? It is still far too easy for us to impose this same *value system* of the world onto the Christian life, onto our view of God, onto his view of us. It seems that the natural, default position of fallen mankind is to approach God thinking, “If I can just be good enough, just do enough good to outweigh the bad, or appease God by doing the right things - then maybe, just maybe, He will accept me and I can live forever in Heaven!” After all, that's how the world works. Just work harder. Just try harder. Just be better.

But praise be to God that's not how His Kingdom works. **The economy of God's Kingdom runs on the counter--intuitive principle of grace!** In this passage, *Matthew 19:13 - 20:16*, Jesus confronts the "works-based" approach to righteousness and shows us that there is absolutely no hope for us down that road. But then, he shows us the road of the gospel: the road to heaven and eternal life will not be found in our own efforts, but child-like faith and dependance on Christ; not in our own perfection, but the perfection of Jesus; not in getting what we deserve or earn, but in God lavishing the glorious riches of His grace upon us who believe in Christ Jesus!

So let's look at these glorious truths of the gospel this morning.

Point number 1...

I. We must have child-like faith to enter the kingdom of heaven (19:13-15)

In verse 13, a new scene begins: "Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray." As Jesus and his disciples continued on their way towards Jerusalem, entering new areas and doing ministry, parents were bringing their children to Jesus, for him to bless them, to lay hands on them and pray for them. But Jesus's disciples were offended by this and tried to stop them, so that they "rebuked the people." When we hear this, we're probably immediately offended by this (and for good reason); we're appalled by the idea that these disciples, who have been hanging around Jesus for so long and left everything to follow him, could be so haughty as to stop parents from bringing their children to Jesus. In that time period and culture, children were seen as the lowest in society. They were seen as helpless, needy, and desperately dependant upon others for their welfare. Since they couldn't bring anything to the table, so to speak, from their own efforts and labor, they had a lower social status, until they were old enough to contribute to society themselves.

And so, the disciples probably thought that Jesus, being the all-important Messiah on a divine mission, should not have his time wasted by helpless, insignificant children. But they were dead-wrong in their reasoning; once again, they missed the point. So Jesus, in turn, rebukes his disciples, in v.14-15: "' Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid hands on them and went away."

Now, before I say what Jesus *does* mean hear, we first need to note what he's *not* saying. He's not saying that all children in all the world, automatically, are part of GOD's Kingdom -

after all, we've already seen over and over again that to be *part of CHrist's kingdom* is to be a Christian, to be saved. So he's not saying that all children are automatically Christians, and then somehow lose their salvation at some unknown age and then have to be saved again. Nor is he saying that only children can be saved or become Christians and adults cannot. That's obviously not what he's saying; that completely goes against the rest of the Bible and the gospel of Christ.

So what *is* he saying, then? He's saying that if anyone wants to be part of the Kingdom of God - in order for anyone to become a Christian and be saved, even as adults - then we must become first *become like little children*.

The disciples didn't think the children should be brought to Jesus because they didn't think that such weak, helpless, and needy children could contribute anything of value to the Kingdom. But this is exactly where they missed the point: Jesus doesn't let us into His kingdom based on how *valuable* our works, efforts, and contribution might be; in fact, it's not based on our works or contributions at all! Jesus isn't sitting around saying, "Oh, look at him, he's so intelligent! He's such a charismatic leader and able teacher! He would be of such great value to my kingdom! I'll let him come to me." Or "Look at her; she's so sweet, kind, and loving - of course I'll let her come to me!" Nor is he sitting around saying, "Not him, not her; they would never be of use to me." Jesus is waiting around for us to prove ourselves good enough - because that would never happen. GOD doesn't need us; we have absolutely *nothing* to contribute to GOD or His Kingdom. We could never be worthy of Jesus's time! We can never earn God's favor or blessing.

So who can be saved, then? Who does Jesus let come to him? Who does he let join His kingdom and be saved? *All who come to him with childlike faith; all who come to him knowing just how truly weak, desperately needy, and utterly dependant we are upon Jesus CHrist's grace!* A young child cannot take care of themselves, nor do we expect them to! I don't expect my children to already know everything; in fact, I want them to learn humility and acknowledge how *little* they know, and trust us to teach them! I don't expect my young children to be able to take care of themselves, meet their own needs, work a job, or pay rent and contribute to our family income. That would be absurd to expect that of a toddler or 3 year old, wouldn't it? Instead, I expect them - I *want* them - to know that, as helpless, needy, and dependant as they are, they can *always* depend on their parents to love, provide for, and take of them. I want my children to come to me in complete *neediness, helplessness, and weakness!*

And that's the only way it works with us and our heavenly Father, too. The only way to come to Jesus, to enter His Kingdom, to become and Christian and be saved, is to acknowledge your own *desperate, needy helplessness*, and to run to Jesus by *desperately clinging to Him, trusting and depending upon him with childlike faith*; trusting him, just like a child trusting his father, to do *everything necessary* to forgive, redeem, justify, and save us - not because of anything we can do or have to offer, but simply because of His glorious grace! After all, this is the gospel of Christ: that Jesus came to save undeserving sinners.

Children, the weak, needy, and helpless of society are a gracious picture to us, a gift from God, showing us what *we* are truly like: weak, helpless, and desperately needy, utterly dependant upon God, our Heavenly Father. True, saving faith must begin with that realization; it must be *childlike*.

And there is no salvation outside of childlike trust and dependance on Christ, because, as we see in our next point...

II. We cannot earn our way into the kingdom of Heaven (19:16-30)

The scene transitions again in verse 16: a rich young man comes up to Jesus, asking, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

The rich young ruler seems to be "perfect" from a worldly perspective - a wealthy, powerful young man with a seemingly virtuous life and desire to be good and God-fearing. From a Jewish perspective at the time, everyone would have assumed that he was *blessed by God*, or else he would not have prospered as he did - they would look at this man and most likely think: "if anyone would be saved, of course it would be someone like *him!*"

But Jesus turns such assumptions upside down. He responds in verse 17: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." In other words, he immediately challenges the young man's assumptions about what it means to "*be good*" and about what it takes to "*have eternal life*." This young man is working under belief that if he can just be good enough, then he can enter into eternal life - what we would refer to as *salvation*, living forever in Heaven, with the Lord. Now, in ones sense, he is right in assuming that if someone were to *earn* eternal life, it would come through being *good enough*, since God is good. But Jesus is pointing out here that he *gravely* misunderstands what it means to "be good." He sorely underestimates *just how good* someone has to be in order

to be *good enough* to have eternal life. Jesus reminds him: “There is only one who is good.” And it is no man, no mere human being - it is God Himself. *Only GOD is good*. God is the standard of what it means to “be good enough” - and that standard is no less than *perfection*, the very righteousness that the holiness and justice of God demands. Jesus drove this point home in Matthew chapter 7, in the Sermon on the Mount: God requires no less than *moral perfection*.

So Jesus says, if you would enter life - that is, if you would *earn it*, by your own efforts - “keep the commandments.” Jesus is not telling him it is possible for him to do so - he’s simply playing out the young man’s logic, to help him see just how impossible it is for him to do so. The young man replies, in verse 18: “Which ones?” And Jesus said, ‘You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (19:18-19). All of these commandments, except for the last one, come from the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament Law of Moses, given to Israel in Exodus 20. Interestingly, Jesus does not quote the entire Ten Commandments - he just quotes 5 of them. And these five commandments, plus the tenth commandment, “Do not covet,” deal with relationships between people - between man and man, neighbor to neighbor. In fact, the very heart and purpose of these commandments is summed up with the last common that Jesus quotes, from Lev. 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The young man replies in verse 20, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” No doubt, this rich, young ruler lived a very good, pious life; no doubt he was seen as a good man, was well-intentioned, and had done many good things. It is very conceivable that he had, in fact, kept the “outward” demands of these commands: that he had never cheated on his wife, never murdered someone, never stolen anything, never lied or falsely testified in legal matters, and had not dishonored his parents. It is entirely possible for someone to keep such commandments. IN fact, if we take those commandments at face value - don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery, don’t bear false witness, and honor your father and mother - well, I’ve never technically broken those commandments either! But if I think that means I’m without sin, or as if I’ve always upheld those commands in my heart and all that they imply, then I would be *dead-wrong*. You see, if we just take the commandments at face value, without getting to the *heart of the matter*, the very purpose of these commandments in the first place, then we’ve missed the point entirely.

While he has kept the “outward” elements of the Law, Jesus has already told us, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) that the whole point of the Law shows us our inability to be *perfect*. Again, as Jesus just reminded the young man, “There is only one who is good.” God alone is good, and he sets the standard. God alone is perfectly good, holy, and righteous. The Sermon on the Mount showed us that if we have committed sins in our hearts, than we are just as guilty as if we had committed the sin outwardly; if we harbor the sinful desires of lust, hatred, jealousy, and greed in our hearts than we have already disobeyed the commands against adultery, murder, covetousness, and idolatry. While he has not broken these commandments in an “outward” since, he has almost assuredly broken them in his heart - just as *we all* have.

Jesus drives the point home by taking it in a slightly different direction: in verses 21-22, “Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ When the young man hear this he went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions.”

The point is not that the young man really would be perfect and sinless if he did this one good thing; nor is the point that we’re all required to sell everything we have in order to truly obey Christ and love our neighbor.

The point is this: Jesus is after this young man’s heart, and he’s showing him the *idols* of his heart. The young man is outwardly blameless in his conduct; but he’s not blameless in his heart. Jesus is showing him how much he lacks by probing deeper: loving his neighbor goes far beyond simply *not killing them, not cheating on his wife, or not lying in court!* Loving our neighbor imposes upon *all of our life* because it is a fundamental orientation of our heart! The young man claims he loves his neighbor as himself; he claims he has upheld all of these commands. But Jesus reveals the contents of this man’s heart: ***he loves his riches, his money and possessions, more than he loves other people.***

But I think Jesus is revealing something else, too: he’s revealing that the man is also guilty of breaking the first two commandments, dealing with “loving God with all your heart” - he is guilty of *idolatry*. Jesus is revealing the idols of his heart - this young man *loves his riches, money, and possessions more than He loves God*. After all, Jesus didn’t just tell him to sell everything he had - he said to then “Come, follow me.” Jesus is God, and He will be first in our heart. The only road to eternal life is to *follow him*.

But the young man went away “sorrowful,” because he loved his idols, his money and possessions, more than God, more than Jesus. In verses 23-24, Jesus says it is very difficult for a rich person to be saved, even as impossible as a camel - or a horse, for our context - to enter through the small hole in a sewing needle - a feat that is utterly impossible! The disciples are dismayed, saying, “Who then can be saved?” (v.25). Again, if this young, wealthy, powerful man, who is pious and seems so blessed by God - if he can’t be saved, who can? And that’s just the point: ***no one can be saved by their own efforts or good works.*** Not a single person on the face of this earth can be good enough to be saved and have eternal life. And that includes you and me. We will never be rich enough, powerful enough, content enough, or good enough for God. In fact, the more prosperous, powerful, wealthy, and pious someone is in this world, the *less likely* we are to be dependent upon God with childlike faith, and the *more likely* we are to be puffed up with pride and to cling to our own abilities, and possessions as idols!

What hope do we have then to be saved? Jesus tells us in verse 26: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

This brings us to our final point:

III. We Must Recognize the Counter-Intuitive, Glorious Grace of God to us and each other in Christ (19:23 - 20:16)

Peter seems to get offended at the implications of what Jesus is saying here; in v.27, he says, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?” He’s still operating under the assumption of *the value of merit and works*. His logic goes something like this: “The rich young ruler failed because he wasn’t willing to give up everything and follow you, Jesus. But we’ve done just that! So clearly, then, we must deserve great reward, right? What will we get?”

Jesus replies in verses 28-30. He affirms that they have, indeed, shown great faith by leaving everything and following Jesus; works produced that reveal the faith in their hearts. He tells them that, indeed, the Twelve Disciples, and later Apostles, will “be first” in the kingdom as they will be raised to judge the unbelieving nation of Israel. He tells them that *anyone* who follows Christ at great cost will indeed receive back *way more than* they gave up! So, for example, if someone becomes a Christian, and in the process is alienated from their family, losing a father, mother, brothers, or sisters as they leave all to follow Christ, then Christ

promises that in the Church, the people of God, we receive a hundred fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers! But then pulls the rug out from under Peter's logic - these aren't "rewards" that the followers of Christ earn or deserve, but are God's gracious gifts to His children. And there's a huge difference.

Jesus then illustrates this point with a parable, in chapter 20:1-16.

There is a "master of a house" - a wealthy landowner - who goes out early in the morning to hire day laborers. A day laborer would not have a steady income or a regular "job." Every day, they would gather in the town square, hoping someone would come and hire them for a day's work, a full day's work being worth about a Denarius. Their entire income was contingent upon getting hired again and again, every single day. And if no jobs came that day, no money did either.

So at the beginning of the day, about 6 am or so, the landowner comes and hires a crew of laborers for the day - we can probably safely assume he hired the strongest, brightest, and most experienced as the first batch. They agree for fair pay and head into the vineyard to work.

But then, at about 9 a.m., the landowner comes back into town and finds many of the day laborers still hanging around, without any work. He said to them, v. 3, "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you." So they went, too. And then at the sixth hour, about noon, he came back and did the same; and again at about 3pm. He came back at the eleventh hour, almost the very end of the work day, and still found workers just standing around, without work and with no hope for pay. He said to them, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." (vv.6-7). Now, if the first batch of workers were the biggest, best, and brightest, we can probably assume the opposite for the last batch, can't we? Not very strong; not very skilled or experienced; not very good at the job; not even worth a full day's pay. But he hired them, too, with just an hour left in the work day! We're already seeing the generous, gracious heart of this landowner, aren't we?

And so, an hour later when evening came and the workday was done, the day laborers were gathered together; it was pay time. The last workers hired came up first; they only worked one hour, and yet, shockingly, he pays them a full Denarius - a full day's wage, exactly what he offered to those he hired in the first hour! And he does the same for the crews hired in the middle of the day. Now if you're one of the workers hired last, you're overwhelmed with joy and gratitude! The whole day you were discouraged, aware of your desperate plight, with no work

and money to bring home. But then, not only did you get a job at the last second - you got a full day's pay for just one hour of work! What incredible generosity and grace!

But now imagine that you're part of that first crew. YOU've been working hard in the sun all day, for about 10-12 hours. If the last crew got a full day's pay, then you're thinking, "Man, this guy sure is generous! I can't wait to see what he's going to give me!" But then, they come up, and they get: *one denarius*. The exact same as those hired last. They grumble and complain, but the landowner gently replies, in vv.13-16, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belong to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belong to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last."

God is the just and generous landowner. He is always just - just as the landowner did not rip the first crew off, but paid them exactly what they agreed upon. But he is *incredibly generous and gracious - far more than we can comprehend!* And this is the main point of the parable: GOD's Kingdom doesn't operate the way the world does. The economy of God's kingdom doesn't run on how hard we work, on our efforts, or the value of what we bring to the table. God's Kingdom runs on the currency of *God's incredible grace*. The landowner wasn't hiring every worker he could and overpaying them because he was a savvy businessman making the highest profit - he was doing so to be as generous and gracious as he could with what he had! And so we see a glimpse into the heart of our gracious, loving Father: *if you want to understand what GOD is all about, what His kingdom is all about, and what the gospel of Christ and the Christian life is all about, look no further: it is all about grace! The unending, counter-intuitive, glorious grace of God towards His people in Christ Jesus!*

We can never do enough good to save ourselves. No, our only hope for salvation and eternal life is grace - glorious grace! - so let us fling ourselves upon God's grace like children who are utterly, desperately aware of their neediness as they depend upon their parents. And let us demonstrate such faith by forsaking all and *following Christ* - living our lives unto Christ, obeying and loving God with our whole hearts! But we do not labor as though we can earn more of God's favor and blessing - we labor as those who know with certainty that our Father is *far more gracious and generous than we can imagine! He loves to give good gifts to His children in abundance!*

SO a few closing applications: 1. Remember God's incredible grace to you in Christ Jesus; 2. Let this motivate you to obey, not to earn a reward, but because you've already received all things in Christ Jesus! 3. Let us rejoice in the Lord's grace to others - even those who don't deserve it, people just like us!

And one of the best ways for us to remember God's grace to us and each other this morning is to come to the Lord's table together. So if you're trusting in the grace of Christ for salvation this morning and are a member of a gospel preaching church, we invite you to come to the table as we visibly proclaim our faith in the gospel together.

But if you're not a believer this morning, then this meal, the Lord's Supper, isn't for you today; but there is a different way you can respond to this message! Simply turn to the Lord in childlike faith, trust in the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in your place to save you from your sins! And then make your faith public by being baptized and joining a gospel preaching church. If you have any questions about this gospel, or if you're interested in baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you.

Let us have a moment of silence before we pray.