

Part 35: Kingdom Economics

Tyler Velin | Matthew 19:16-20:16

November 11, 2018

There is a distinct cultural change which is going on in our western world today. For many of you, you grew up in a culture where reason, rational thought and empirical evidence was king. There was no need for religion or spirituality because it belonged outside the realm of the senses and therefore wasn't really relevant to our lives at a fundamental level.

Statistically this led to the rise of what are called, "the nones." The "nones" are not Catholic school "nuns," but instead they are those who when given a survey to select their religious preference, they put "none."

It was therefore assumed, and was in fact the reality for a period of time, that Americans were simply not interested in anything outside of the realm of the physical world and observable sciences. But this reality can no longer be our assumption. Because more recent studies have shown that most of these "none" still consider themselves to be spiritual. Or they claim to have an affinity for a particular religious system but do not actively practice or attend organized events for it.

In fact a study done in 2017 by Florida State University and the Public Religion Research Institute found that as a whole only 31% of Americans consider themselves to be neither spiritual or religions. Meaning that nearly 7 out of 10 people in America consider themselves to be either religious or spiritual, or any combination of the two.

This is because we are realizing that observation alone cannot provide answers to many of life's important questions. History cannot codify morality. Science cannot discover the satisfaction gene. And mathematics cannot sum up purpose or individual meaning. In a world where organized religion as a whole is less popular, the desires which led people to religion are still as popular, we just disguise them in different clothes.

In the wake of the elections this week on journalist commented on this idea saying: "Having hundreds of people explaining to me on Twitter that everything from sex to nature to beauty is "political" makes me realise that Western civilisation really hasn't come up with a viable alternative to religion, yet. Until we do, politics will be the opiate of the masses." We are still a people who desire an experience of something more.

This is important for us as we are in the gospel of Matthew for two reasons. The first is that more people are interested in spiritual issues than you would think. To you who are Christian in here, are you able to answer their questions? The second is this, you in this room who consider yourselves spiritual or religious, how do you relate to the person and work of Jesus Christ? In other words why are you here? And what do you hope to find?

Today in our text Jesus is going to deal with those who want more. People are searching this world for something. The question is: what is that thing, and how do we get it? Today Matthew is going to show us this: **It is only Jesus and his grace which satisfies our longing for something more.**

In looking at this we are going to look at two realities. The first will be the human impossibility of satisfaction, the second is the divine possibility of grace.

Last week we saw a scene where parents began to bring their young children to Jesus, the disciples tried to stop this from happening because what benefit could these kids add to Jesus' ministry. Ironically, Jesus rebuked the disciples and said, "It is these children who come to me with nothing to offer who will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven."

This story ought to ring loud in our ears as we begin to read what happens next. Look with me at **Matthew 19:16**. A man came to Jesus, and this time, no disciples held him back. Perhaps it was because they had learned, but it could also be because the disciples knew this man. As we read this story more we are going to find out two things about this man, he was rich and he was young. Luke and Mark also tell us that he was a ruler.

Here comes to Jesus, a rich, young ruler. Certainly this is the type of man we would expect to come to Jesus. This is the man who had the social and economic capital to make a difference. This is a man who would be valuable to the cause of Christ. Imagine someone like LeBron James or Oprah Winfrey coming and asking this question. And he asks Jesus the question there are probably more people asking today than we would expect: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life."

Notice the distinct emphasis of the man's question. He knows that there is a moral qualification: something good is required. And he thinks that he must meet that demand, he must do something good if he is to have in the moment a secure grasp of eternal life. He has lived the American dream and now he wants the payout, and he wants it with certainty.

Jesus answers his question with a question: **Matthew 19:17-22**

There is something tragic which happens in this text. Here we have a man who comes to Jesus with everything; he has wealth, he has youth, he has power, he even has a desire for Jesus and his kingdom, and yet he leaves empty. What went wrong? This is where we are going to see our first reality today: **The Human Impossibility of Satisfaction.**

Jesus gives the man a simple equation: If you want eternal life, be the good man. The good man obeys the commandments. Which commandments? Well Jesus gives five of the Ten Commandments and then rearticulates the second half of the greatest command. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie in court, honor your parents, and love others as yourself.

Now why these commandments? What did Jesus leave out? Jesus very obviously leaves out the first part of the greatest commandment (Love God). He leaves out the first four of the Ten Commandments which deal with worshipping and honoring God. And it shouldn't be lost on us that when addressing a rich man with great possessions he leaves out the last commandment about covetousness.

Why would he leave these out? Because Jesus here gives the commands that just about every person in this world would say they've kept. Here Jesus gives to him what appears to be the simplest to keep commandments. But even in simplicity we see two problems. The first is this: his obedience did not satisfy. Even though he claimed to obey all of these simple commands, he still was fully aware of his lack.

Isn't that interesting? You make these six commands into the whole framework of Christianity, and not only will very few people object to them, but 98% of people will claim to have completed them. Just like this man did. But underneath this seeming obedience lies the problem that this man knew deep in his soul: What more do I need to do? What do I lack?

What's interesting here is that Jesus didn't tell him he lacked anything, but the man knew it. His own heart condemned him. Why? Why did he feel this lack? Why was his obedience not enough? Because, this is the second problem: his obedience wasn't perfect.

"All these I have kept," he says to Jesus. And Jesus says to him, "Prove it." If you wish to be perfect. If you wish to reach the highest goal of obedience, prove that you love others as you love yourself and give all that you have to the poor. You love money, you have money, love others with your money and then follow me.

When the man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. You see it didn't take much for Jesus to show two deep problems in this man's heart. They are two deep problems which are universal problems in the hearts of all of us: The first is that we cannot on our own obey even the simplest person to person commands perfectly. The second is that we treasure other things not only above serving others, but above following Christ. Meaning on our own, we cannot love others good enough and we cannot worship God pure enough to get eternal life.

His own love for money showed that he couldn't glorify God properly or love others sufficiently. And here was his sorrow. He knew he couldn't cut it. He went to Jesus, he desired what Jesus had, he sought to obey, he wanted to do it right, but in the end he went away crushed.

The rich man with all his social and economic capital did not have the proper commodity needed to gain his own spiritual satisfaction. Look at what Jesus says next: **Matthew 19:23-25**.

Jesus says it is with great difficulty that those with great power and wealth will enter God's kingdom. This was devastating to the disciples because it was long believed that those who were rich and powerful were those whom God smiled upon. They were blessed by God. And if those who were blessed by God with wealth can barely get into God's kingdom, then who at all can be saved?

We just like the disciples have the same expectations: if we can reach success, money, family, or influence by society's standards, then certainly we be satisfied spiritually. We subtly view tangible and relational gifts from God as the reward of God himself. But here was a man who had it all, and he went away empty.

And the disciples ask a new question. They don't ask "What must I do to have eternal life?" They ask, "Who then can be saved?" If this guy can't get into the Kingdom, than can anyone?

Look at Jesus' response: **Matthew 19:26-30**. Who then can be saved? With man it is impossible. But with God all things are possible.

You cannot save yourself by your works or even by your spiritual seeking. What this story shows is that proximity to Jesus, a desire for Jesus, and even an awareness of the commands to obey and the promise of new life are not sufficient to give you the eternal satisfaction you want.

It is only the costly call to follow Jesus exclusively which does this. You see at the end of the day the young man wanted something to do, but Jesus gave him someone to follow. There is one who is good, and it is not you, the one who is good is Jesus, so follow him.

There are two emotions we have seen in this text. We have seen the sorrow of the rich young man, and the fear of the disciples that they have no hope.

For some in here this one time encounter of sorrow may be your weekly reality. Each week you come to church here hoping that in the coming, in your obeying, in your tithing that you might experience the joy this young man sought. But it always evades you. You like the young man know enough to come to Jesus, you know enough that he has the answers, but perhaps deep in your heart you too are unwilling to see Jesus centerpiece of all you seek. You want something from him, but you don't want to follow him.

Unless you see Jesus as the only one who is good, you will always be crushed and sorrowful because on your own you will never find satisfaction. That comes only through following Jesus.

To you believers in here, are you willing to give up what this young ruler was not willing to? It is easy to follow Jesus when the burden of choice is not pressed against you. But there will be a time when you are forced to choose between your money and your Jesus. There will be times when you are forced to choose between your comfort and your Christ. Will you be reminded of the confidence Christ gives the disciples here that if you have followed Jesus, you will inherit the Kingdom itself?

One author says, "The very legitimate fear of giving our everything to Christ is the greatest enemy to discipleship." If you want to follow Jesus well, you must give up your greatest treasures and follow him. In this text the rich young man had a great many possessions the problem was that none of the possessions he had was great.

But here in this text, calling the young man and comforting his disciples is the object of greatest possession: Jesus Christ. He is the kingdom you are looking for. He is the life that we desire. He is the beautiful object behind every desire that compels our hearts and he is calling us to come to him. But by the rich man's own standards, he cannot. So what does this look like?

Consider in closing a parable Jesus gives which highlights our second reality this morning: **The Possibility of Divine Grace.**

Hear with me the parable Jesus gives in **Matthew 20:1-7**. So here Jesus paints the scene of a landowner who had a vineyard. The theme of vineyard is really important in the Bible, in the Old Testament the vineyard was synonymous with the Kingdom of Israel, and here Jesus extends that metaphor to the whole Kingdom of God.

When Jesus speaks of the vineyard, he speaks of the Kingdom. And the owner of the vineyard then went and found some workers and he began to negotiate a wage for them. You work for this many hours, and fulfill these duties and I will give you a denarius (that was the typical sum for a day's labor). And the laborer's agreed on it. This is important. The requirements and rewards were laid down and were agreed to by both parties.

So these men go to work, but the owner goes back to the market place. And he finds men who aren't working. He says, "Come work in my vineyard and I will give you what is fair." These men don't get a specific number like the first laborers did, they are just promised fairness. So the owner does this two more times: once at noon, and once at three.

Then he goes out again at five, one hour before the working day is yet done and he finds even more men not working. He asks them why "Why are you standing here doing nothing?" They say, "No one has hired us." So the owner calls them to work his vineyard.

So now we have five different groups of laborers working the same vineyard. We have men who came to work at sun-up, some at nine, some at noon, some at three, and others at five. Let's look at the conclusion of the story: **Matthew 20:8-16**.

Here we see the scandal of divine grace. And let me say this, because it is so remarkably clear in both this parable and the story of the rich man. If you do not understand the grace of God, you will like the rich young man and the first servants in this text, always be disappointed. You will always be frustrated.

Here we have individuals who came in at the eleventh hour, just in the nick of time, and they receive the full benefit of the contract negotiated by those who pledged to work the full day. And those who worked the full day grumble at the landowner. And he says to them: Is it not my vineyard? Is it not my money? Are not you getting exactly what you set out to earn?

Then why are you upset, why are your eyes evil because I am generous?

Remember the two problems we saw with the rich young man? His obedience didn't satisfy and his obedience wasn't perfect? He said he obeyed, he believed he obeyed, but his response to Jesus' question showed he really didn't.

Well here we see the same two problems but Jesus uses the allegory of labor. For the first laborers their labor didn't satisfy, and their labor wasn't perfect. And again, the error of their thought was provoked only by an encounter with God.

The men who were the negotiators, the rule keepers, the arbiters of fairness and labor got exactly what they deserved. They got exactly what they negotiated. They, in the language of the rich man, did exactly what was required and failed to be satisfied by it.

Why? Because they saw others get the same thing without laboring for it, and it robbed them of joy. You see if you are someone who thinks you can earn God's salvation you will never experience joy because nothing is a grace. You got what you deserved and there is nothing amazing about that.

To think you can earn eternal life and spiritual satisfaction through your own fulfillment of your contract means that you will never really experience the joy of salvation.

But just as it was with the rich young man, so too it was here. Just as the rich young man's obedience was a straw man, so too is the first servant.

With the rich young man Jesus gave six commandments, and the ruler failed. So too in the issue of the vineyard, there are no laborers who can meet the contract that was agreed to. God gave his law and his

commandments to Moses on a mountain. These were the commands and rules God's people were to obey if they wanted his kingdom. Look at what happens when Moses came down the mountain to God's people: **Exodus 24:3-8**. We agreed upon the covenant. We said we will obey the laws. If you want the fruit of the vineyard, if you want eternal life, you must be the good man. You must fulfill the agreement of labor.

You must meet not the five commandments, not even the full ten. You must fulfill the whole law. You want the Kingdom, you must be perfect. The problem is that we are not perfect. Not shortly after this covenant cutting ceremony in Exodus 24, the people of God make golden calves and worship them as God. We cannot keep the covenant. We cannot earn our reward.

It was only Jesus who fulfilled the contract that God struck up with humanity. God demanded perfection, and we failed time and time again. Eternal life is a commodity of which the economy is grace and grace alone through Jesus Christ. Remember back in Matthew 5? Jesus says, I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

Jesus is the one who met the contract and earned his wages, but unlike the rich young man he gave out of his wealth to those who were poor. Unlike the first servants who hated God since they bore the hard labor and the hot sun, Christ bore the burden of the law and the fire of the cross so that all who the master calls might reap his labor.

We who are last, we who didn't work our full hours can be first because the firstborn became last for us. It is by God's generous grace through Jesus that we receive the satisfaction we so desperately needed.

If you are a Christian, if you are a seeker, the question is not what must I do? For what you must do is an impossibility. But what Christ has done for us, we must claim through faith. We must leave everything and go to him.

He is the great possession. He is the faithful laborer. We do not come to God in our wealth, for our wealth and obedience apart from grace are nothing. We are called to God in our poverty. We are idle but the will of God and the work of Christ beckons us to come, come to him. Leave it all behind, receive his grace and receive a hundredfold in return.

Dear believers, why are you standing idle? For Jesus has called you to his vineyard to labor for his Kingdom. Labor is necessary, but it is labor inside of the kingdom not labor to earn the kingdom. Be generous with your money and with the gospel. Do the work of the evangelism and discipleship for this is the task Christ's generosity has bought you for. What's interesting is Jesus doesn't have to teach the late servants how to respond. We assume they respond with joy because they understand their grace. Is your life a response to grace? Or a discontent life of hourly pay?

To you who are still seeking, still spiritual without a clear object of faith: Here is the gospel. That Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. Look and find him. Hear his call.

Do not misread the idea of the eleventh hour. Paul says in Romans that to not presume God patience with you will endure forever. God's kindness, his patience is meant to lead you to repentance even right now. J.C. Ryle says that of the two men who died on crosses next to Jesus, "One thief was saved that none should despair, but only one that none should presume."

And here is the wonderful hope of this generous Jesus. Because you cannot do anything to merit your salvation, it can be done right here today. You don't need to leave here and create a plan to get your life in order. You simply need to see him as the one who was good for you, and you need to follow him. We have a church who would love to answer your questions on this. Find someone to talk to before you leave.

Repent of your sin, throw away your wealth and false comforts, and follow him. Believe in him. What then will you have? What then do we have? We have Christ, our greatest hope and our surest treasure.