

Week 23: Matthew 19–20

Hook



Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

About 30 percent of the world's population drive on the left side of the road. Perhaps you've even visited one of the 76 nations or territories that drive on the left; these include England, Australia, New Zealand, India and Japan.ⁱ The story goes that hundreds of years ago most everyone drove on the left side of the road, keeping their right hand free to wield a weapon during more violent times. However, in 1908, Ford unveiled the Model T, a vehicle with the driver's seat on the left of the vehicle. The seat was positioned on the left so that passengers could exit the vehicle onto the curb. This innovation was so significant that Canada, Italy and Spain changed to driving on the right side of the road in the 1920s and most of Eastern Europe did the same in the 1930s.ⁱⁱ

Q: Have you ever had to drive on the left side of the road? What was that experience like?

Q: How do you typically respond to a drastic change?

Q: When you became a Christian, what were some of the drastic changes that took place in your life?

Transition: Today we will explore more of Jesus' teachings about kingdom values. More drastic than driving on the opposite side of the road, these values were completely revolutionary.

Week 23: *Matthew 19–20:28*

Book

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Matthew 19:1–12 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Divorce is not to be taken lightly.

Q: What does it mean for a husband and wife to live as “one flesh”? How would that kind of attitude change our culture’s view of marriage and divorce?

Q: Why do you think the disciples responded the way they did? What does this tell you about God’s standards for a godly marriage?

The IVP New Testament Commentary calls this section (19:1–20:16) “Inverting the World’s Values.” This is just what kingdom values are – the inverse of the world’s values. Though a lot of individual events, teachings and stories are contained in this section, they all point to this upside-down-ness of God’s kingdom – that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In God’s kingdom, those the world considers weak and worthless have just as much value as the powerful, and “greatness” is not found in power or status but in humility and self-sacrifice. Bible scholar Craig S. Keener wrote that this whole section shows us a contrast between Jesus and His culture. “Jesus’ male contemporaries valued the great and powerful; Jesus summoned status-seeking men to love their wives and children. The world valued wealth; Jesus summoned His followers to sacrifice all for the kingdom, caring for the poor. Only those who prepared for such sacrifices could enter the coming kingdom.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In this first section, regarding grounds for divorce, Jesus challenged a Jewish tradition of divorce that had been abused to become very unfair to women. Roman law at the time permitted either party to divorce the other, but Jewish law allowed only the husband to divorce the wife.^{iv} When women were divorced, they lost their financial stability and honor; because of the shame, it would be hard for them to remarry or to provide for themselves as single women.

At the time of Jesus, a debate raged between two Pharisaic schools of thought about the wording of one of the laws of divorce: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because *he has found some indecency in her*, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house ...” (Deuteronomy 24:1). The school of Shammai put the focus on the word “indecency” and interpreted it to mean only if she had committed adultery against him, which fits with the rest of the verse, that she would go become another man’s wife – the man with whom she had committed adultery would marry her. But the school of Hillel focused on the word “some” indecency and interpreted it to

mean that a man could divorce wife for *anything* that caused her to “find no favor in his eyes,” as the passage says literally, even burning his food or if her husband thought another woman was prettier.^v This application not only gave men all the power in the relationship, it made woman extremely vulnerable to being divorced and thrown out with no way to provide for themselves.

When asked about His interpretation of this passage, which side of the argument He fell on, Jesus went right past Deuteronomy and went back to Genesis. It wasn't about not honoring God's law in Deuteronomy; He wanted them to change the way they even thought about the question. Instead of providing valid reasons to divorce a wife who didn't make her husband happy, He wanted husbands to love their wives as their own flesh. Instead of looking for a way out of their marriages, He wanted men to see their marriages as sacred and do everything possible to fight for them. They shouldn't be concerned about their “right” to divorce but instead about how to love. Jesus went beyond just opposing divorce to encouraging them to understand what it really means to live together as one flesh.^{vi}

Jesus cleverly used the pre-Fall narrative to answer their questions. Both Pharisaic schools saw the world before the Fall, before sin entered the world, as God's ideal; while later, Scripture sometimes allowed things that were less than this ideal as a result of people's “hardness of heart” (v. 8).^{vii} The Deuteronomy statements about a man's giving his wife a certificate of divorce were *conditional* statements (“when a man ...”), not commands. God was not condoning divorce in these situations. God said unequivocally in the Old Testament, “I hate divorce!” (Malachi 2:16, NLT). *Holman's Commentary* says, “The Old Testament instruction requiring a certificate of divorce was not commanding divorce. Rather, it provided protection to the woman when a divorce was chosen. It was actually Moses' effort to curtail the rampant practice of ‘easy divorce’ among God's people. The legal certificate kept the husband from treating his wife capriciously, threatening her with abandonment one day and taking her back the next. It protected her from abuse.”^{viii}

Jesus didn't contradict the heart of Moses' law; He upheld it! Both Jesus and the original law given in Deuteronomy provided legal protection for the wife and prevented quick and easy divorce for any reason. But with His appeal to Genesis, Jesus went even further. The goal is not just to not divorce or mistreat your wife, the *ideal* is to love her as you love your own flesh – as Paul wrote later – to love your wife as Christ loves the Church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).^{ix} Jesus' standard of selfless love in marriage was so hard-core that His disciples exclaimed it would be better to stay single (v. 10)! Jesus flipped the script on that statement too, making it also about the kingdom rather than our own desires, saying perhaps it might be better for some disciples not to marry because it may be hard to find a spouse who shared their commitment to the mission of the kingdom.^x

We have the same problem in our culture today that they did in the first century, except it's not just men looking for any excuse to get out of their marriages. In some situations – like abuse – you should leave a marriage. But many marriages today end just because people “aren't happy” anymore, which is just a modern way of saying the same thing the Hillel school said, that she has found no favor in his eyes – “for any cause” (v. 3). This is true both outside and inside of the Church, where the divorce rate is 37 percent as compared to 41 percent for non-Christians.^{xi} The problem is the same one Jesus described – hard hearts, hearts focused on all the ways my spouse disappoints me, instead of my putting his/her needs ahead of my own in humility (Philippians 2:3) and living together as one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Just as it was in Jesus' day, the solution is not in clarifying our interpretations of the law but in changing our hearts.

Q: Why is it so easy to find fault with a spouse, close friend, or family member? How can focusing on their that person's faults lead to conflict and brokenness in our relationships?

Q: For marrieds: Think about struggles and conflicts you've had in your marriage. How would remembering you are “one flesh” change the way you handle those things?

Q: For everyone: In *any* relationship, how would remembering to love the other person as Christ loved you (in humility, putting his/her needs ahead of your own, with empathy – seeing it from his/her perspective) change the way you interact with that person in conflicts or struggles?

Q: How does this discussion relate to the previous chapter about forgiveness?

Matthew 19:13–20:16 [Read]

Talking Point 2: In God's kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Q: How did Jesus' view of children connect to His comments about the last being first?

Q: Why is wealth such a trap for people like this wealthy young man?

In this section, Jesus expressed the value of children in God's eyes, challenged the rich young man to give his wealth to the poor, and told a parable of the vineyard workers who received the same payment no matter how much time they worked in the field. These narratives, though very different, all make the same point – in God's kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

It may seem strange that parents would bring their children to be blessed by Jesus when their culture considered children to be of no value. Despite children's having no value *as children*, it was common for parents to bring them to prominent prophets or religious leaders like Jesus for a blessing *for their futures*. But Jesus taught that children had value in God's kingdom even

now. He reiterated His teaching in chapter 18, that in order to enter the kingdom, we have to “become like children” (i.e., give up worldly honor and status). The disciples’ efforts to keep the children from distracting Jesus from “more important” matters showed that they still didn’t understand the upside-down nature of the kingdom and Jesus’ ministry – that He came to care for the weak, the lowly, the marginalized and the poor, not to engage in political power plays, honor games or military battles.

Just after this public statement about value in the kingdom, a rich young man asked Jesus what “good deed” he must do to inherit eternal life. As Jesus had taught in chapter 18, to enter the kingdom, we must “become like children” – give up our honor and status as He did when He came down from heaven to earth (Philippians 2:1–8). This story reiterates that point even more directly. How to obtain eternal life was not an uncommon question to ask a rabbi. But Jesus was quick to point out that no matter what “good deeds” we do, only God alone is good. None of us can earn entrance into the kingdom through good deeds, no matter how many we do (Romans 4:4–6; Ephesians 2:8–10; et. al.). Yet, Jesus conceded that honoring God includes obeying His covenant law. Except for the command against coveting, He listed the part of the Ten Commandments that have to do with how we relate to other people (the first four have to do with how we relate to God) and, as a summary, He added the one-liner from Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus later said this is the twin “greatest commandment” with the *Shema* – love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Matthew 22:34–40).

But the young man pushed back and made it personal – “What do I still lack?” Not a general hypothetical statement asking what more could *a man* do, but what do *I* still lack? This question showed a respect and honor for Jesus as more than just a teacher but as a prophet or possibly even a divine being who could see into his heart as David asked God to do. “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*” (Psalm 139:23–24). Just as He invited His other disciples to leave their nets and their families and their livelihoods, Jesus invited this man, but he couldn’t do it. It was too much for him to give up.

This encounter provides a clear contrast, a clear choice to be made. Jesus offered the man the opportunity to exchange his worldly treasures for treasures in heaven, but he chose to keep his treasures on earth. Not all of us will have this choice presented so clearly for us, but we all have to make this choice. We may not be explicitly asked to sell everything we have and give it to the poor, but following Jesus is about surrendering all we are and all we have to Him, without exception (Matthew 13:44–46; 16:24–26; Romans 12:1–2). Will we surrender all to Jesus as a living sacrifice, or will we cling to the things of this world?

In response to this man’s choice, Jesus warned His disciples that it was extremely difficult for a person with worldly wealth, status and honor to enter the kingdom of God. Some scholars have tried to explain this metaphor away by saying that Jesus wasn’t talking about a literal needle, but rather a very small gate in Jerusalem called “the Needle’s Eye.” But there is no archaeological evidence for such a gate, and this metaphor was a well-known statement used at the time to refer to an impossible task. The Babylonian version used elephants in this saying,

but in Palestine, where the largest beast of burden was a camel, they used camel.^{xii} Even if we didn't have this evidence, Jesus Himself said "with man this is impossible" (v. 26). He was clearly stating something that is an impossibility. Jesus intentionally used hyperbole to make a point. Wealth and worldly status are huge barriers to entering the kingdom and to perfect surrender to God's will. Because those with worldly power and status think they have much more to lose. But the kingdom is the pearl of great price; it's worth trading all that we have for, even if we have all the riches of Solomon (Matthew 13:44–46).

The disciples were shocked at His words, because so many in their culture believed wealth was a blessing from God, that it showed God's favor on your life. If it were impossible for the rich, how much more impossible would it be for regular guys like them (v. 25)? They misunderstood, again. As Jesus said when the man first came to him, only God is good; there are no good works by which you can gain entrance into heaven. *No one* – rich or poor – can gain entrance into the kingdom on their own. They must go through Jesus.^{xiii} It is impossible with man – with human strength, wisdom, status, power, wealth or "righteousness." But it is not impossible with God.

The disciples countered that they, unlike the rich man, had surrendered it all to follow Jesus. This is true, but on the night of His death, their faithfulness was tested, too. Not by wealth, but by safety. They had given up all their material wealth and even their families, but did they stay faithful to Jesus even when they feared for their lives? At first, they denied Him and hid in fear. But after they were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they preached with boldness and with no fear of persecution or death (Acts 2–5). They even considered it an honor to suffer for the Gospel (Acts 5:41). With man this is impossible, but *with God*, with His Spirit, it is possible.

Jesus promised the kingdom to all who follow Him (v. 29) – rich or poor, sick or healthy, Jew or Gentile. Worldly status doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is surrendering your life to Jesus. Those who sacrifice now and become "least" in this age will inherit a place of honor in the age to come.^{xiv} Jesus told a story to illustrate this concept. In the parable, every worker in the vineyard received the same payment for the day's labor, no matter how long they had worked. Day labor was a common situation in their culture. At harvest time, when vineyard owners needed extra help, they hired extra workers from the poor or even homeless who didn't have other regular jobs.^{xv} The surprising thing was the owner's giving all of the workers the same pay, even those who had only worked an hour. Jewish hearers of the time would have considered it extraordinarily gracious and pious to give wages to those who were not expecting it.^{xvi}

Those who had worked all day complained even though the pay they received was fair, what had been agreed upon. They weren't mistreated or abused. They just didn't like that someone who "didn't deserve as much" received the same pay they did, much as Jonah wasn't happy about God's showing mercy to the Ninevites when he didn't think they deserved it (Jonah 3–4). This parable illustrates that God's mercy is based only on His grace, His character, His love, not on our merit. Salvation is given to *all* who come to Him, to all who follow Jesus, not just those who work the hardest or "do the most" for the kingdom. In his commentary, pastor and best-selling author John MacArthur explains that Jesus' saying the first will be last and the last will be

first “means that everyone ends up the same ... No matter how long each of the workers worked, they each received a full day’s wage. Similarly, the thief on the cross will enjoy the full blessings of heaven alongside those who have labored their whole lives for Christ. Such is the grace of God.”^{xvii}

Q: Why is it necessary to surrender all to follow Jesus? Why does He demand that? How does that make Him sound to unbelievers? How does it sound to those who have the Holy Spirit?

Q: Why is it hard for us to give up *everything* to follow Jesus – not just material things, but *everything*? What things are you still holding back from giving over to Him?

Q: How does it make you feel to hear about God’s grace for other people who “haven’t done as much for the kingdom” as you have? Do you begrudge them God’s grace or rejoice with Him?

Matthew 20:17–34 [Read]

Talking Point 3: In God’s kingdom, greatness is not found in power and status, but in sacrifice and humility.

Q: How did Jesus describe “greatness” in the kingdom of God?

Q: How did this define Jesus and His ministry?

Jesus had already chastised them for asking who was “greatest” in the kingdom, showing them a child as their answer (Matthew 18). He had just finished telling them the first would be last and the last would be first (Matthew 19–20). And yet, James and John’s mother still came to ask that her sons be allowed to sit on His right and His left in His kingdom. The disciples still didn’t understand what was going on. In their defense, Jesus told them in the last chapter that the 12 of them would sit on 12 thrones to judge the 12 tribes of Israel (19:28). They were just asking for the “best” of the thrones. It was a bold ask – they weren’t nicknamed “the sons of thunder” for nothing (Mark 3:17), but it wouldn’t have been completely unexpected. Other than Peter, they were His two closest disciples. They had been with Him at the Transfiguration and at other more intimate moments. It was natural for them to expect a higher rank in the kingdom than the other disciples.

But they missed the bigger picture Jesus had been teaching in the previous few chapters as well as what He had just told them, that He would suffer and die by crucifixion. They still didn’t get what Jesus’ kingdom was all about. They heard “12 thrones” and “Israel” and still thought He would take the throne of David back from the Romans and they would rule Israel with Him. But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking” (v. 22). They were asking for power and glory – the world’s definition of greatness. But in Jesus’ kingdom, greatness isn’t wealth, status, power or glory. It is suffering, sacrifice, humility and surrender.

Jesus asked if they were able to drink from the cup He would drink (v. 22 – the same language He used in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed for God to take the cup away from Him if it be in His will.) Those who suffer with Jesus will reign with Him (Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12). They said they were able, but they did not know what they were agreeing to (v. 22). The other 10 were indignant with James and John, but Jesus reminded them that leadership in His kingdom isn't about power and authority but about service and humility. The world argues about greatness and power and authority, but not God's people (v. 25–26). It didn't matter who sat on His right or left. Those were worldly distinctions, not heavenly ones. In Jesus' kingdom, even the 24 leaders on the golden thrones lay their crowns at the feet of Jesus (Revelation 4:10). In His kingdom, no one is great but God.

The last very short story may seem out of place after these stories and teachings about "greatness" in the kingdom, but it's a great contrast to the request of James and John. They requested glory and personal advancement while these two blind men had a genuine basic need. While Jesus was saddened by the rich young man walking away and frustrated with the disciples' asking for glory and honor, He was moved with compassion for these two men and immediately healed them. Though they needed healing, their first request was for the same thing the vineyard owner gave to all of his workers – *mercy* (v. 30). Instead of Jesus' asking them to sacrifice for Him, He *gave* them something – a huge thing, the gift of sight, which meant they could have a regular job, a regular life in regular society. Unlike the rich young ruler, these two men turned and followed Him. They gave it all up to follow Jesus. Instead of focusing on the gift, they focused on the Giver. This is the true heart of the one who is greatest in the kingdom.^{xviii}

Q: Do you see the kingdom definition of "greatness" being lived out in the American Church today, shunning status and power and living in humility and service? Why or why not?

Q: Describe a church leader you've seen who *does* exemplify Christ's definition of "greatness." What impact has that person had on the world around him? On you personally?

Q: If we were to live lives of humility, service and sacrifice, how would it change our church communities? How would it change the world around us?

Week 23: Matthew 19–20

Took

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

You may have driven on the left side of the road; perhaps you were even accustomed to it. But attempting to navigate your way through Texas on the left side of the road would be disorienting, counterproductive and even dangerous. Living as a believer and yet attempting to hold onto the values of the world will leave you dissatisfied, unfulfilled and in the path of correction.

CHALLENGES

THINK: If you were to ask Jesus, “What do I still lack?” how would He answer? What things are you still holding back from Jesus? What do you still need to surrender to Him? What does it mean to surrender all to Jesus? If it doesn’t literally mean we have to give everything we have to the poor, what *does* it mean?

PRAY: For God to search your heart and see if there is any grievous way in you. Ask God to use His Word as a double-edged sword, penetrating even to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the attitudes of your heart (Hebrews 4:12). Consider using all of Psalm 139 as a prayer, asking God to search your heart and reveal to you the ways you need to change that you can’t even see yourself.

ACT: Serve. Find a tangible way to let go of your worldly status and power and take the role of a servant for your community. How can you surrender your power, your status, your wealth, your pride, your place in the world to serve someone else with a spirit of humility? After you have done this one act, ask yourself if there are other ways God is calling you to humble yourself and serve His people in your community.

Hook, Took & Editing by Peyton Coker

- ⁱ <https://www.businessinsider.com/which-countries-drive-on-left-2018-10>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.rd.com/article/why-drive-on-different-sides-of-the-road/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew, IVP New Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
- ^{iv} Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).
- ^v Mishnah Sefaria Gittin 9:10; Josephus Antiquities 4.253
- ^{vi} Samuel Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law: The Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah, Harvard Semitic Series 11* (1940).
- ^{vii} Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).
- ^{viii} Max Anders and Stu Weber, *Matthew, Holman's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).
- ^{ix} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).
- ^x Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{xi} Barna Research, "3 Data Trends in Marriage and What They mean for Your Church" *Barna*, Sept 26, 2019.
- ^{xii} Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).
- ^{xiii} M. Eugene Boring, *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).
- ^{xiv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{xv} Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Romans Galilee, A.D. 132–212, Oxford Centre for Post-graduate Hebrew Studies* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).
- ^{xvi} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).
- ^{xvii} John MacArthur, *MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).
- ^{xviii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).