



# Session 6: Matthew 19-20

## for the week of November 7th

### **The Community of the King: Values in New Community**

19:1 resumes the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry after the record of his teachings in chapter 19.<sup>1</sup> At this point in Matthew, Jesus and his disciples are continuing to head towards Jerusalem where Jesus will enter in triumph yet ultimately be crucified as he has already predicted.<sup>2</sup> We also continue to see an escalation in the tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders who will eventually call for his execution.

Just as Jesus has begun to describe the new community (*ekklesia*) that he is building in his teaching in chapter 18, chapters 19-20 continue to develop themes related to the kind of values that Jesus expects in this new community. In his interactions throughout these chapters he both critiques the misplaced priorities of those who approach him and reveals the ways in which his redeemed community is meant to operate according to redeemed values.

For example, in his teaching on divorce (19:2-9), Jesus not only exercises authority over the Pharisees in the proper interpretation of God's law, but also shows the way in which the exceptions given for divorce demonstrated a devaluing of God's law and ignorance of God's intentions for marriage. The Pharisees had permitted divorce based on varying interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1. Some schools of thought permitted a man to divorce his wife only in cases of immorality on the part of the wife; others went so far as to allow divorce for men who found anything unpleasant about their wife.<sup>3</sup> In the patriarchal culture of the time, a woman's welfare often depended on the financial security and social status that came with marriage. The liberality with which men could approach divorce placed women in vulnerable positions, and a divorce on the grounds of a supposed "indecent" could even force a woman into a life of prostitution. Jesus' admonition here not only condemns the way in which the Pharisees had devalued God's word on marriage, but also condemns the sinful "hardness of heart" that had these kinds of painful affects on others. Thus, Jesus reveals the importance of truly valuing God's intentions for us, in contrast to a merely external devotion to God's Word that is on the lookout for loopholes and is guilty of twisting the Scriptures to fit one's agenda.

Another example is Jesus' interaction with the rich man (19:16-30). Not only does this man approach Jesus with the wrong question (how can I get into the Kingdom of God through my own merit), but the man also demonstrates a merely external piety to the law that did not flow from a heart of devotion to God alone. Jesus reveals the idolatry of this man's heart with the command he gives him to sell all he has. The man's worship of possessions leaves him unable to follow Jesus' command, thus signifying that this man did not truly value God's kingdom above all else.

It's important to understand that Jesus' teachings in these passages do not advocate some kind of works-based righteousness (e.g., be generous enough and you'll get into heaven). Jesus' teachings here are revealing the kind of counter-cultural values on display among those who have demonstrated the child-like surrender and faith described in chapter 18 and thus truly belong to the Kingdom of God. Apart from God's gracious work in our justification and the transformation of our hearts and minds, it would be impossible to enter the Kingdom and live according to these values. But with God, and Christ's redeeming work on our behalf, and the Spirit's sanctifying work in our hearts, all things are possible. So, as those with faith in Christ, redeemed from sin by his sacrificial work, and now living in the power of the Spirit, we can seek to be a community that embodies these counter-cultural Kingdom values for the glory of God in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "when Jesus had finished these sayings" or a variation on that phrase signals the close of each of the five major blocks of Jesus' teaching recorded by Matthew.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 17:22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 180.

## **Discussion**<sup>4</sup>

- 1) Read *Matthew 19:3-12*. When the Pharisees ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Jesus responds by pointing them back to God’s original intent for marriage in *Genesis 2:24*. Given Jesus’ teaching here, how are we meant to understand God’s design for marriage?
- 2) Read *Matthew 19:16-22*. A rich man asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. Notice that Jesus’ response includes only commands five through nine of the Ten Commandments, which are the others-oriented commands (*Matt. 19:18–19*; see *Matt. 22:39*). Jesus omitted the vertical, Godward commands, the first of which is against idolatry: “*You shall have no other gods before me*” (*Ex. 20:3*). He also omitted the tenth command about covetousness, which is elsewhere identified as idolatry, that is, valuing something above God (*Ex. 20:17*; *Eph. 5:5*; *Col. 3:5*). How does this help us understand what Jesus is asking the man to do in *Matthew 19:21* and why the man responds with sorrow in *Matthew 19:22*?
- 3) Read *Matthew 19:23-30*. In *verse 23* Jesus says it is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom. Why so? How does this context help us understand what Jesus means in *verse 26*?
- 4) Read the story in *Matthew 20:1–16*. Why do the first-hired laborers grumble against the master, and how does the master respond? How is the mindset of the first-hired laborers a potential danger for long-term faithful Christians?
- 5) Read *Matthew 20:20-28*. Note how Jesus reverses the world’s instincts about leadership and greatness in *verses 25–27* (compare *Matt. 18:1–4*). How would you summarize the two different mindsets? What is one area or example in your own life where your natural instincts about leadership need to be replaced by Jesus’ lowly but truly great way?
- 6) Matthew brackets Jesus’ teaching on greatness with statements about his impending death (*Matt. 20:17–19, 28*). Read these verses again and consider how Jesus is the clearest example of true greatness. What, then, does the cross teach us about true greatness and, more broadly, about leadership in general?
- 7) Throughout Jesus’ conversation with the rich young man several terms are used as near synonyms. The man asks what he must do to “have eternal life” (*Matt. 19:16*). Jesus speaks of entering “life” (*Matt. 19:17*) and the “kingdom of heaven” (*Matt. 19:23*), being part of the coming “new world” (*Matt. 19:28*; literally, “the regeneration,” or renewal of all things), and inheriting “eternal life” (*Matt. 19:29*). The disciples interpret all of this in terms of being “saved” (*Matt. 19:25*). The great hope of salvation held out in the Bible is robust enough to be referred to by a number of terms. Central to this hope is reconciliation with God through the forgiveness of sins, but our ultimate salvation includes participating in the future renewal of the world. Christians will be raised from the dead to live a flourishing bodily life with God in a new creation forever (see *1 Cor. 15:20–26*; *Phil. 3:20–21*; *Rev. 19:7*; *21:1–5*). According to the kind of values that Jesus has taught about in these chapters, how are we meant to anticipate this new life even now?

## **Prayer**

Spend some time in prayer together, praying for each other’s needs and that the Spirit will grant us a deeper understanding of the goodness and authority of Christ and empower us for living as representative of his kingdom in this world.

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<sup>4</sup> Some questions adapted from *Knowing the Bible: Matthew* by Drew Hunter.