

Matthew 21-09-12a

Good morning and welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church. We're continuing our study in the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 19. We've been in the vicinity of the rich young ruler for some time now and we'll be concluding that section which continues with Jesus' words about the difficulty of the wealthy entering the kingdom and the fate of those who leave things to follow Him.

It's very fascinating. There was a lot more here than initially met my eye and I had a very enjoyable week running down various trails. I could probably stay here as you well know for quite some time but we'll summarize and conclude and be ready for chapter 20 after we do so.

But let's ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study and we'll get started. Father we thank you for another Sunday morning, another opportunity to spend time together, dining on the manna from your word, being refreshed and renewed and restored, the washing of water and renewal of the Holy Spirit that comes through your word. We thank you for the example and the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the opportunity we have to look at it afresh this morning.

We pray that your spirit will guide us and give us understanding and the ability to see not only what is being said and what the truth is but how it pertains and how it applies in our lives so that we can live in a way that is truly pleasing in your sight and glorifies our Savior. We ask it in Jesus name, Amen. The rich young ruler having come and gone sorrowing because he had great wealth, Jesus in verse 23 of Matthew 19 says, Assuredly I say to you it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Looking at the astonished faces of his disciples and their stunned silence, Jesus repeated again, I say to you and if you look at the parallel gospels in Mark and Luke, he repeated the saying, it is hard to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. It is hard enough to enter the kingdom.

It is harder for the wealthy. Again, I say to you and this is if you compare the gospels, this is Jesus' third time to say this and he changes it slightly and says, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. For a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

So what is his point? First of all, they have just seen the difficulty that the young man has with parting with that on which he relies for security and it is important to define wealth in those terms because when we look at our life and those areas that we find satisfactory, that we find pleasing, that we find comforting, in which we find our security, it goes beyond mere possessions. In many cases, possessions can have the opposite effect because you begin to worry about losing them, having them get dented, having them get scratched, having them get keyed, having them come apart at the seams right

the day after the warranty expires. We crack things, we lose things, we are in the middle of the lake and our hat blows off, our favorite hat that has sentimental value and it sinks out of sight to the bottom of Lake Oolaga.

I've seen this happen. So we repose comfort and pleasure and most of all security in a lot of things beyond mere dollars or in these days denarii and shekels and it is the relative value that we assign. Jesus, as we saw last time, never asked anybody else to leave everything they had and follow him.

There were people who did so in varying ways and to varying degrees, but it is not a condition for everyone to enter the kingdom of God that they divest themselves of all of their earthly possessions. Christianity and even Old Testament Judaism is not an ascetic religion. It doesn't require abandoning all, giving up all.

So what is Jesus really saying here? We get an amplification as we go on down. When the disciples say in their great astonishment, who then can be saved? You can see that there is still, even at this late date, confusion in their minds between deliverance and entry into the kingdom. Saved means delivered.

Who then can be delivered? They're not thinking in terms of heaven, hell, golden streets versus lake of fire. Those truths are in a very nascent state in the days of the Lord Jesus and his teaching. Those crystallize and become clear when you have John's revelation.

There is no knowledge of such a thing as the lake of fire. There is Gehenna, which is the city dump, and it is a place of destruction. It is a place of loss, but it is not the eternal, permanent living torment that has come to be associated with hell.

So what is Jesus saying? What is the misunderstanding of the disciples that he is going to correct? Who then can be delivered? This goes to the common understanding and misunderstanding that wealth was a blessing from God. The more wealthy you are, the more blessed you are. Jesus says the exact opposite of everything that they believe and understand.

Let me put this in a context we can understand a little better, perhaps, because we've long disassociated these things in our minds. But let's take something near and dear to my heart. How close to God is a church? How spiritual are its members? How on the mark is its leadership and its focus and its set of priorities and goals and values? In the modern day, Christianity generally views large, prosperous churches that have facilities and ministries and missionaries and multiple buildings and a fancy sound system and lights and a worship team and multiple pastors and a couple of dozen Sunday school teachers at least.

This is a mark of success in the general view of Christianity, is it not? You've got a TV ministry. You've got a radio ministry. You've got a book ministry.

You've got a web ministry. We've got resources, and we'll happily send them to you in response to a gift and so on. Classic, modern, American Christianity views a church and its pastor and its leadership as successful when these accouterments are in view.

Trust me when I tell you that somebody preaching out of their living room is not viewed by the general run of Christianity with the same respect and assumptions of success as someone who's doing the very same thing at this very same hour on TV. So this is a Christian cultural set of beliefs or assumptions perhaps. If you question someone closely, they will be quick to say, oh no, the small rural pastor, the tiny congregation is just as valuable in God's sight.

People know this, but the knee-jerk reaction, the worldview, nobody thinks that the large megachurches are doing something wrong. Um, they're doing it better. They're doing it best.

And this is just a cultural assumption. Well, compare that, uh, to the disciples and the culture in Jesus day, believing that the rich, particularly those who were not oppressive. Now, if you look at a rich tax collector, they don't think that guy's blessed by God.

They think he got rich by cheating, by defrauding. And there is an allusion to that in the commandments that Jesus quoted to the rich young ruler back in verse 18. What are the commandments that you should keep? If you want to enter into life, verse 17, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, i.e. defraud, don't bear false witness, don't cheat or use falsehood to cause someone to lose what is their due in terms of justice, in terms of what is right.

So defrauding and, uh, denying the truth regarding someone are two of the five that Jesus quotes here along with murder adultery and, uh, honoring father and mother. But in the middle of that is, are you taking something from someone, their reputation, their truth, uh, something of that nature? Um, the young man says, all these I have kept from my youth. Now we are aware that in terms of the biggies, I haven't murdered anyone.

I haven't broken in and stolen from someone's domicile or business. Uh, if you define the commandments in certain large ways, we can say, I haven't broken the commandments. The spirit of the commandments is a different thing.

Let me read you something that I think is pertinent. Um, it was written by, uh, a man named, uh, Eugene Peterson, Eugene Peterson. And it has to do with how true is it when the young man says all these I have kept from my youth.

Really as a child, you never dishonored your father and mother by disobeying or by talking back or by, you know, a cross look or comments to your little friends about how mean your parents are. You really, from your youth, you kept these Eugene Peterson said this, and I think it is pertinent. One of the large and persistent tasks of living the

Christian life is learning to tell the truth.

The opposite of telling the truth is telling lies. We lie a lot. Most of us lie a lot.

We lie a lot more than we are aware of. We lie. Even when we think we are telling the truth.

The reason we do so is clear. We want to be at the center of the action. We want to subordinate all reality, persons, things, and events to our willfulness.

We want to control people's responses and manipulate their perceptions. Let me say that again. We want to control people's responses and manipulate their perceptions.

We don't want to always be seen in terms of mistakes we've made, errors of judgment, missteps that we've made, faults that are evident. We want to control how people respond to us. We want to manipulate how they perceive us.

Back to Peterson here. In order to do that, we arrange the data, we filter the facts, and shape the information so that we can influence the way things will be heard and seen, so that the response will be congenial to us. Lying is a product not so much of maliciousness, but of laziness.

Most people tell lies with the best of intentions. They think that they are helping the cause of their country or company or their own fortunes and that this is the best way. Few people, at least at the outset, have bad motives or evil intent.

They simply want something good or attractive or pleasing to take place, and the lie seems a shortcut to make it happen. Lying seems easier than the truth. Most people don't have the patience to go into all of the ramifications of the truth, so they lie.

The rich young ruler has convinced himself and wants to convince the Lord that all these he has kept from his youth. Notice Jesus does not make the case that I have just made, that are you sure? Jesus, because he is so the Lord, takes a different tack to make the same point. If it is true that you have truly kept not only the letter but the spirit of these commandments from your youth, here is something that you can do that will demonstrate that quality of soul that you claim to possess.

Because keeping the commandments, guarding the commandments, living the commandments day in and day out, things large and small, requires a condition of soul. So Jesus doesn't say, are you sure you didn't back sass your mother when she caught you stealing unleavened bread out of the jar or whatever? He says, if that's true, so to speak, then here is a way you can demonstrate that quality of soul. If you want to be complete, if you want to demonstrate this quality, go sell what you have and give to the poor.

He doesn't just say sell what you have and sit like Gandhi on the roadside waiting for handouts. Being a charity case was looked down on in Israel and people who needed charity were ignored if not despised. I call to your attention the story of Lazarus sitting at the gate of the rich man in Luke chapter 16.

The man had no qualms of conscience about walking by the beggar. How did he manage that? This same mindset that says the wealthy are blessed and if you're sitting by my gate without possessions, there's something wrong with you. You need to get that looked at, you need to get that fixed.

Look at these dogs who are your companions. It's part of the mindset. So when the young man heard that he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions and this was his security, this supported a convenient lie that he was telling himself, he had an inkling that all was not well.

That's why he came and asked Jesus this question. But as my father used to say, why do you ask me questions and then argue with my answers? He asks this question, but he doesn't like the answer and he cannot comply with the condition because this suggestion from the Lord Jesus has outed the lie that the young man is telling himself. He has not really kept the commands.

And we speculate on did Jesus really ever change his mind? Did he come back and do the right thing at some later point? Let me read you something else. And I got this from Alfred Edersheim. The wealthy in Jesus day had an out for not complying with this condition that the Lord sets.

If you want to be perfect, sell what you have. Remember there were five imperatives there, go sell what you have, give to the poor, come follow me. They had a tractate in the Mishnah which dealt with possessions and donations and such.

What do you do with your material goods? They had a complete commentary built up on this. There's a tractate about this. It's called Arakin, A-R-A-K-H-I-N.

A-R-A-K like Arak, that's like Uzo in Lebanon, Arak, then H-I-N, Arakin. In section 8.4, it says this. I remember who wrote these.

These are the religious leaders in Jesus day. They devised this stuff and it was part of their oral commentary. It was eventually set down in writing.

So this is what the Mishnah says. A man may devote part of his flock or of his herd of his Canaanite men servants and maidservants or his field of possession. But if he devoted the whole of them, they are not considered validly devoted.

This is the view of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azariah said, if even to the highest, no one is permitted to devote all his possessions. So if that's true, if no one is permitted to

devote all of his possessions to God, to the highest, how much more should one be careful about sparing in regard to one's possessions, sparing to your neighbor? If you're not supposed to devote it all to God, which is the assumption, then you've got to be even more careful about doing any sort of charity in your periphery.

So Eliezer Ben Azariah said, if even to the highest, no one is permitted, et cetera. The difference here, and I'm telling you, if you try to read Mishnah, you just get lost in the sauce. They back up, they go forward, they go down rabbit trails.

It's really difficult to read. Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azariah said, in Usha, they ordained that one who would distribute his possessions must not go beyond one-fifth of them. It happened that one wanted to distribute more than one-fifth and his colleagues would not permit him to do so.

Who was that? Rabbi Yeshivah. Some say it was Rabbi Yeshivah who wanted to distribute and his colleagues would not let him do so. Who was chief among them? And they get off into, well, which guy told the other guy that he shouldn't distribute more than 20%? But anyway, the conventional wisdom in Jesus' day was that if you over-donated, if you weren't careful and only gave a little bit, you could destitute yourself and become a burden on society.

So what this really does is pit the rich young man against the conventional wisdom to follow the Lord Jesus, to not rely on what is commonly understood. And you can think about my earlier examples in this regard. This is further elaborated as we move forward now into the question, who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said to them.

We've seen from Genesis forward that when somebody looks, when someone lifts up their eyes and looks, when Jesus looks at someone intently, there's meaning in that. Why doesn't it just say here, Jesus answered and said. Jesus looked at them and said.

This is a great thing to remember anytime we are communicating is a lot of debate, a lot of conversation. You think about all of the wash of political and social commentary that goes on now is basically people shouting their view and really not listening or even engaging the view that they are opposing to look at it, to consider it and to find the best way, not just to refute it or to answer it because sometimes logic, reason and evidence aren't the best way to look at the person who is launching this idea. That's what Jesus did with the rich young ruler.

The man says, all these I've kept from my youth. Jesus could say, well, I don't really think you have. Let's go back and find some examples of where you didn't keep the commandments.

Jesus, remember in Mark it says he looked at him and loved him. He looked at him. Now Jesus looks at the disciples.

It's important if we are going to speak the truth to one another in love that we take a beat, take a breath and think about the person we are addressing, not the argument we are addressing, not the issue we are debating or discussing. What is the most helpful thing I can say in love to this person, not to this idea, not to this argument, but to this person. Jesus looked at the rich young ruler when he answered him.

Jesus looks at his disciples when he answers them. Who then can be saved? That's a pretty open question. So Jesus looked at them and said, does Jesus know who then can be saved? Could he have launched into a Sermon on the Mount length diatribe here? But he looked at them and he said, really he says with men this is impossible.

It's a polite way of saying, it's going to be impossible for me to explain this to you right now. The fact that you're struggling with escaping the paradigm of our day on the wealthy being blessed and the downtrodden being cursed. When he says with men, this is impossible.

What is this? Answering the question, who then can be saved? It's at this time, in this context, it's impossible. And there are times when we just avoid that question. If you've been watching The Chosen, and I suggest you do at some point, find a way to watch that.

But the portrayal of Jesus is well done in several respects. One of which is when people ask him difficult questions, he says, that's a question for another time. And that's what Jesus is doing here.

Who then can be saved? That's a discussion for another time. That's an answer I'll give you in another context. And he doesn't let himself get deflected and distracted from the true issue.

What is the issue with the rich young ruler? In what are you reposing confidence? In what are you trusting for security? That's the real question. Who then can be saved isn't even the same issue. Saved, delivered, is separate.

Jesus has been talking about entering the kingdom, not being saved. Entering the kingdom and salvation are not synonymous, as we've seen many times. Jesus looked at them.

And you get the idea that there was a pause before he answered this question. With men, this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

You need to get back to the issue of where is your security. If your security is the Lord God and your relationship with him, everything is possible. So Peter answered and says, see, we have left all and followed you.

Therefore, what shall we have? Now this, again, is an easy question that Jesus could

have picked apart. Well, we're here with you. What are we going to get? We have left.

Jesus answers and says, assuredly, I say to you that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother, see where it says, or wife, you've got a new King James. There's a text note there because the better text doesn't include or wife.

They do the same thing in Mark and it's not there either. Think about the context here. Has Jesus not just made a very significant case for not separating from your wife, except in extremis or wife is not in the text.

It's been attracted from another passage. So cross it out. Houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or lands for my sake.

If you look at that, count the items. Number one is houses. Number two is brothers.

Number three is sisters. Number four is father. Number five is mother.

Number six is children. And number seven is lands. There's a perfect seven there.

So in the middle of seven, what do you find? What's number four? House, brothers, sisters, father. If you look at that as a chiasm, look at the outside houses is the first thing. And land is the last thing.

Lands, houses and lands, houses and lands inside the house and the land. You've got the family and it's the nuclear family, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children. Right at the center is the father outside of that, you've got sisters and mother.

They correspond. They're the female elements in the family. If I can still say female outside of that, you've got brothers and children.

And then outside of that, you've got the houses and the lands, right? Notice it doesn't say gold, silver, precious stones, oxen, sheep, donkeys, camels. What does Jesus focus on here? This is the family as it is composed of people and where it is located. It is a house on land.

Those who have left their houses on their lands and their family members. Now we have a lot to say about this and we'll do it after the break, but I want to point out that it's not just leaving these things that makes you righteous. This was the rich young rulers mistake.

I've kept the letter of the law. Oh, Jesus says, leave houses, lands and all of my family. So I'll just move out and go to an apartment and I will have all kinds of things in the kingdom.

This is talking about where do you repose your security. Security in the ancient world, security in Israel was family. I am in a tribe.

I am part of a clan and in that clan, I am part of a family and my particular father and mother, my children, my brothers and sisters, that's who I am. It's a great discussion going on today about identity. Who am I? Am I some intersectional entity? What makes me who I am? What makes me, how do I consider myself? How do I identify myself? How do I view myself? How do others view me? And this is the root place for security.

Am I secure? Am I content? Am I okay with myself? Remember the book back in the sixties, I'm okay, you're okay. This is where the rich young man who came to Jesus was insecure because he felt like, well, does my wealth define me? Does my youth define me? Does my position as a ruler define me? I think I want to be defined as someone who is going to inherit in the kingdom. That's what I want.

Something beyond this life, something more permanent, something more substantial than the superficialities, which he sensed were the current source of his security. But Jesus says, well, it's not enough to want to inherit eternal life. You have to prioritize it over what you have in this life.

It's not so much divestiture as it is priority. And sometimes the only way to demonstrate that priority is to separate from something. This has been the theme, has it not, in this recent portion of Matthew, unity versus division to what do we cling from? What do we separate? When do we separate? How do we separate? On what basis do we separate? That's not a, not a casual thing to give away everything you have to sell it and give the proceeds to the poor.

But look at the last two commands of those three, come follow me, transfer your security from the things that you are going to go sell and give the proceeds away, benefit others and come follow me, transfer your security to me. This is difficult. And you remember that quote earlier? I'm going to read it again next session because I think it is very valuable.

We lie to ourselves when we say I'm committed, when we say I trust and I have faith. There are times like this rich young ruler, when we think we are honoring God, we think that we are honoring his word. But when the test comes, when the challenge comes, we find that we're not quite there.

The only lie that is worse than lying to everyone around us is to lie to ourselves. Jeremiah 17, nine, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Who can figure it out? Well, we can't.

We've got confirmation bias. We've got our thumb on the scale all the time. It takes objective truth.

It takes the witness and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit to shine light in us. It takes the word of God to divide to the soul and the spirit and the joints and the marrow. This is why the word and the spirit are our primary greatest gifts from the Lord.

Jesus better than his presence. The disciples have been with Jesus now for years and they can't see their own hearts. Jesus said, I'm leaving, but I'm going to send you something better.

Those who come after you all are going to do greater things than what you've seen me do. Why? Because the presence and power of God's word and God's spirit is greater in terms of its benefit to followers of the Lord Jesus than the presence of Jesus himself. Jesus looks at these people.

He talks to them. He challenges them. He teaches them.

He rebukes and instructs them, but they don't get the benefit that you and I get from the presence and the power of the spirit and the word. That's why we come to church. That's why we make a priority out of Bible class, not just listening to it, but thinking about it and letting it penetrate.

Remember when Jesus said, let these words sink down into your ears, let it sink down into your heart. These words, he didn't say, let me sink down into your heart. Let Jesus come into your heart.

Jesus said, let my words sink in. That's what can change us. That's what can transform us.

That's what can make us objective and make us truthful. I am the way, the truth, and the life. If you look at that as a mini chiasm, the way and the life, the way of life, what does it center on? Truth.

It's truth. We have to tell ourselves the truth before we can even hope to speak truth to one another. We have much more to say about this.

We're going to make an excursion into the Old Testament. This is really fascinating. We'll see that when we come back from the break.