

## Chapter 20

### ***The Parable of the Workers (20:1–16)***

(Mark 10:31)

Peter had recently reminded Jesus that he and the Twelve have left everything and followed Jesus and Peter wanted to know what they therefore would have in the world to come (Matthew 19:27). Jesus responds.

*“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* (Matthew 19:29–30, ESV)

Our new section in chapter 20 on the workers in the field ends with a similar phrase as found in 19:30.

*“So the last will be first, and the first last.”* (Matthew 20:16, ESV)

This fact would often suggest that the material between these verses is one unit and that these verses would be an inclusio around a common section. **However, in this case they appear to be similar conclusions to two sections that are related stories. In some sense, what one is saying, so is the other.**

The material that follows will expand the “*everyone*” (not just the rich) and the “*eternal life*” comments in 19:29-30.

***Matthew 20:1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.***

***For....*** This word links the current section with the one just past. There is more information to be given on that prior material.

***the kingdom of heaven is like....*** There is also more to this story than human figures. Heaven is *like* something found on earth.

***master of a house....*** The English phrase is made up of two Greek words, “human” and “master of a house.” The phrase suggest that this is an analogy with a “heavenly” “master of a house” or God. So, **there is something about this man’s behavior that would illuminate the master of the heavenly house.**

***early in the morning*** – This would be before 6 a.m. for he wanted his workers in the field by that hour.

***to hire laborers for his vineyard....*** In that day, the normal place for hiring day laborers would have been the marketplace. Today, it would be in the parking lot of Lowes or Home Depot. Socially and economically, day laborers would be of the lowest status, barely above that of slave. In many ways slaves would be better off, they would have food, shelter and clothing regardless of an immediate need to work in the field. These day labors are less secure than that. **Our last story was about rich people, this one is about poor people. But they do have something in common.**

**Matthew 20:2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.**

**agreeing....** They negotiated and agreed on a wage.

**denarius**<sup>1</sup>.... If they did not earn a denarius every day, they and their families were in danger of starving.

**a day** – They were required to work 12 hours from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. for this sum.

“...the Mishnah calculates that a person needs a minimum of 200 denarii per year in order to exist, this income presupposes that a day laborer was able to find work at least 200 days in a year and that he furthermore did not have to support a family. One denarius could buy 10 to 12 small, flat loaves of bread; 3 to 4 denarii 12 liters of wheat (from which one could make about 15 kilograms of bread) or a lamb; 30 denarii a slave’s garment; 100 denarii an ox. In view of these prices the day laborers had a hard life.”<sup>2</sup>

There are 313 work days a year. 200 denarii would support one man for a year. If he could find work the other days, and that was not always possible for planting and harvesting were seasonal, that would give him 113 denarii to try to improve his standard of living or perhaps save and buy “tools” to improve his life. If he had a wife and children, he would be hard pressed to support them. Therefore, his wife and children would have to work for all to survive. All this supposes the man does not get sick or injured.

This illustrates why some volunteered to be slaves (Exodus 21:5-6). Security is an important element in life. With the right master, slavery was better than living like this. Many people found the security of slavery to be far superior to freedom, many still do.

**Matthew 20:3 And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,**

**the third hour** -- around 9 a.m.

**marketplace**<sup>3</sup>.... “The marketplace would be the central square, where all kinds of business was done and casual labor hired.”<sup>4</sup>

**Matthew 20:4 and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’**

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<sup>1</sup> *denarius* δηνάριον “...a Roman silver coin equivalent to a day’s wage of a common laborer—‘denarius.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 530.

<sup>3</sup> *marketplace* ἀγορά “...a commercial center with a number of places for doing business—‘market, marketplace, business center.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 428). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

“The third-hour men are promised “whatever is right” (v. 4); and, trusting the landowner’s integrity, they work on that basis....”<sup>5</sup>

**Matthew 20:5 So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.**

**the sixth hour** -- about noon

**the ninth hour** – about 3 p.m.

**Matthew 20:6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’**

**the eleventh hour....** This would be about 5 p.m.

“The extraordinary behavior of this landowner in adding extra workers after he has already recruited all he needs in the early morning therefore probably indicates not that he could not calculate his labor needs in advance **but that he was acting compassionately to alleviate the hardship of the unemployed.**”<sup>6</sup>

**Matthew 20:7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’**

**Because no one has hired us....** “...the farmer can see that they are unemployed! The brief dialogue makes it possible for the hearers to spend a moment with these men who have been left without work. What kind of people are they? Are they too old, or are they sick people whom no one wanted? Did they miss their chance for work because they overslept?”<sup>7</sup> Were these still unemployed because they “were the least desirable workers....”<sup>8</sup>

These are the only workers where some sort of moral failure is implied. And yet, they too are hired.

**Matthew 20:8 And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’**

**when evening came** – about 6 p.m.

**the owner of the vineyard....** “This facilitates the decoding of the parable’s allegory and points to the real-life referent: Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 428). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 531.

<sup>8</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 750.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 982.

**Call the laborers and pay them their wages.... The Torah required that day laborers be paid every day.**

*“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning.” (Leviticus 19:13, ESV)*

*“You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin.” (Deuteronomy 24:15, ESV)*

“The word “wages/reward” ... again directs the hearers’ attention to God who will reward the righteous in the future life.”<sup>10</sup>

***Matthew 20:9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.***

“That he had paid the full day’s wage probably indicates a genuine concern for the needs of others. It can scarcely be due to a desire to be rid of money! We must assume that that householder knew that a poor man and his dependents needed the money if they were to have even the necessities of life. There is compassion behind the payment.”<sup>11</sup>

***Matthew 20:10 Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.***

“It is an obvious piece of reasoning: they had worked longer hours and done more work, so they deserved more pay.”<sup>12</sup>

***Matthew 20:11 And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house,***

***grumbled***<sup>13</sup>.... “...whenever complacency, disparagement, discontent, enter the soul, then it begins to decline; and *the first* are becoming *last*, till they fall below the level of those they despise, and the publican and the harlot enter the kingdom of heaven ‘before,’ i.e. in front of them.”<sup>14</sup>

*“Do all things without grumbling or disputing,” (Philippians 2:14, ESV)*

***Matthew 20:12 saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’***

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<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 531.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 501.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 502.

<sup>13</sup> *grumbled* γογγύζω “...to express one’s discontent—‘to complain, to grumble, complaint.’ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>14</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).

“...though fairly paid, they feel unfairly treated because others who worked much less received what they did.”<sup>15</sup> The thought is that “Those have been made equal who have not contributed enough to deserving to be made equal.”<sup>16</sup>

“Surely those who had done a full day’s solid work under the worst conditions of the day as well as during the more uncomfortable hours should be paid more than those who had done very little and had done that little in comparative comfort? It wasn’t fair.”<sup>17</sup> And do we not identify with these workers? “It is frightening to realize that our identification with the first workers, and hence with the opponents of Jesus, reveals how loveless and unmerciful we basically are.”<sup>18</sup>

**“The complaint of the leaders ... is not that the Lord broke his word or cheated them; it is that the Lord was far more generous with the undeserving.”<sup>19</sup>**

“The thrust of the complaint is thus twofold: the latecomers did very little work, and what they did they did under the best conditions in the cool of the day....”<sup>20</sup> **Perhaps their real problem was the thought that they could have come late and still made the same wage.**

**Matthew 20:13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’**

**he replied to one of them....** Probably to the one who was the most vocal representative of the group.

**Friend....** Powerful and rich he may be, but unkind and arrogant he is not.

**I am doing you no wrong.** There is no injustice here. “This man had made a legal agreement with his workmen; they would work for a day, and he would pay them a denarius. That was what they did and what he did. Where is the injustice? **The fact that he chose to be generous to other people gave these men no new rights.**”<sup>21</sup>

**Did you not agree with me....** There was an agreement that the master kept, but the workers do not want to keep.

**Matthew 20:14 Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.**

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<sup>15</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 428). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>16</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>17</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 503.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 320–321.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 502.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 503.

There is an element of harshness in this; it is a rebuke.

**Matthew 20:15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’**

The landowner was already being significantly other-centered in his hiring pattern (they needed work); he continues to be so in his payment pattern (they need the pay that would have gone with a full day of employment).<sup>22</sup>

**begrudge** or **is your eye bad (evil) because I am good?** A strong moral element has now entered the story, they are simply greedy.

In Scripture, the evil eye general means stingy.

*“but if your eye is bad (evil), your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”* (Matthew 6:23, ESV)

**I am good....** We are reminded of Matthew 19:17 where Jesus the good teacher 19:16) and is called good, *“Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good.”* And here the owner of the vineyard is also good.

“These rhetorical questions (vv. 13b–15) show that God’s great gifts, simply because they are God’s, are distributed, **not because they are earned, but because he is gracious....**”<sup>23</sup>

“Jesus is pointing out that God does not deal with us on the basis of merit but of grace. The love of God in all its fulness is poured out on sinners, and they receive infinitely more than they deserve. The parable underlines the truth that God’s way is always the way of grace.”<sup>24</sup>

**Matthew 20:16 So the last will be first, and the first last [for many are called, but few are chosen.]**

**So the last will be first, and the first last....** “the lasts became firsts by sheer grace, not by work performed. The firsts became lasts because of a bloated self-consciousness....”<sup>25</sup>

## Solutions?

In our last section, **Matthew 19:30, the first (the rich young ruler who was first in wealth) became last by refusing to follow Jesus. Here in Matthew 20:16, those that entered the vineyard first become last because of greed. In both stories, money is involved, and money is a deciding element in who does not enter the kingdom; but money has nothing**

<sup>22</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 428). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 505.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 321.



to do with who does enter the kingdom. In other words, greediness keeps out, but simple possession of wealth plays no role. None of the workers in the last group were well off. But you don't need to be well off to have an *evil eye*, these were poor people, but they were greedy.

The focus in 20:16 is on those that had little time to serve in the vineyard, but were well paid. There is another story in Luke of one that entered the kingdom at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. It is the story of the thief on the cross.

*“And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*” (Luke 23:42–43, ESV)

In all these stories, the last received eternal life, which is what the rich young ruler was looking for—and was offered!

“For although through diversity of attainments the saints will shine, some more, some less; yet as to this respect, the gift of eternal life, it will be equal to all. For that will not be longer to one, and shorter to another, which is alike everlasting; **that which hath no end will have no end either for thee or me.**”<sup>26</sup>

But, how is being first in the kingdom justified for those that entered at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour? **Should it not read *the last shall be equal***. Is the text not telling us that the first were lost? *And that makes the last first*—instead of just equal! Those that went to the field first display an envy and greediness that disqualified them for the kingdom.

Luke's story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) tells a similar story “ where the worthy elder brother who has been treated fairly resents the father's generosity to the one who deserves nothing. In that case, the explicit application (Luke 15:1–3) was to Jewish religious leaders who objected to Jesus' openness to the undeserving....”<sup>27</sup>

In Luke, the prodigal son (the Gentiles) did become first, but only because the first son (the Jews) was so angry, he refused to go into the house (enter the Church). The story of the Prodigal Son is a story of Judaism and Gentile Christianity, with many in Judaism angry that Gentiles were received into the believing community by faith only. They, therefore, put themselves last by refusing to go in.

The verse 19:30 the story is a comparison of two groups, both rich?

The 20:19 story is a comparison of two groups, both poor.

So, neither riches or poverty enhance the chances of the one or decrease them for the other. What is the missing element?

<sup>26</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament,” in *Saint Augustin: Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels* (ed. Philip Schaff; trans. R. G. MacMullen; vol. 6; A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series; New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 6375.

<sup>27</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 752.

Perhaps the missing element is found in a passage cut from our Bibles by those that advocate for the Minority Tradition of the documents of textual history. It is the phrase, ***for many are called, but few are chosen.***

One author in justifying the deletion of this passage says, “That saying does not fit well in this parable since all the workers actually receive a denarius. Therefore, all the workers here could be called “chosen,” and there are no figures in this parable who would correspond to being not chosen.”<sup>28</sup>

*No figures...not chosen?* Did this author not just read the story of the rich young ruler? And, although he was *called*, he was not ultimately *chosen*. And those that entered the field first are *called*, but because of their greed were not *chosen*. So, the call of the gospel goes wide, but “*those who find it are few.*” (Matthew 7:14, ESV). **It seems that the greed of the rich or the poor was the deciding factor in keeping them from faith.** Greed blinds to everlasting riches.

“... And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” (Exodus 33:19, ESV)

**Is this not the ultimate explanation of the story** of the rich young ruler and the disciples, as well as the story of those early in the field and those late? It is the sovereign choice of God, not the work of the sinner—***for many are called, but few are chosen.*** If so, then those that entered the field first were ultimately found to be “not chosen” as was the rich young ruler.

Back to the story of the prodigal son. There the first son proved to be lost although he was seemingly a member of the family—saved. But ultimately, like the rich young ruler, he refused to enter the house.

Although this story of the prodigal son may be similar, it is not certain that our Matthew 19 and 20 stories are actually saying anything about Israel. **But they are saying much about divine election—whether Jew or Gentile. Certainly, the Israelites were called to labor in the vineyard first but ultimately grew jealous of those that entered later who received the same reward of salvation.**

But in fact, salvation is the choice of God and that from eternity past.

“*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love*” (Ephesians 1:4, ESV)

“*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*” (Romans 8:29–30, ESV)

“Using this verse, the point is often made that God’s predestination and election is based on His own foreknowledge of who would repent and believe. Being able to see down through the corridors of time, God knew before time who would respond to the

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 983.



gospel message and believe. These he elected for salvation. This reminds one of a politician who is willing to lead if only the people will tell him where they want to be led. God is willing to elect if only we will be so kind as to tell Him whom to elect. So, who is doing the electing here, God or man? In order to protect the sovereignty of man, we sacrifice the sovereignty of God!

Here we have an election that is conditional, as opposed to the Reformed view of an unconditional election based solely on God's own sovereign purposes. The condition to this salvation is man's evangelical obedience and this, it is said, is based on God's knowledge of human actions and responses. In this view, you have man being the prime actor and God being the reactor. In other words, God elects those whom he sees will elect him. So, man directs the affairs and decisions of God, instead of God directing the affairs and decisions of man. In order to give man an unlimited will to decide the destiny of his own soul, we must limit the will of God."<sup>29</sup>

### ***Jesus Heads to Jerusalem (20:17–19)***

(Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34)

***Matthew 20:17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them,***

***he took the twelve disciples aside....*** The crowds, friendly or enemies, will not hear this announcement.

***Matthew 20:18 “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death***

***up to Jerusalem....*** At this point Jesus is near the Jordan River and may be about to enter Jericho, next he will ascend the mountain road to Jerusalem. Right after this event in 20:29 we read:

*“And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him.”* (Matthew 20:29, ESV)

So, we appear to be either between the Jordan River and Jericho or in Jericho.

***will be delivered....*** The grammatical structure is of a future passive. The passive voice show that Jesus is allowing this to happen. God the Father is delivering God the Son over to death.

““Hand over” (delivered) in the OT is a judgment word; it is what God did to Israel whenever she persisted in sin (see the book of Judges especially and its thematic “he handed her over” to her enemies). Therefore, when God now in the Gospel “hands over” Jesus ... God does so in order that Jesus may bear our judgment in *our* place. That is the Good News in the Bad News of Jesus' suffering.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph E. Bass, Jr., *Tell Me About Presbyterians – Just What Do They Believe?* Living Hope Press, 2006, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 325.

**chief priests and scribes....** "...the main human actors are the Jewish high priests and scribes."<sup>31</sup> This is new information; prior to this Jesus enemies were the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees will play a role in Jesus death, but not the prominent one that they have played thus far, that will be left in the hands of the chief priests; "the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jews, is in mind."<sup>32</sup> It was the job of the priests to offer sacrifice, and that is exactly what they will do with Jesus—offer him up as a sacrifice for sin, although they don't understand that they are doing this.

In Jerusalem, the Pharisees play second fiddle to the Sadducees and high priests.

**Matthew 20:19 and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."**

**Gentiles....** For the first time, we become aware that the Jews will not act alone in the murder of Jesus. Symbolically, the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, will play a role in his death. Some Gentiles like to focus on the role of the Jews only in the death of Jesus. But they are being dishonest, they are equally guilty for his murder.

**mocked and flogged and crucified....** As he approaches Jerusalem his description on what is going to happen has increased detail over his prior announcements.

Jesus has alluded to his crucifixion on several occasions during his ministry.

*"And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."*  
(Matthew 10:38, ESV)

*"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* (Matthew 16:21, ESV)

*"But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands."* (Matthew 17:12, ESV)

*"As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed."* (Matthew 17:22–23, ESV)

**crucified....** This is the first time that the method of his torture and death is mentioned although his use of "cross" in 10:38 implied it.

On several occasions Jesus has informed the twelve about his coming passion. However, Luke tells us, "*they understood none of these things.*"

*"But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said."* (Luke 18:34, ESV)

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<sup>31</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 539.

<sup>32</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 507.

**he will be raised on the third day....** Jesus' resurrection is not an afterthought of the disciples in order to keep Jesus' memory alive. It was the fore thought of the Father in order to keep us alive.

Jesus' order of the coming events is not vague but, precise.

Jesus just said that **the last will be first**. He is **the last** in his condemnation, mockery, and death "*cursed by God*" (Deuteronomy 21:23) and "*despised*" by men (Isaiah 53:3); but he **will be first** when God raises him from the dead and exalts him to the position of authority over the world. "*he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 1:20, ESV).

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:5–8, ESV)

And what is our greater context?

*"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 18:4, ESV)

So, Jesus taught humility as the means of greatness for us and then demonstrated it in his own life.

**To Be at the Right and Left Hand of the One Who Gives His Life as a Ransom  
(20:20–28)**

(Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-30)

How do you go from "*So the last will be first, and the first last.*" (Matthew 20:16, ESV) to "*Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.*" (Matthew 20:21, ESV) in such a few short minutes? Is no one listening?

Clearly, Jesus' recent teaching in Matthew 18:1-5, "*Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matthew 18:3, ESV), did not make a lasting impression on them. It is a message he will repeat over and over again and one we must repeat in our day as well. Greatness in the world is by ruling over others; greatness in the kingdom is by serving others.

**Matthew 20:20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.**

**the mother....** "A comparison of Matthew and Mark makes it *likely* that the mother of Zebedee's sons was called **Salome**, and John's account makes it seem that this lady was the sister of Jesus' mother. If this is the way the passages should be understood,

James and John would be cousins of Jesus.<sup>33</sup> This may explain why Jesus and Mary relocated to Capernaum after they were run out of Nazareth, Mary had family there, her sister Salome and maybe others as well. You will remember that on the cross Jesus committed Mary to the care of John and not one of his younger brothers. In the light of this, we might here see Salome in this request as urging the claims of the family on Jesus. When you start passing out the rewards and honors, family comes first!

## A Little Background

It appears that she was one of those that gathered in Galilee when Jesus is about to depart to Jerusalem for the coming feast.

*“As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men,” (Matthew 17:22, ESV)*

We will see her again at the cross.

*“There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” (Matthew 27:55–56, ESV)*

**the sons of Zebedee....** James and John were fisherman living in Capernaum.

*“And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them.” (Matthew 4:21, ESV)*

James and John, along with Peter, form an inner circle of Jesus’ disciples.

*“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” (Matthew 17:1, ESV)*

**kneeling**<sup>34</sup>.... Notwithstanding the family relationship, she does not treat Jesus with undue familiarity; she is very respectful. “The verbs translated *knelt* and *made a request* are both feminine participles, so that it was the lady who was foremost in bringing the request.”<sup>35</sup> She is looking out for her sons.

**something....** “One of the main ways in which a woman in a patriarchal society could exercise power was in terms of her continuing influence over her adult sons. The mother is asking for her sons, but she is also asking for herself.”<sup>36</sup> From this, we see

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<sup>33</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> *kneeling προσκυνέω* “...(an idiom, literally ‘to incline the face to the ground’): to prostrate oneself before someone as an act of reverence, fear, or supplication—‘to prostrate oneself before.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>35</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 509.

<sup>36</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

that the families of the disciples are no more spiritually mature than are the disciples themselves.

**Matthew 20:21** *And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”*

**What do you want?** This lady had given much to this cause. Through her wealth she helped undertake the financing of this 3 ½ year project. She also personally journeyed with this band and with other women may have prepared them meals and did other acts of service. She had given her two sons to the cause. It is time to address *the golden rule—he who has the gold, makes the rules*. It was pay-back time. What’s in it for me and my sons?

**one at your right hand and one at your left....** “The “right hand” and “left hand” suggest proximity to the King’s person and so a share in his prestige and power.”<sup>37</sup> **In these positions, they could virtually insulate Jesus from the others and thereby obtain almost total control over the kingdom.**

“The mother anticipates acquisition of royal rule in Jerusalem in the near future, and hopes that her two sons will be able to play a key role in this royal rule. The promise of Mt. 19:28 is part of the background of the present request.”<sup>38</sup>

*“Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* (Matthew 19:28, ESV)

But this was not good enough, it had to be the particular thrones to the right and left of Jesus.

In some sense, it appears she is trying to confront Jesus’s earlier announcement that it was Peter who would be the preeminent one in the founding of the kingdom.

*“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18, ESV)

Clearly Peter would be sitting on the right of Jesus. Something must be done. “Is it a power play masking as a prayer request?”<sup>39</sup>

As we learn, she and her sons simply do not understand the cross. **They believe this is a revolution with the Romans soon to be shown the door. The anti-Zealot message of the Sermon on the Mount was lost to them.** The twelve thrones will be set up momentarily.

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<sup>37</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 431). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>38</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 328.

“... because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.”  
(Luke 19:11, ESV)

This request could no longer be delayed; it was time to act; so, she responds, “I want the two thrones next to Jesus for my boys.”

“There is faith in their request. The kingdom had not yet been established in the way the Zebedees looked for it, and there was no sign of such a kingdom. But despite the lowliness of Jesus and of the entire little band the Zebedee family were so sure that the kingdom would eventuate that they were already putting in their claims for the best places when it came.”<sup>40</sup>

One might wonder how this sordid story would play out in other religions? Covered up and ignored would be the most likely response. But not Christianity. Here Matthew, some 25 years later, covers up nothing but puts all the warts and pimples of the Twelve on display. The Bible is an honest story of fallen men regenerated and empowered by God to do uncommon things in our fallen world. “The church did not suppress this unflattering portrait of her leading apostles.”<sup>41</sup>

**Matthew 20:22 [But] Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink [and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with]?” They said to him, “We are able.”**

We read this story in Mark 10:38-39 as well.

“Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,” (Mark 10:38–39, ESV)

**Are you able....** Why did Jesus ask these questions? Was he really asking them if they were ready to suffer with Jesus? Perhaps these questions were for the benefit of James and John, questions like this encourage a reassessment of commitment.

**to drink the cup....** “Drinking of the cup is to be understood in connection with OT language where **it is an image for being overtaken by disaster.**”<sup>42</sup>

“The “cup” (cf. 26:39) characteristically refers, in OT imagery, to **judgment** or retribution (cf. Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17–18; Jer 25:15–28).”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 509.

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 328.

<sup>42</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>43</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 431). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.



*“For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.” (Psalm 75:8, ESV)*

*“Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.” (Isaiah 51:17, ESV)*

*“The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.” (Revelation 16:19, ESV)*

As they thought of participating in Jesus’ reign and of sitting on his right and left, Jesus was also thinking of drinking a cup. In the garden, we read:

*“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”” (Matthew 26:39, ESV)*

**It was the will of the Father and the Son that Jesus drink this cup and suffer this death.**

***and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with....*** The cup and the baptism are two different ways of saying the same thing. The reiteration drives home the common point.

Although baptism is today generally thought of as “mode” and in most churches that mode is “dipping,” this is actually an incorrect understanding on the word baptism. In fact, baptism addresses “result” or “change of condition”—not mode.<sup>44</sup> So, Jesus was not asking them if they were able to be *dipped* with the baptism he was to be *dipped* with.

In Jesus’ earlier baptism by John the Baptists, his change of condition or result was from one not yet qualified to be prophet, priest and king, to one who was so qualified through a *ceremonial washing or anointing*. They could never be baptized with this baptism, it was fully unique to him.

We talk in the same vein today when we say something like “on that first day of practice I went through my baptism by fire.” By this we mean “I started that day a novice, I ended it a pro.” The change of condition was from novice to pro by means of a rough day of practice, by enduring the hazing and hard hits and as a result now accepted by the team as a full member. When we say things like this, we are not talking about being dipped in anything.

So, in that vein, but far more seriously, Jesus is asking if they could be baptized with the suffering and passion that awaited him. The change of condition or result of their baptism would be going from a student in the things of God to becoming a full-fledged and qualified Apostle in the work and suffering of Jesus. Again, in doing all this, they would not have been dipped in anything.

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<sup>44</sup> Ralph E. Bass, Jr., *Baptidzo, A 500 Year Study in the Geek Word Baptism*, Greenville, SC, Living Hope Press, 2009.

**They said to him, “We are able.”** “They say they *can*.... And we learn both that they *cannot* (26:40, 43, 56) and, through Jesus’ resurrection forgiveness and presence, that they *can* (26:32; 28:10, 16–20).”<sup>45</sup>

“These disciples recognized the need to make sacrifices in order to reach the desired goals. **This is probably how they wanted to understand Jesus’ Passion prediction: as a highly metaphorical way of speaking about a hard struggle before success.**”<sup>46</sup>

“If the disciples grasped anything of Jesus’ passion predictions, they probably thought the language partly hyperbolic. Jesus did use hyperbole elsewhere [e.g., Mt 19:24] and referred to the eschatological conflict during which Messiah’s side would suffer losses; but these could scarcely be too severe for one who could still storms and raise the dead. Thus, by their bold response, James and John betray their misunderstandings of the timing of the dawn of the kingdom in all its glory (cf. Luke 19:11), and equally of the uniqueness and redemptive significance of Jesus’ sufferings (cf. 20:28) now imminent.”<sup>47</sup> **Not understanding much of what lay ahead for Jesus at Calvary, they glibly responded that they could do so as well.**

**“That they claimed too much was made plain when they ran away in Gethsemane (26:56). And yet—in due course they did drink the cup, James by martyrdom (Acts 12:1–2) and John by exile to Patmos....”**<sup>48</sup>

**Matthew 20:23 He said to them, “You will drink my cup, [and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with] but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”**

**You will drink my cup...and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with....** Jesus admits that there is a cup for them to drink and a baptism to endure, one associated with suffering for them in the years ahead.

“...for Jesus’ impending suffering the disciples will not be at all ready, but later, informed by that experience and its aftermath, **they will give their lives as those who live out an understanding of greatness as service.**”<sup>49</sup>

**to sit at my right hand....** This privilege was temporarily assigned by the Father to two thieves on crosses.

*“Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.”*  
(Matthew 27:38, ESV)

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<sup>45</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 329.

<sup>46</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 431). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>48</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 510.

<sup>49</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

In the future kingdom, these positions are for the Father to decide; no one knows who will sit on those thrones—perhaps a Moses and a Paul? Perhaps two heroes of faith unknown to all but God.

**Matthew 20:24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.**

“James and John, through their mother, have made a bid for what the others see as an unfair advantage. They have been rebuffed by Jesus, but they should not have tried to get one-up on the others. The reaction of the Ten is every bit as status conscious as the original request.”<sup>50</sup>

“The two were stealing a march on the others, some of whom doubtless had their eye on the same positions. It was a source of indignation that the Zebedees had tried to get in first.”<sup>51</sup> **“But as two had asked carnally, so now the ten are grieved carnally.”**<sup>52</sup>

**Matthew 20:25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.**

“It is the way of the world to look for the highest possible place and to take delight in making full use of the authority that that place gives.”<sup>53</sup> But, **“The church is to be a counterculture within culture, not a poor imitation of culture.”**<sup>54</sup>

**Matthew 20:26 [But] It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,**

**It shall not be so among you....** “The future tense lays down what is to happen; it is to be understood as having the force of a command....”<sup>55</sup>

**great ... must be your servant....** Or, shall we say it again, **“the first shall be last.”** “In the disciple community the behaviour patterns that mark aspiration to greatness are those of service and not those of control.”<sup>56</sup>

**servant**<sup>57</sup> .... It is the Greek word for *deacon* that is used here. It was a word often used for a person who waited on tables, very similar to a waiter today. According to Jesus, this is what leaders do.

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<sup>50</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 511). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew* (ed. John Henry Newman; vol. 1; Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 695–696.

<sup>53</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 511). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>54</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 332.

<sup>55</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 511). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>56</sup> Nolland, John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>57</sup> *servant* δῆκονος “A minister, servant, deacon. The derivation is uncertain. According to some it comes from *diakónis*, in the dust laboring, or running through dust.” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

**Matthew 20:27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,**

**slave**<sup>58</sup>.... “In the ancient world there was no one lower than a slave; the slave’s “whole life is lived in service for which he can claim neither credit nor reward....”<sup>59</sup>

“It is in lowly service that Christians find their true fulfillment. **They follow a Master who took the form of a servant and lived all his earthly days in humble obscurity. The way forward for them is in humility and lowliness. To set one’s heart on eminence is to lose the heart of the Christian way.**”<sup>60</sup> Only a few days earlier Jesus covered this very point:

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:4, ESV)

It was not remembered.

**Matthew 20:28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**

Jesus puts forth his own life as an example for our behavior of the first being last. He is supremely the first in the universe who becomes the last, the criminal that dies for others.

**came**.... “When Jesus says he “*came to serve*,” he hints at his preexistence and his divine mission. Before Jesus came to us, he was somewhere else.”<sup>61</sup>

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:5–8, ESV)

Why did he come? He came “*to call ... sinners to repentance*” (Luke 5:32). He came “*to seek and to save what was lost*” (Luke 19:10). He “*did not come to judge the world, but to save it*” (John 12:46–47). He “*came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15).”<sup>62</sup>

**not to be served but to serve**<sup>63</sup> “This is the very antithesis of what the sons of Zebedee wanted. They viewed themselves as the kind of people who would be right at

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<sup>58</sup> *slave* δούλος “A slave, one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another, his will being altogether consumed in the will of the other (Matt. 8:9; 20:27; 24:45, 46). Generally one serving, bound to serve, in bondage (Rom. 6:16, 17).” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 512). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>60</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 512). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew & 2* (ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani; vol. 2; Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 228–229.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew & 2* (ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani; vol. 2; Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 229.

<sup>63</sup> *serve* διακονέω “...to render assistance or help by performing certain duties, often of a humble or menial nature—‘to serve, to render service, to help, service, help.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996).

the top in the kingdom.”<sup>64</sup> They were not interested in how to serve but how to be served.

**give his life....** “This verse is the Gospel’s first description of *the meaning of Jesus’ death....*”<sup>65</sup> **His life was not taken from him, he gave it willingly.**

*“just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”* (John 10:15, ESV)

*“who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,”* (Galatians 1:4, ESV)

*“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

**ransom**<sup>66</sup>.... “Ransom or price paid for redeeming captives, loosing them from their bonds and setting them at liberty.”<sup>67</sup>

The word “λύτρον (‘ransom’) is used in secular sources primarily of manumission of slaves and release of prisoners of war....”<sup>68</sup>

*“who gave himself for us to redeem [ransom] us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”* (Titus 2:14, ESV)

*“knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”* (1 Peter 1:18–19, ESV)

*“he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption [ransom].”* (Hebrews 9:12, ESV)

*“In him we have redemption [ransom] through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,”* (Ephesians 1:7, ESV)

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*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains.* New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>64</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 512.

<sup>65</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 335.

<sup>66</sup> *ransom* λύτρον “...the means or instrument by which release or deliverance is made possible—‘means of release, ransom.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains.* New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>67</sup> Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament.* Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>68</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Test.* Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.



“He who did nothing wrong was condemned for everything so that we who have done everything wrong may be condemned for nothing.”<sup>69</sup>

**for....** “...the preposition *anti* means substitution, “in the place of”....”<sup>70</sup>

**many**<sup>71</sup>.... “The many, in this case, are the people, the children, the elect of God.”<sup>72</sup>

“*Out of the anguish of his soul he [the Lord] shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:11–12, ESV)*

““The many” underlines the immeasurable effects of Jesus’ solitary death: the one dies, the many find their lives “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,” a great host no man can number....”<sup>73</sup>

“*for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*” (Matthew 26:28, ESV)

“He consumes the divine fury provoked by the iniquities of all peoples, and he alone can and does suffer in their place.”<sup>74</sup>

### ***Christ's Purposeful Atonement***

“The many” is a phrase filled with implication. It is sometimes thought to address what is often called, “the doctrine of Limited Atonement.” However, the very sound of that phrase “limited atonement” is distasteful because it seems to deny the sufficiency of the work of Christ at Calvary. Indeed, that is exactly how some respond to this doctrine. But first let it be understood that no true Bible believer would deny the sufficiency of Christ’ work at Calvary for the salvation of all souls. However, there is a sense in which all parties “limit” the atonement. For the Reformed, the atonement is limited in its purpose. Christ died for his elect; that was the purpose of His death. Although Christ death is sufficient for the salvation of all, it is efficient only for those whom Christ died, his elect. Now, although Arminians **Error! Bookmark not defined.** deny the limitation of the work of Calvary to the elect only, they nevertheless have a limitation of their own.

<sup>69</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 336.

<sup>70</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 337.

<sup>71</sup> *many* πολὺς “...a relatively large quantity of objects or events—‘many, a great deal of, a great number of.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>72</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew & 2* (ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani; vol. 2; Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 230.

<sup>73</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 433). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>74</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 1009.



Their limitation is in its efficacy or power. Insisting that Christ died for all men they are hard pressed to explain why all men are not saved. The only explanation appears to be that the atonement is simply not capable of saving the “all” for which Christ died.

So, there are two limitations possible on the atonement, one a limitation of its purpose, to save the elect only, or two, a limitation in its power, an atonement intended to save all but not efficacious to save any in and of itself.

**Nature Not Extent** - So, both camps limit the atonement. One limits its purpose, the other its power. Which is right? The answer to that question can only be found by asking the question “What was the nature or purpose of the atonement?” It is only as we understand its nature or purpose; can we address its extent or audience. To put it another way, “**What exactly is the Cross of Christ supposed to do for sinners?**” Surely whatever purpose God had in the atonement, that purpose was achieved at Calvary!

So, we come to the point where we have a choice. *Either*, the atonement provided the possibility of salvation for all, but made the salvation of none certain. *Or* the atonement made certain the salvation of all for which it was intended, the elect. In an attempt to defend an “unlimited” atonement, the Armenians have given us no atonement at all, *only the possibility of one*. Whereas Reformed Theology insists that Calvary achieved its goal, *the certain salvation of all for which it was intended*, the elect.

By way of illustration, we can say that when Adam sinned he did not create the possibility of his descendants being fallen; his actions insured the certainty of such a condition. Similarly, when Christ died he did not create the possibility of His descendants being saved; his actions insured the certainty of such a condition.

*For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.... For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.* Romans 5:17, 19

If Christ’s death was to atone for all men, then all men must be atoned for. None can be lost. But we know that many are lost. Therefore, those who are lost did not receive atonement in Christ. He did not die for them. If He did then they could not go to hell. Then, for whom did He die?

*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.* John 10:14-15.

Jesus answered, “*I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand”* John 10:25-28.

For whom did he die? He clearly says, “*I lay down my life for the sheep....*” He died for His sheep, not for those who are “not my sheep” or the goats as they are called elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> His death fully achieved its purpose, the certain salvation of his sheep.<sup>76</sup>

But, none of this denies that Christ death is sufficient for the salvation of all, only that it is efficient only for those whom Christ died, his elect. In that light, let’s consider these verses.

*“who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”* (1 Timothy 2:6, ESV)

*“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”* (2 Corinthians 5:14–15, ESV)

*“But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”* (Hebrews 2:9, ESV)

*“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* (1 John 2:2, ESV)

The purpose of listing verses for both sides of the argument is not to say, “you have your verses, and we have ours,” thereby suggesting that both are right, which is logically not possible. But to note that in some sense Christ died for all, and in another sense, he died for his elect. That “sense” is in the sufficiency of Christ’s death versus the efficiency of his death. His death was indeed sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect. This distinction is not meant to be boringly nit picking, but to be accurate to the details of Scripture.

This explanation has the danger of satisfying neither party. But something must be said other than “it teaches both.” That is certainly wrong.

### ***Healing two blind men (20:29–34)***

(Mark 10:44-52); Luke 18:35-43)

***Matthew 20:29 And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him.***

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<sup>75</sup> David G. Hagopian, *Back To Basics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1996), Chapter Five.

<sup>76</sup> Ralph E. Bass, Jr., *Tell Me About Presbyterians – Just What Do They Believe?* Living Hope Press, 2006, 42.



Recently we read:

*“And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.” (Matthew 20:17–19, ESV)*

These verses explained why Jesus must make his fateful journey to Jerusalem. Now Jesus and those with him begin their final approach to the cities: Jericho, Bethany, Bethphage, and entry into Jerusalem. Jericho is about sixteen miles from Jerusalem.

Matthew says that Jesus **went out of Jericho**, while Luke says, he drew near to Jericho.

*“As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.” (Luke 18:35, ESV)*

Liberals have a field day with issues like this. Why? Because they are diligently looking for errors in the Bible. And when they have the least opportunity, they are quick to cry error. Their heart delights in making the Bible appear to be nothing more than a man-made book full of mistakes.

But, the facts will never support such an attitude. Take this passage, “...the Jericho of NT times was built by Herod more than a mile to the south of the OT site.... It is possible to sort out the healing of the blind men episodes in the synoptic Gospels by understanding that Jesus was passing from the site of ancient Jericho (Mt 20:29; Mk

10:46) and approaching Herodian Jericho (Lk 18:35).<sup>77</sup> Leaving one Jericho, he then enters another.

**Matthew 20:30** *And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”*

Mark identifies one of the men as Bartimaeus.

*“And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.”* (Mark 10:46, ESV)

It is probable that certain figures in the Gospel stories are remembered by name years later simply because they became active members of the Church and thereby became known to a wide range of people. This may be the case with Bartimaeus.

This would be a prime location and an optimal time for people to beg. The time is the approaching feast in Jerusalem, Passover. The location would be the road leading to Jerusalem. Here you could catch people in a good mood, everyone is feeling “religious.” A good time to seek help.

“The blind had no other way of earning a living, and with crowds of people going up to Jerusalem for the feast there was always the possibility of help coming from well-disposed worshipers.”<sup>78</sup>

**they cried out**<sup>79</sup>.... It would seem that these blind men heard of this miracle worker from Galilee but this would be the very first time that they’ve come in close proximity to him. And may never get another chance to ask for his help. It’s now or never. But they are the most marginal of all people, pushed to the sidelines and unable to do anything but scream for help. **But what they can do, they do.**

**Matthew 20:31 [But]** *The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”*

**[But]**.... “But has adversative force; it sets the unsympathetic crowd over against the noisy blind men. The people wanted to see and hear Jesus, not to be disturbed by these men shouting out for pity.”<sup>80</sup>

**rebuked**<sup>81</sup>.... The crowds rebuked them—*threatened* them would be closer to the point.

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<sup>77</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Jericho,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1119–1120.

<sup>78</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 514). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>79</sup> *they cried out κράζω* “...to shout or cry out, with the possible implication of the unpleasant nature of the sound—‘to shout, to scream.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>80</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 515.

<sup>81</sup> *rebuked ἐπιτιμάω* “...to command, with the implication of a threat—‘to command.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

**be silent...** Such people were easily intimidated and disrespected in this culture. **They were in this condition, no doubt, because they were great sinners, such was the opinion of the period.** It would not be uncommon to strike them and send them off with blows, and feel very good about doing it.

But **they cried out all the more.** This was the chance of a lifetime and it must not be squandered. They dared the blows and screamed out for mercy.

“If they had let him pass, their chance would have gone by forever; but when the chance came they seized it.”<sup>82</sup>

“...waylay” Jesus while you can; he may never come this way again....”<sup>83</sup> One wonders how many others begged that day--politely.

**Lord...Son of David....** ““Son of David” is simply the Jewish way of saying “Messiah.””<sup>84</sup> It would seem that they had heard a great deal about Jesus—and came to believe it.

**Matthew 20:32 And stopping, Jesus called them and said, “What do you want me to do for you?”**

Up to this point they have cried out for a certain generic mercy, perhaps not unlike the common cries of their daily begging. But now Jesus asked them to be specific, just what is it that they want from him?

**Matthew 20:33 They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”**

They must have heard a great deal about this person called Jesus to ask for such a thing. From others, they have asked for what their faith believes others can provide—alms, from him they ask what their faith believes he can provide—sight. They ask with faith.

**Matthew 20:34 And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.**

**And Jesus in pity touched their eyes ....**

Shackled by a heavy burden,  
'Neath a load of guilt and shame.  
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,  
And now I am no longer the same.

He touched me, Oh He touched me,

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<sup>82</sup> William Barclay, ed., *The Gospel of Matthew* (vol. 2; The Daily Study Bible; Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 237.

<sup>83</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 349.

<sup>84</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 350.

And oh the joy that floods my soul!  
Something happened and now I know,  
He touched me and made me whole.  
*He Touched Me* by Bill and Gloria Gaither

***and immediately they recovered their sight ....***<sup>85</sup>

***followed***<sup>86</sup>.... Physically followed him, yes. Spiritually followed him, probably. That would explain why Bartimaeus was known by name so many years later when Mark wrote his account.

Not everyone touched by Jesus, then or now, show faith or gratitude.

*“Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?” (Luke 17:17, ESV)*

Some regain their sight but never see. Jesus, when speaking to Paul, said that he was sending Paul to the Gentiles:

*“to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:18, ESV)*

The act of giving sight is a symbol of opening the eyes of those spiritually blind that thereby allows them to see God, repent, have their sins washed away and be saved. That is what God did to us when he touched us.

### **Why This Story and Why in this Place?**

In Matthew 19, in the story of the rich young ruler, we read that “... *many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” (Matthew 19:30, ESV). In the story of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20, we read “*So the last will be first, and the first last.*” (Matthew 20:16, ESV). In the story of Zebedee’s mother, we are again confronted with the passion for greatness, “*It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,*” (Matthew 20:26, ESV). Now in Matthew 20:29-33, we read how the great God of the universe stops and serves the lowest of humanity, two blind men, “*And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.*” (Matthew 20:34, ESV).

This story is about “...the reversal of values which we have seen throughout the past two chapters and to which this story fittingly supplies the climax. It is very subtly drawn. **The request of the disciples (for top places in the kingdom) shows their blindness: the request of the blind men shows their vision....**”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> *recovered their sight ἀναβλέπω* “...from *aná* ..., up or again, and *blépō* ..., to see or look. To look up, see.” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>86</sup> *followed ἀκολουθέω* “...to follow or accompany someone who takes the lead in determining direction and route of movement—to accompany as a follower, to follow, to go along with.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 216–217.



“It is easier for Jesus to give sight to the blind who believe in him than to make the scales fall from the eyes of his disciples who do not know to what degree they are still blind.”<sup>88</sup>

“He has just been teaching his followers the importance of lowly service, and he now gives an example of it.”<sup>89</sup>

*“So the last will be first, and the first last.”* (Matthew 20:16, ESV)

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<sup>88</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).

<sup>89</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 515.