

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

MATTHEW 19:16-20:34

Mark Zuckerberg is **rich**... his fortune is valued at \$1½ billion.

Mark Zuckerberg is **young**... at age 23 he's the world's youngest billionaire.

Mark Zuckerberg is a **ruler**... he's CEO of a social network of 66 million users called Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg is a rich, young, ruler – and he's also Jewish.

Zuckerberg is a lot like the man who approaches Jesus in Matthew 19:16...

Luke tells us this man was a "ruler" - probably a ruler or elder in the synagogue.

In verse 20, Matthew calls him "young"... From the conversation we gather he was rich... Put it all together and a rich, young, ruler approaches Jesus.

This man is a rising star - the epitome of success – a model for young Jewish professionals... If he walked into most churches he'd be made an elder.

He's moral, religious, influential, *and he'll give lots of money.* Quick, put him on the board before he visits another church... yet Jesus handles him differently...

Verse 16 "Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Notice his mind-set. He's into what he can earn, and do, and prove, and accomplish. This man is a go-getter. He's yet

to be broken and humbled. He thinks even eternal life is a commodity to be earned.

So (Jesus) said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."

The man had addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher" – which was extravagant language for a first century Jew. The adjective "good" was used to describe "good" – only in its purest sense. It was usually only associated with God.

Jesus was asking the young man, "In calling me good, are you calling me God? Are you ready to bow down to another - relinquish control of your life to God?"

Jesus cut right to the core of the issue. His question put him back on his heels. Jesus was perceptive. He knew the hearts of the people with whom He spoke.

He understood the issue they would have to step over to get to faith.

And He knows the pivotal matter in this young man's life is not *what he does*, but *who he worships*. Right now he worships himself. He likes to be in control.

And note this point – you can be *religious* and still be in *rebellion*.

The rich, young ruler has no faith in God. His faith is in himself and what he can do to earn God's favor. Religion is just a tool he uses to dictate his own fate.

"He said to Him, "Which ones?" He's still focused on

keeping commandments.

“Jesus said, " 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Notice, Jesus lists the second table of the Law of Moses - the last half of the Ten Commandments.

The second table dealt with man's relations with his fellow man – but this was not where he had the problem. His issue was with the first table, the commands that dealt with his relationship with God. He worshipped another god... himself.

Verse 20 contains such a revealing statement. “The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" This young man has been a lifelong observer of the Law, yet he realizes something is still lacking.

It goes to show when you try to be good enough for heaven you're never good enough! The cost of God's favor is too steep – heaven is impossible to earn.

The other night at Mack's baseball game they played a country music song between innings. It was by Alan Jackson. It's called, “Where I Come From.”

Here's the chorus... “Where I come from there's cornbread and chicken. Where I come from there's a lot of front porch sitting. Where I come from we're trying to make a living... and working hard to get to heaven... where I come from.”

And that's the mentality of a lot of Southerners. Just like the rich, young ruler they work hard – do stuff – keep rules – expecting to earn a ticket to heaven.

This ruler is about to learn heaven ain't for *workers* but for *believers*.

Verse 21, "Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect..." the word means "complete." Here's the idea, "if you want to have it all together spiritually..."

Then "go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Remember Jesus is speaking to a specific person.

This is not a blanket statement to everyone who's interested in eternal life. Divesting all your material wealth is not a universal requirement for salvation.

Listen carefully, YOU don't have to go and sell all that you have to receive eternal life, UNLESS what you have is what's standing between you and God.

In the case of the rich, young ruler Jesus is applying repentance.

With His keen insight Jesus could look into a man's heart and size him up immediately. He knows the issue in this man's life is money and materialism.

Jesus is saying, "No one can serve two masters".

Here's the lesson for us – salvation is by faith. But real faith means getting rid of all our other gods – trusting Jesus exclusively. We have to dump the idols.

For this man it was his money... *What's your idol? Sports? Cars? Job? Sex?*

We're tempted to water down the words of Jesus in this

story, but we shouldn't.

Yes, Jesus doesn't tell us all to sell our goods and give them to the poor, but He told *this man* to do just that and he meant what He said. Jesus set the terms of this man's eternal salvation. And Jesus looks into the heart of every person and knows the issue that needs to be addressed - the rival that needs to be uprooted.

He says to us all, "For Me to be your Savior, you must let Me be your Lord."

Verse 22 provides the sad ending of this story. "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

But that might not have been the ending. There's a tradition that this rich, young ruler was a man named, Saul of Tarsus - the "Saul" who later became "Paul."

Paul was in Judea during the ministry of Jesus. He was young, rich, and a ruler among the Jews - the description fits. It's certainly a provocative possibility.

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Understand, Jews considered riches a sign of God's blessing. The Jews had their own form of prosperity theology. But Jesus throws a wrench in their doctrine.

Yes, riches can be a blessing. Abraham, Boaz, Joseph of Arimathea were all rich men who were men of faith. But for most men riches are more a *barrier* than a *blessing*. Possessions have a slippery way of taking possession of our

hearts.

If the rich, young ruler was Paul, it's interesting that he would later write to Timothy these words of warning, "Godliness with contentment is great gain..."

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

Jesus says in verse 24 "And again I say to you, 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."

The Jewish Talmud spoke of an elephant trying to pass through the eye of a sewing needle. The Talmud was written in Babylon where there were elephants. There were no elephants in Israel so Jesus modifies the saying to a camel.

A large animal passing through the eye of a needle was a colloquial way of stressing an extreme difficulty. In this case here, a rich man entering heaven.

There's another possible interpretation.

Bible commentator G Campbell Morgan writes this...

"Possibly by the 'needle's eye,' our Lord referred to the small gate of a city, through which no camel could pass except by being unloaded, and bending down in order to gain entrance."

After dark, the large gates closed, and the only way into the city was the needle gate – but only after the camel was unpacked and brought to its knees.

And this would apply to a rich man. He can enter heaven, but only after he's willing to unload and unpack his baggage, and bow his knee to Jesus.

“When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” This should be the reaction of everyone living in America.

We think of a “*rich man*” as someone living in a country club - but compared to 95% of the world's population everyone in this room is a rich person. And unless we're careful we can allow our hearts to become entangled in material treasure.

Hey, “the rich man worships what he has - the poor man worships what he wishes he had - but both are bowing at the same altar and to the same god.”

The disciples ask, “Who then can be saved?”

“But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Actually, the salvation of any man is a human impossibility. Salvation is supernatural. It's a miracle from beginning to end.

It takes the Almighty God to *call* and *convict* and *draw* and *deliver* and *cleanse*. Salvation is a human impossibility made possible by the grace and mercy of God.

“Then Peter answered and said to Him, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” The disciples did what the rich ruler failed to do.

Peter wants to know if they'll be rewarded. “So Jesus said to them, “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 twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Obviously, you and I are Jesus’ disciples today. And it’s healthy and appropriate that we apply to ourselves what Jesus said to those disciples.

But never forget – the first 12 disciples have a unique place in God’s kingdom.

Revelation 21:14 tells us that on the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem there appear the names of the twelve apostles. They’re given special honor.

Here we’re told when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom on earth the first twelve disciples will sit on twelve thrones and govern Israel’s twelve tribes.

This is why it creeps me out to hear modern day preachers claim to have the same apostolic authority as Peter and John. That’s dangerously presumptuous.

Jesus continues to address the sacrifice made by His disciples. “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.”

Mark says, “Who shall receive a hundredfold now in this time and in the age to come eternal life.” The rewards of serving Christ are both *temporal* and *eternal*.

Not that we’re guaranteed fame and riches - Jesus promises us persecution.

But if we serve Him with all our heart we’ll find friends and family in the Body of Christ we never knew existed. We’ll be

rewarded new friendships that will far surpass, even a hundredfold, the friendships we gave up to follow Jesus.

Jesus does promise His servants both *eternal life* and a *better life*.

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

When my kids first learned this verse they understood *what it said* - not what *it meant*. One would push the other to the front of the line and insist on him going last. We heard it over and over... **"You go first, because I want to be first in heaven."**

They were haughty trying to be humble... *This was the disciples' attitude.*

These men left all to follow Jesus. Now they want to know what's in it for them. They're focused on pay day. What are they going to get for their sacrifice?

Chapter 20 discusses heavenly rewards... Heaven will hold lots of surprises. Some of earth's rich, young rulers won't be rich or ruling in heaven.

Heaven's highest posts will be occupied by folks unknown on earth.

Heavenly rewards are doled out differently than *earthly riches*. In the kingdom of God the rules change. Jesus illustrates this with the parable in chapter 20...

Verse 1 **"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning (around 6:00 AM) to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."**

Middle Eastern agreements involve lots of haggling. When

you go to Israel you never pay *“the asking price.”* Everyone expects you to haggle or negotiate.

And wages were no different. Here they settle on a denarius for a day's labor. A denarius a day was the salary paid to a Roman soldier. This was a fair day's wage.

“And he went out about the third hour (9:00 AM) and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour (noon and 3:00 PM), and did likewise.” Hey, the hiring went on all day.

“And about the eleventh hour (The work day ended at 6:00 PM. The 11th hour was 5:00 in the afternoon.) (the landowner) went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'"

"They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.'

He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' They work 60 minutes, while the first hires were at it for 12 hours.

This was a common scenario in Jesus' day. The foreman of the vineyard had quotas. He was under pressure to harvest a certain volume of grapes each day.

If he suspected bad weather late in the day - or the workers had fallen behind – he'd go to the labor pool in the middle of the day and bring in reinforcements.

But what happens next was a surprise!

"So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said

to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.'

"And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius." These last minute pick-ups felt like they'd hit the jackpot. They got a whole day's pay for just one hour of work. This was a real bonanza!

And this also raised the expectation of the guys who'd been *sweating since six*.

If the late-arrivals got a full day's pay, surely those who'd labored all day would receive twelve times their original wage. "But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner..."

They felt ripped off – cheated – robbed in the workplace. They want to unionize. File a grievance with the NLRB. This is a clear violation of fair labor practices.

They said to the landowner, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'

"But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? In other words, "*We had a contract. How can I be cheating you when all I'm doing is honoring the contract you signed?*"

"Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you." And here's the landowner's justification... "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my

own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

Here is a parable packed with important lessons...

Notice first, **a harvest is underway**. And the same is true today.

A harvest of souls is going on around us, and God needs laborers.

It's the 11th hour, and Jesus asks His followers, "**Why have you been standing here idle all day?**" Idleness is a sin – especially when the hour is so late.

Second, notice **it's never too late to get started**.

Some of you have been serving the Lord all your life. You started at 6:00 AM as a young child. Others of you started at 9:00 as a teenager - or at noon as an adult.

Perhaps some of you have waited until the 11th hour. You've wasted most of your life living in sin, but now in your latter years you're serving the Lord.

This parable delivers good news... no matter your age, it's never too late!

Let me give you three more points. Remember the main purpose in this parable is to teach us how heavenly rewards are doled out. How do we receive heavenly rewards? And here're three words to write down: **faith, focus, freedom**.

Notice the difference between the 6:00 AM and 11th hour workers...

The early birds haggled and negotiated. They wanted a guaranteed *contract* – whereas the later laborers trusted in the owner's *character*! They took him at his word. They rested in his promise, “**whatever is right you will receive.**”

This is how heavenly rewards work – it's grace, not justice. Grace is always better than fairness. Do settle for what's fair. Have **faith** in God's generosity.

Notice too, if the early morning workers had kept their **focus** off the latecomers they would've gone home happy. It was jealousy that robbed them of their joy.

When we use to play basketball in the driveway the older boys had to follow the rules, whereas Mack could run with the ball and was immune from fouls.

Zach and Nick would complain, “**Dad it's not fair!**”

They didn't understand I had objectives more important than fairness. I wanted Mack to participate and he needed greater grace to do so. When God chooses to be gracious to one of His kids it doesn't mean He's being unfair to the rest of us.

This parable emphasizes *our faith*, *our focus*, and **God's freedom**. It teaches us God's sovereignty. God can allocate His rewards as He pleases.

As Jesus put it, “**Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?**” It was the landowner's money – and he can do as he pleases with his money.

Here's the bottom line, all that we receive from God is more than we deserve.

If God, for whatever reason, chooses to be more generous to some than to others that's His prerogative. Who are we to

argue with God's choices?

Verse 17 “Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, (this was His final pilgrimage to Jerusalem before His crucifixion) took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.’” It all went in one ear and out the other.

Jesus is explaining His death, while the disciples are talking about His kingdom. The Lord's focus is on His passion. The disciples are fixated on their promotion.

“Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, “What do you wish?”

She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.” The lady's name was “Salome.” Her two sons were James and John. Mark's Gospel seems to imply that the two boys put her up to this stunt. *How can Jesus turn down a mom on her knees?*

Salome comes to *worshipping Jesus* only because she *wants from Jesus*.

“But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

They said to Him, "We are able." Notice, their mom asked, but Jesus answered James and John. They were behind her request.

Jesus tells them He's about to drink the cup of suffering. He'll be baptized in the salt water of persecution. Are James and John really willing to suffer persecution?

Those who are great in the kingdom are those willing to follow in His footsteps.

An old Roman coin has pictured on it an ox in the middle, flanked by an altar on one side and a plough on the other side. The inscription reads, **"Ready for either."**

The goal of Christian discipleship is to be ready for either... to drink the cup of sacrifice in one gulp, the gulp or Christian martyrdom – or to willingly to take a sip from the cup of sacrifice every day, and lay down my life in faithful service.

We need to be ready for either... *service or sacrifice.*

When I read Jesus' words it sobers me. I wonder if I'm really ready should I be called on to suffer and die for His sake. It surprises me how presumptuous and assured James and John are of themselves. **"They said to Him, "We are able."**

They'd refused to think about the cross. *Now they're ready to carry one?*

It's interesting in Acts 12 we read that James was the first of the disciples to be martyred. King Herod killed James with a sword. He did drink the cup of suffering.

Years later John was arrested by the Emperor Domitian and was boiled in hot oil. John survived. He was a hard-boiled

guy. He was eventually exiled to Patmos.

Both James and John did end up drinking deeply from the cup of suffering.

“So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.”

James and John were trying to move up the apostolic pecking order – and it ticked off the other disciples. Not necessarily because of principle - the other disciples were probably angry they didn’t think of the idea first.

“But Jesus called them to Himself...”

It’s interesting how Jesus is going to handle his ambitious disciples... He doesn't throw water on their fire - rather he places it back in the fireplace.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be great for God, just as long as you have the proper definition of “*true greatness*”. Jesus defines greatness...

“And (He) said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them.” Jesus draws a contrast.

Among the ungodly - the pagans - the world without God - greatness is gauged by a person’s control and dominance and manipulation over other people's lives.

The Gentiles “lord it over” or boss people around. They

pressure people and badger people to do their bidding. They force their agenda on other people.

It was once said of a man, "His life was now perfection. His ambitions all complete. Never mind which direction? He was in the driver's seat."

This is the problem with power. It's a drug. It's addictive. It's intoxicating. It has a life of its own. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And the world loves power. The idea is to get in the driver's seat and stay seated.

In verse 26 Jesus says, "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave..." Greatness in God's kingdom is just the opposite... It's not sitting in the driver's seat, but washing the car.

God measures greatness not by the degree to which I can *manipulate folks*, but the degree to which I *minister to folks*. Greatness doesn't pressure people – it sets people free. It doesn't put down, but lifts up. It's not intimidation, but humiliation.

Greatness in God's kingdom is not climbing the ladder – it's holding the ladder for others to climb. As DL Moody once wrote, "The measure of a man is not how many servants he has, but how many men he serves."

In verse 28 Jesus finishes His thought, "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Jesus is our example. The Son of God had all power coursing through His veins, but what does He do? He takes a towel and washes His disciples' feet.

Here was the God who hung the stars in the heavens, yet He never pushed people around. He was so un-intimidating little children flocked to him.

And if the Lord of glory came to serve, how can we justify any other lifestyle.

It's been said, "**We may easily be too big for God to use, but never too small.**"

Greatness in God's Kingdom is not about being *big*. It's about becoming *small*. It's not *growing muscle*, but *showing mercy*. Greatness in God's kingdom is not about *standing up*, but *stooping down*. It's about serving God by serving others.

Verse 29 "**Now as they went out of Jericho, a great multitude followed Him.**"

Jericho is 18 miles east of Jerusalem. It's an oasis in the Judean wilderness near the Jordan River. Jericho is a beautiful city lined with palm trees.

Jericho was called "**The City of Roses**" – because of its flowers.

Luke 18 tells us this event happened as Jesus was nearing Jericho.

Matthew and Mark say that it occurred as they were leaving Jericho.

The apparent discrepancy is easily resolved. At the time there were two Jerichos - the ancient, Jewish city was just

east of a newer, Roman city.

Matthew and Mark were Jews so they referred to the older city. Luke was Gentile so he spoke of the newer city. This event took place somewhere in between the two – as they were leaving the old city and entering the new.

One other point about Jericho... there was a bush that grew nearby that supposedly had medicinal value. It was used to treat blindness.

Thus, a large population of visually impaired people flocked to Jericho.

Verse 30 “And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” The Greek word translated “cried out” is the word “crazo” – it’s the same word used to describe a woman undergoing the pains of childbirth.

“Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!”

These guys were disturbing the peace. They were making a scene.

I’m sure these two blind men had heard of Jesus, but they never dreamed they would actually have an opportunity to meet Him. Yet suddenly, here they are, on the same street. They begin screaming hoping He’ll notice them.

Even when their pressured to shut-up they remain

determined. This could be their *only shot* to ever reach Jesus - and they're going to give it their *best shot*.

Here are two men who have *no eyesight*, but *tremendous insight*.

Jesus is on their street and no matter what anyone else thinks about them they're going to get His attention. They won't be *scared-off* or *shut-up*.

These blind men are going to keep screaming until Jesus notices them.

Hey, this is the determination we should show whenever we seek Jesus.

And it worked, verse 32, "So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" Notice, suddenly the Son stands still!

Jesus is headed to the cross. He's 18 miles away from Jerusalem. The climax of His ministry and of God's plan for the ages is just down the road - yet the cries of two blind beggars arrest Him and cause Him to stop. I believe wherever need, faith, and determination cross paths Jesus instinctively stops and takes heed.

"They said to Him, "Lord, that our eyes may be opened."
So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, No lasik - no surgeries - no medicines - no bandages - no corrective lenses... They go from blind as a bat to 20/20 in an instant.

Anne Mae Pennica was born in 1919. She was born blind.

For 62 years she lived without sight. She never saw a blue sky, or a snow-capped mountain, or a green pasture. She never saw her husband's face. Then in October of 1991, Dr. Thomas Pettit of UCLA performed a new type of surgery on Mrs. Pennica.

He removed a rare case of congenital cataracts from Mrs. Pennica's eyes.

For the first time in her 72 years she could see. After her surgery her vision was 20/30 - good enough for an elderly lady to qualify for a driver's license.

Anne Mae Pennica said after her surgery, "Everything was so much bigger and brighter than I ever imagined." Imagine these two men - blind since birth...

Suddenly they can see! For the first time they see the beautiful roses, the palm trees, the deep blue water, the majestic mountains of Moab off in the distance.

But for these men it was even more special. For the very first sight they ever saw was the most magnificent sight any of us will ever see... *the face of Jesus*.

One day our eyes will be opened. The spiritual cataracts that limit our vision to the material, physical world will be removed. Suddenly we'll see as we've never seen before. And the first sight we'll see will be the face of our Savior, Jesus.

And notice the last four words in chapter 20. Here's a beautiful thought - "and they followed Him." Their eyes were opened and they set out to follow Jesus.

The next day Jesus will arrive in Jerusalem. He'll ride His donkey down the Mount of Olives to the Hosannas of the crowd. These blind men will see it all.

That same day Jesus will enter the Temple and drive out the moneychangers.

On Monday, He'll curse a fig tree, and these blind guys will see it wither...

Later in the week Jesus will be arrested and crucified.

Three days later He'll bound from the grave victorious over death.

And these two blind men will see it all! Talk about an eye-full!

And here's my point... when Jesus opens your eyes - when you see His face in your heart - it's just the beginning of the wonders and glories He wants to reveal.

Following Jesus is an adventure. There are all kinds of marvels to behold.

When you journey with Jesus you always want to keep your eyes wide open!