

Matthew Chapter 19-20 – Jesus’ Judean Ministry – Part 7
Matthew 20:17-34 – Parable of the Laborers
Jesus Prepares His Disciples / The Ascent to Jerusalem

Introduction

Matthew 19-23 is an account of Jesus’ final Judean ministry; He is in this region for 6-9 months, which will end in Jesus being arrested and crucified. During this time, Jesus, with the disciples, is going in and out of Jerusalem, healing the crowds and increasing the faith of the disciples while refuting challenges from the leadership sects in Jerusalem.

In this section, Jesus focuses on the preparation of His disciples, telling them of the near future and giving them further instructions about greatness in the kingdom.

Matthew 20:17-19 – Jesus Foretells His Crucifixion

In this passage, we see the setting. Jesus and His disciples are in Judea, and then Jesus purposes to go to Jerusalem. In Matthew 21, this is the “Triumphal Entry?”.

We must first note that the travel to Jerusalem is a particular trip, but this is not the only trip Jesus makes during this last Judean ministry. He has been to Jerusalem before this, and Jesus enters and leaves Jerusalem after that initial entry. This does seem to be the last time He travels to the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Once Jesus enters Jerusalem in 21:1, Jesus does not go too far away. Bethany is about 2 miles away; Jesus would retreat there seemingly every night. Right before the trip to the vicinity of Jerusalem, Jesus was in Jericho. Jericho was about 15 miles from Jerusalem.

In preparation for this final trip, Jesus has a conversation with the Twelve. This discourse serves two purposes. First, Jesus continues His prophetic role; Jesus is the prophet, telling the end before what happens is the one true hallmark of the one true God (Isaiah 6:5-10). Second, this prepares the disciples for His death and resurrection, even if it only takes effect after the events.

The information is very straightforward and is a repeat of previous conversations (Matthew 16:21, 17:9-13).

But even with this very plain communication, they did not understand what Jesus was saying (Mark 9:32). According to Luke, this is a perpetual statement made by Jesus even when they were in Galilee, at least six months prior to these events (Luke 24:6-8).

This is the nature of prophecy; those who receive it do not understand the meaning of it until after it occurs (John 2:18-22, 12:16).

Matthew 20:20-28 – Serve, not be Served

The proximity of this passage cannot be ignored. Jesus just told them that He was going to be crucified, they did not understand, then two of the disciples made a request through their mother.

In Mark, James and John ask the question; in Matthew, having their mother ask expressed the wishes of the sons with extra sympathy behind the request. John and James either asked their mother to make this request, or this was desired in their internal family discussions, and she acted.

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It is as though they ignore the prophecy of the crucifixion and go back to their proclivity of wanting to be prominent in the kingdom. To demonstrate that this action was on behalf of James and John as their request, Jesus addresses “you” in the plural. Jesus then asks them, “Are you able....” The brothers respond, “We are able.” Their mother is not addressed after the initial question.

What did they understand? Jesus has authority. But what did they not understand? That Jesus did not exercise His authority autonomously. Jesus, in His humanity, subjects Himself to the authority of the Father.

The positions of right and left were the two privileged positions. Back in Matthew 19:28, Jesus already told them that all of them would sit on thrones and judge the tribes of Israel; what they are asking now is to have the two most privileged thrones.

Jesus’ response tells of an important truth: if they want to have that level of honor, they need to sacrifice everything and “drink from the same cup” as Jesus. This indicates that the amount of suffering that Jesus has endured and would endure would also be their suffering.

Initially, they probably did not realize what it would take to have that level of honor. But in Jesus’ response, I believe they understood that they would have to suffer in the likeness of Jesus. I do not believe their response was ill-informed after Jesus tells them the cost.

Jesus then tells them the good and bad news. You will drink of my cup, the cup of suffering. The bad news is that He does not decide who has that level of honor. The Father has purposed who will sit on Jesus’ left and right. One suggestion is that the right hand of Jesus will be David. Will Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Joshua have less honor than the Twelve? We do not know the answer to this question, and neither do the Twelve.

Jesus’ reply indicates that rewards in the kingdom of heaven will not be granted in response to personal ambition or private requests.

In the end, all of the apostles suffer in the same manner as Jesus Christ. Not one of them declares that they would be the greatest; their attitude and purpose shift in Acts to that of servitude and sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel, and they all understand the grace and love of Christ in their lives toward whom they serve.

If the attitude of James and John were wrong, the response of the disciples indicates that they also had a wrong attitude. They may have been thinking, “I was going ask for that too, and you beat me to it!” But the fact that they became angry indicates that they also wanted a place of prominence and were not focused on the means of greatness.

Jesus then steps in to correct their attitude, again! Greatness or authority in the kingdom is not about power. The means of greatness is not about stepping on or over people. To be great, they must be a servant, a slave. The reason is obvious. God set the parameters for greatness; it is a ministry of servitude and faithfulness to the death that will be honored. They must be like Christ to obtain greatness.

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Matthew 20:29-34 – Healing Two Blind Men

Jesus’ Judean ministry had its impact; a large crowd was following Him. It is unknown if the purpose for going to Jerusalem was known to all that followed Him, but I would guess not. The revelation of His death was given to the Twelve and the immediate inner circle. The crowds were most likely unaware.

During the trip, two blind men heard it was Jesus and called out to the Son of David. In Mark and Luke, only one is mentioned, including a name (Mark 10:46). This is not a contradiction; rather, Mark and Luke focus on one of the blind men, probably because he became known to believers and could testify to this account.

As discussed before, “Son of David” is both Messianic and a cry for the redemption of Israel; they were proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah King. Others have referred to Jesus in this manner, including another case of two blind men (Matthew 9:27-31, 12:22-23, 15:21-22).

Why did the crowds that were following Jesus tell them to be quiet? Did the crowds disagree? The people that were following Jesus were absolutely aware of the claim; did they believe it? The crowds would have undoubtedly been aware of the claim. But were they believing that Jesus was the Son of David?

Two ideas have been suggested here. With the presumption that the crowds were not believers, they were hushing the blind men to rebuke the claim. In this scenario, the blind men saw what the seeing crowds were blind to.

With the presumption that the crowds believed that Jesus was the Son of David, the crowds would have understood that this would have been a call to war (with the Sanhedrin as well as Rome). Perhaps the crowds did not want to cause a preemptive attack on Jesus and thwart plans that they thought were in the works.

Regardless, this crowd that was following Jesus eventually entered Jerusalem before He did and cried out, “Hosanna to the Son of David” later that day. Was there a lesson for them with these blind men?

Timeless Truth

Lessons in Matthew need to be filtered through the lens of Historical Narrative. Many desire to treat these passages as lessons for the church, but nothing is prescriptive in this section. The indication that one of us could be on Jesus' right or left is driven by the lack of understanding of the kingdom of heaven, the restored kingdom of Israel.

In this economy of grace, we all have an inheritance that we will enjoy in the kingdom. Will there be a hierarchy? I believe so, based on the rewards given, but there is no throne promised to those in the church administration. The closest we get to that is Revelation 3:21. There will be authorities and we will have responsibilities in the kingdom, but thrones are not guaranteed.

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However, servitude and self-sacrifice are still a priority in the church administration. We are to be motivated by grace and love and, in turn, show grace and love to one another because of the amazing blessings that we have because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

To those who successfully serve one another in the proper manner with the proper attitude, I do believe there is great reward in the Bema. But it will not be in the same manner as the promises made to Israel and in the kingdom of heaven, the restored kingdom of Israel.

In Matthew 20:29-34, we see an account of Jesus having compassion and providing evidence to the crowds that the claim of Jesus’ Messiahship was indeed true. They did not understand what that entailed, but in the end, the apostles and many believers understood what happened after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is not about the blind receiving sight; it is about the call to the Son of David. Do we understand who Jesus is?

My desire for the rest of the Book of Matthew is to make sure we all understand the nature and character of Jesus Christ.

Do we know who Jesus is?

Do we understand the character of Jesus so as to use His humanity as an example?