

On the Corner Fringe: The Least In The Kingdom December 22, 2017

The following text is a message from Corner Fringe Ministries that was presented by Daniel Joseph. The original presentation can be viewed at <https://cornerfringe.com/media/7pt8679/otcf-the-least-in-the-kingdom>

*Portions of this document have been edited from the video message to better present a comprehensive, written document. Special attention was given to preserve the original context, but this document is not verbatim. Scripture verses are in the red text with other quotes in blue. Therefore, it is recommended that this document be printed in color. The Hebrew words are generally accompanied by the transliteration into the English alphabet. In most cases, the Hebrew is to be read from right to left.

The Least in the Kingdom: Interpreting Matthew 5:19

This transcript features a message from **Pastor Daniel Joseph** of **Corner Fringe Ministries** regarding the biblical interpretation of **Matthew 5:19**. He challenges a literal reading of the verse, which some use to suggest that **breaking God's commandments** is acceptable as long as one is okay with being "least" in heaven. By examining the **broader context**, Daniel argues that **Yeshua** actually demands a more rigorous and internal adherence to the law. He utilizes **hermeneutical principles** and linguistic analysis of the Greek word "**elachistos**" to demonstrate that the phrase is an idiom. Ultimately, he asserts that the passage is a warning rather than a permission to sin, emphasizing that **faithfulness in small matters** is essential for entering the kingdom.



[Introduction]

Insightful—Challenging—Cutting Edge—
Biblical

[Daniel Joseph]

Shalom, everyone. Welcome to *On the Fringe*. I'm Daniel Joseph, and today I want to talk about one of those passages that I've gotten many questions about over the years. There are several passages in Scripture where we

wonder what is really being said and conveyed. Is it saying what I think it's saying? When we have one of those moments, it's always a good thing because it forces you to dig deeper, to gain understanding.

And you know, this is the reality. When we go to Scripture, we have to understand the LORD's going to make you work for it. And it's not just that you're going to breeze through it, read it, and have a perfect, complete understanding. When we read Scripture, it's a treasure. It's a treasure that is to be sought. And so, we need to remember to be diligent and not have the false expectation that we're just going to go through and immediately have a perfect understanding. That's just not reality. The LORD wants us to work for it.

Well, one of those passages that you're going to have to work for is actually found in the Gospel of Matthew; it's His teaching of Yeshua. He makes a statement in Matthew 5:19, and this is what He says: "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The question that I've gotten over the years is, "Daniel, is this saying what I think it's saying? Is Yeshua advocating? Is He okay with us breaking the commandments, and not just breaking them but actually teaching others to break them as well?" And, if I do this, the passage appears to be saying that we're still going to get into the kingdom of heaven. So, the question is, is that what Yeshua is saying?

Well, the problem is that there are times when we read Scripture and hyper-literally take what's spoken when, in fact, it's idiomatic. So, the first thing that you want to ask yourself is, again, this is a basic hermeneutical principle, does this even sound right? Most people, upon hearing this, are drawn back to their sin. This doesn't exactly sound right. If you're going through Scripture and you come to one of those moments, you need to start applying some serious hermeneutical principles to the situation, and you need to get into the context, the immediate context. You need to get into a broader context. If you're struggling, you can go to Hebrew or Greek. If you're in the New Testament, you start digging for that treasure. And the more you dig, of course, the more you're going to find.

In this situation, we find that to come to the conclusion, if we just read it hyper-literally, and in at least our English language and how we communicate today, this would appear to actually say He's fine; Yeshua is fine with the fact that we break the least of the commandments. It's not that big of a deal. It's not the end of the world, and you're still going to get in. You can still teach others to do it, too. But you're just not going to be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The problem with that interpretation is that the immediate context does not allow for it. In fact, in a previous verse, Matthew 5:17, Yeshua literally says, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." "Pléroó" (πληρώω) in Greek.

Then, going through all the way into chapter 7, Yeshua continues with what I would call the greatest exegesis that you will find anywhere on the Torah. It is profound. Do you want to read the greatest interpretation, the clearest interpretation, of how man should actually honor the Torah? How they should walk in the ways of the LORD? You need to read Yeshua's discourse in Matthew 5-7; it is truly incredible. The crescendo happens as you get to Matthew 7:12, where He says, "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." So, this is the crescendo. That's what it's all about.

And so, the immediate context in looking at it is not going to allow for that interpretation. So, you have in Matthew 5:17—"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law..." Then you have Matthew 5:19, and then as you get into Matthew 5:20, the very next verse says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Okay, so the immediate context doesn't work for this interpretation of this lax view on the commandments of God.

Let me take it a step further. As you continue in Matthew 5:21, Yeshua goes through this discourse where He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder...'" He goes on to say in Matthew 5:22, "... whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the

judgment..." If you even speak the words out of your heart that proceed from anger, calling your neighbor a complete fool, you "shall be in danger of hell fire."

And so, here you see the different levels He's speaking of. He says on one level, the physical reality, you go out and murder, but Yeshua brings a greater interpretation and a more stringent approach to the Torah so that even the things that you think in your heart, you will be guilty of. And He builds upon that in Matthew 5:27-28 when He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Now think about that. Think about the level to which Yeshua is going.

He's bringing a much deeper understanding, a much more stringent approach to the Torah. Just the opposite of what you would think when you look at this passage in Matthew 5:19, where He takes a more lax approach; it's the exact opposite.

The second thing, on a broader scope of things, is that you will not find it anywhere in the Torah or anywhere else, for that matter, in Scripture with the teaching that it's fine to break the commandments, any of the commandments, and to teach others to do so. Because what you find from Genesis to Revelation is the exact opposite. In fact, James tells us in the second chapter of his little epistle that if you stumble in one point, you are guilty of all.

Now, getting into the historical context here, you need to know this teaching was indicative of Yeshua's time period amongst the sages, amongst the school of Hillel, which taught that the smallest commandment weighed as heavily as the greatest. And the smallest commandment was as important as the greatest commandment. And you might say, how do you get that out of this teaching? This is exactly what Yeshua is teaching. Look at the context before and after this statement. Look at the broader context of Scripture as a whole.

But not just that, look at Luke chapter 16, because what we find is Yeshua makes a statement and says in Luke 16:10, "He who is faithful in what is least..." Least, those are the words Yeshua is using here in Matthew 5:19. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much"; and then He says, "and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (emphasis added). The very thing that the sages, these profound sages who were teaching Torah in Yeshua's day, were teaching, Yeshua comes and builds upon that reality, that truth.



If you look at this in Greek, the word for "least" used here is "*elachistos* (ἐλάχιστος)," okay? In Matthew chapter 5, "*elachistos*," I challenge you to go to Luke chapter 16 and that passage I just quoted you; it's verse 10. The word, the very word that's used there, is "*elachistos*" in Greek, where Luke uses the Greek word for "least." And elsewhere in Luke, in the identical context where you have it in the negative.

And so, as we begin to look at this, this is an idiomatic phrase. Basically, Yeshua is saying: He's referring to the least; if you're going to be unjust in what is the least, you're going to be unjust about what is much. This is a statement saying you're not going to get into the kingdom of heaven.

Another statement that you would have to make that's more idiomatic in nature is Matthew 19:30—**“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”** Think about that statement. Most of us think, “Well, you know, I was going in first, but now I'm going to be last; I'm not going to be so great in the kingdom.” Again, look at how Yeshua uses that in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 13, verse 30, and what you will find is it's in the context of being cast out, being cast out of the kingdom. That's weighty.

You know, unfortunately, when we go to Scripture, we want to read into everything that no matter what we do, we're going to get into heaven because we need that comfort. Unfortunately, that's subverting the conviction. It's subverting the fear of the living God to walk in His holiness and to recognize Him for being so beautiful and so holy. But we want to tell ourselves, we want to go to sleep at night and tell ourselves, “It's going to be okay that I'm breaking the commandments of God.” And what I'm telling you is it's not, because nowhere in Scripture will you find that teaching. There's no harmony to that. There would be no harmony in interpreting Matthew 5:19 as “Oh, I can break the commandments, but I still get in.” Everywhere else you go in Scripture; it tells you the exact opposite.

You know, just thinking about it now, in Proverbs 10:20, it says, **The heart of the wicked is worth little.** Do we really believe that the heart of the wicked still has value, but it's just worth little? You would think of the words “least” or “little,” *elachistos*.

So, as we get into Scripture and as we get to these passages, when you get into those moments that you think, “Something doesn't sound right here,” well, investigate it. Learn to investigate. Learn to (Matthew 6:33) **“seek first the kingdom of God”**, because what do we want to draw out of this ultimately, our goal when we're seeking first the kingdom of God? What are we after? We're after the heart of the LORD. We're after His teaching and what He really has for our lives.

Well, that's all for today. I just wish blessings upon you and your family. Shalom.

The Warning of the "Least": Understanding Matthew 5:19

The Literal Trap (The Problem)

The Hyper-Literal Misreading



Mistakenly viewing "least in the kingdom" as a low-level entry pass for law-breakers.

The Danger of the "Lax View"



Assuming God permits breaking "small" commandments if one remains a believer.

Subverting Holy Conviction



Literal interpretations can falsely soothe the conscience while ignoring the call to holiness.



The Contextual Reality (The Solution)

More Stringent, Not Less



Jesus raised the bar, equating internal anger with murder and lust with adultery.

The Idiom of Exclusion



In Greek (*elachistos*), "least" and "last" often refer to being cast out entirely.

The Weight of Every Law



Historical sages taught that the smallest commandment weighs as heavily as the greatest.

Contrasting Views: The Shift in Perspective



Literal Misinterpretation ❌

- 1 Law-breakers get "lower tier" entry.
- 2 Breaking "least" laws is acceptable.
- 3 Jesus came to relax the Law.

Biblical Contextual Reality ✅

- Righteousness must exceed the Pharisees' for entry (Matt 5:20).
- Stumbling in one point makes one guilty of all (James 2:10).
- Jesus came to "pléroó" (fulfill/fully preach) the Law.