

Defining Relationships 2: material relationships and the kingdom

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Date: 29 January 2006

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[0 : 00] We'll do turn, if you would, to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19. We've seen already that this chapter is all about defining relationships.

What is the defining relationship in your life? In which relationships do you seek your real satisfaction, your fulfillment, your sense of identity, your salvation, you might say?

Is it in the relationships of this world, the people and the things of this passing world, the promise so much in the way of satisfaction, or is it in your relationship with the new world, as Jesus calls it in verse 28 of our passage, his kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, and with himself as the king of heaven, and the Lord of all on his glorious throne?

The one who commands all to hear his voice. The one who commands all to come to him, to follow him. Which is the real defining relationship among those who want to be and claim to be followers of Jesus?

That's the question that Jesus is asking of his followers. And that's the question that Matthew is asking of his readers, in a very graphic fashion. Jesus is teaching his disciples what it means to follow him, as he literally is on the road, traveling to Jerusalem.

[1 : 37] As he's on the road of his final great journey, the journey that is going to take him to the new world, to the glory that he's speaking about in his heavenly kingdom.

But remember, it's a journey for Jesus that means rejection by this world, scorn from this world, ultimately suffering and death at the hands of this world.

That's the only road for Jesus to that final glory. And Jesus has been very plain, hasn't he? That the path of those who would follow him to glory is exactly the same path.

Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever would save his life must lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

But that is the way of life. That's the way of the kingdom. That is the way to the new world with Jesus. And there's no other way. And so, would-be followers of Jesus must decide.

[2 : 46] Jesus is pressing his authority home on every follower to choose which world will be their true home. And you must choose, Jesus says.

There's no dual citizenship. There's no hedging your bets. Only one world can really define your citizenship. Only one world can really define your allegiance.

So, which relationship really dictates the terms? Do you and all the relationships that you have with the powerful forces of this world, do they bow down to Jesus?

Or does Jesus have to bow down before them and their ownership and mastery over you? In other words, is the story of your life a story of true worship, serving the living God and loving him alone?

Or is it actually the story of idolatry? Loving and worshipping falsehoods. Serving and satisfying ourselves. And it's pretty stark when you put it that way, isn't it?

[4 : 05] It's cutting. But Jesus doesn't play trivial pursuit. Jesus always cuts to the chase. He gets right to the point because the stakes are so very high.

He's dealing with the issues of eternity. Of ultimate importance. And that's why, if we are wise people today, we'll listen to him.

We saw that last time, in the first half of the chapter, that the real answer to the question of what we're really living for and which world we really belong to is exposed when Jesus turns his searchlight upon the relationships that we have with this world's people and this world's things.

For example, as we saw last time, our attitude to God's divinely ordered creation of marriage in verses 1 to 12. And it's certainly no accident that three subjects are grouped together in this chapter.

Marriage, relationships with marriage and sex, relationships with children, and relationships with material wealth and power. Because these are all powerful relationships, aren't they?

[5 : 20] They can all become, indeed they often do become, powerful and controlling gods. Gods that demand our allegiance. So that our attitudes, even to these good gifts that God gives us, can easily become perverse attitudes that lead us into idolatry and that lead us away from the worship of God and of seeking him alone.

They can lead us into a self-serving relationship with these things. Thinking that we can use these things to give us what we want and what we think we need.

And remember we saw that Jesus exposed the Pharisees very devastatingly. They had deceived others with their cloak of religious zeal.

They'd even deceived themselves. But they hadn't deceived the Son of God. You see, the basic attitude of the man of this world, whether he's religious or irreligious, is this.

I love me. And I will satisfy myself. I will fulfill myself. I will save myself. By my experience of human relationships in marriage and sex.

[6 : 41] Or by my relationships with material wealth and power. Or with other things, whatever it may be. That's the real attitude of the person of this world.

And the frightening thing, friends, the frightening thing is this. It can be made to look very religious. Very zealous. Very evangelical, even.

Very dutiful and meticulous. Very concerned with God's laws and his ways. But what it does, in fact, is that it domesticates God's law.

That attitude says this. Well, I'll do my bit. I'll give God his share. All the commands that he asks. But the rest, that's for me. That's mine.

See, it wants to limit God's law. To make God's law our servant. I'm the master. Father, God's law must bow down to me. And that's the world's heart, you see.

[7 : 47] That is the religion, the spirituality of man. Man is in control. He has autonomy. But Jesus says, If you truly worship God, then his law, his word, is your master.

You are not your own master. God's word is your master because God is your master. And because you love him. And you cherish him.

And you cherish your relationship with him. That's why you gladly bow the knee to him. And you are the one who surrenders willingly to his authority. You give up all your own personal autonomy because you love and you trust God.

You rejoice in being under his authority. Because you know that to be the servant of this God is perfect freedom. His yoke is easy. His burden is light.

And you see, the evidence of this is not so much in the way you keep God's commands themselves in the outward things. But it's in the motivation to your obedience to God's laws.

[8 : 56] It's a loving response to a relationship of love with God himself. To your truly defining relationship. You see, if the truly defining relationship in your life is your relationship with the living God in Jesus Christ, then you will have gladly surrendered all your other relationships to him.

You'll have listened to his words. You'll have come to give yourself wholly to him. You will be truly following him wholeheartedly in his way. So that all the other relationships you have in this world and your attitudes to them and your valuations of their importance, all of these things will be defined by the overarching importance of your love for the Lord Jesus Christ and your valuation of the great pearl that you've discovered in his kingdom and being part of it.

So friends, is our attitude really that of the new world or is it the attitude of this present world?

And once again, Jesus exposes the truth about our hidden attitudes by putting his finger on the issues at the very heart of the many powerful and competing relationships that we have within this world.

not this time with marital relationships, but in verses 16 to 30 he addresses material relationships and the kingdom of heaven. And it proves to be just as uncomfortable an encounter as was his encounter with the Pharisees.

[10 : 41] So let's look at these verses. This time, the question and answer session is not with the Pharisees who came to test Jesus to trap him, but verse 16 says it's with a man who came to ask him a plain and vital question.

What must I do to have eternal life? There's no suggestion here of insincerity, no hypocrisy. He's not coming to test Jesus. He wants the truth from Jesus.

Verse 20 tells us he's a young man. In Luke chapter 18 where we have the same story, we're told he's a ruler. He was extremely rich. That's why we know him as the rich young ruler.

So let's be fair to him for a start. Let's honour his seriousness. I guess there's not too many rich young heirs today who seem to have such a keen interest in theology.

Much more likely to be found at this time of year skiing in Clostas, I would expect. Or maybe boating in the summer in Monte Carlo. But not this chap. He really is serious.

[11 : 45] He's searching for the truth. He wants the truth and he wants to know and experience eternal life. That's not just life that's a far off in the distance after this life.

But what he's looking for is the assurance now of sharing the life of the Lord God himself. The assurance of salvation. That's what he's after.

That's what he longed for. Or so he thought. But the reality is, and we see it in this story, the reality is that what he really was longing for wasn't actually that at all.

What he was really seeking was not a relationship with the one true God, but actually a relationship with a God of his own imagining. And he was about to discover in meeting Jesus that although he was earnest, in fact he was very self-deceived.

He was deceived by his own religion, by his own spirituality. Just like so many people who think they're seeking God and think they want God in their life, when this man is actually confronted with the real Jesus and therefore with the real God of Scripture, he's exposed.

[13 : 14] He's exposed as actually having another true love, another relationship which in fact is the one that defines him and so controls him and owns him so that no real relationship with Jesus Christ is possible.

The encounter all revolves around three questions that the man asked in verses 16 and 18 and 20 and Jesus answers. So let's look at the first one in verse 16. He opens the conversation and this gives us the first clue that this man's life is not really defined by a real relationship with the living God.

What good deed must I do to have eternal life, he says. Now do you see how the subject in his question is himself? What must I do that I may have life?

and all his focus is on religion, on doing rather than on relationships, on what he does rather than what he is and on the life he gets rather than whose life it is and what that eternal life actually means.

All the focus you see is on the commands not on the commander on what must be done rather than who it is being done for and why it is being done for him.

[14 : 46] You see in verse 17 how Jesus picks up on that. He turns the focus completely from the commands to the one who commands. Why do you ask what is good?

He says there is only one who is good. You see he is turning the focus onto God himself. from rote religion onto real relationship.

If you would enter life he says keep the commands that is the commands of the one who is good because they are good commands of the good God.

You see what Jesus is saying that has been the purpose of God's law all along right from the very start. God's law reveals himself it reveals his nature his character his goodness to us so as to draw us to him to respond to love him to obey him in response to his great love and mercy to us.

Now we must see that otherwise we will totally misunderstand the whole of the Old Testament. Jesus is not turning this man or anybody else for that matter away from God's holy commands as though somehow the way of life was not anything to do with obedience to God or the way of faith was the opposite of the way of obeying God's laws of course not quite the reverse.

[16 : 09] What he is saying is that obeying God's law has always been a matter of faith a matter of glad and grateful response to God's grace from a heart that is full of love because God has loved us.

Obedience to God has always been the mark of true faith the mark of real relationship with God the mark of knowledge of God. So for example just think back to Exodus chapter 20 the great chapter of the giving of the Ten Commandments what does God say first I am Yahweh the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage I am your redeemer your savior therefore he goes on you shall have no other gods before me you shall not worship idols you shall not profane my name and so on all the Ten Commandments I am your God and Savior I am your Lord therefore you must respond in obedient faith it's the same in Deuteronomy chapter 6 the Shema hear O Israel the Lord your God the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might and these words that I command you today shall be upon your heart teach them to your children when you're going out and coming in when you rise up and lie down and so on you see

I am the Lord who defines you and you will therefore love and obey my words because they are my words and because you love me it's the same in Leviticus chapter 19 it's the same all the way through the Old Testament law and Jesus affirms that he says yes real living faith real relationship with the Lord has always been that way you submit to his authority because the one true God truly is your God live like that and you shall live you shall live eternally but the second question you see in verse 18 reveals that this man had never really grasped this that obedience to God's law truly is a matter of the heart a response of faith lovingly abandoning yourself to God and his will and purpose for you verse 18 he says so which ones and that's the clear giveaway isn't it of the thinking of man of the religion of the spirituality of this world like the

Pharisees he has turned God's liberating law into a legalism into a bondage he wants to justify himself he wants to use God's law not as an authority to submit to gladly but rather to bolster his own autonomy to bolster his own self-righteousness what he means is how can I limit what God asks of me so I can be sure I can conquer God's commands and I can justify myself to my own satisfaction to my own self-assurance that's what he means it's the typical response you see of autonomous human hearts hearts that are determined to be in control of ourselves and so Jesus replies in verses 18 and 19 specifying the fifth to the ninth commandments and he adds Leviticus 19 verse 18 love your neighbor as yourself why does he respond that way why when a couple of chapters later on in chapter 23 chapter 22 verse 37 when he's asked to summarize

God's law he does it differently he says it's love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and your neighbor as yourself that's God's great commands why does he answer differently here why doesn't he mention those first four commands about loving the Lord your God well I think because it's quite easy isn't it to say yes I love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind but it's much harder to show that that's really true by loving my neighbor truly as I love myself and by devoting myself to living a life that honors God and his name in every single aspect in my relationship with parents in marriage in business in truth in society and so on as all these other commands imply of course Jesus is looking for real love for God and real faith and trust in him but he is looking for real faith and trust not spurious faith not faith that says

[21 : 10] Lord Lord but faith that is visible that does the will of the Father in heaven as he said back in chapter seven and you see this man's superficial understanding of God is exposed by his answer he says I've kept all of these not even a hint of self doubt but how can you possibly exhaust the command of Leviticus 19 verse 18 to love your neighbor as yourself the answer is only by having an attitude that has utterly surrendered everything in this life to a primary and defining relationship with God himself the God of grace and love and mercy so that his grace and love and mercy continuously overflows through your life to others in a way that could never say well I've done that bit now let's get on to the next command because it knows that it's never ending expression of the love of

God you see it's totally foreign isn't it to the attitude that this man is exhibiting here that's the attitude of heart that this man clearly did not have that was his great lack and in answer to his third question Jesus totally exposes him what do I still lack he says well now Jesus hits him with the tenth commandment you shall not covet and he exposes the real truth that actually this man's heart is full of idolatry that's what covetousness is Paul tells us in Colossians 3 the real truth is that this man worships his possessions that is his real God that's his idol that's his savior his satisfier he had great possessions but of course in reality they possessed him not God this man is defined by his material relationships relationships in this world not by a real living relationship with the living

God and when Jesus says sell everything you have and give it away it just exposes what's true all his law keeping was for himself not for God and his idea of eternal life was simply perpetuating his own autonomous life forever in other words it was just deifying himself and that is idolatry it's the worship of a false God it's putting yourself in the place of the one true God but true eternal life true new world kingdom life means sharing God's life which means losing our life to him it's the life of repentance it's the life with this world behind me and the cross of Jesus before me and Jesus command here to the man follow me both offers and invites to the only true law keeping and that is submission and obedience to

God for God just because he is God and just because we love him and we cherish him and we submit to him and that means total submission to Jesus as our Lord as our commander indeed disobedience that leads to life can only come from Jesus by his gracious gift by his enabling the burden of God's command is impossible with man just like a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle but not with God in Jesus Christ come to me says Jesus for my yoke is easy my burden is light follow me listen to me obey my words and you'll be complete you'll be perfect but that does mean renunciation of all this world's defining relationships and that's oh so hard and in verses 23 to 26

Jesus simply goes on to expand verse 22 Jesus is speaking about the terrifying power of material relationships the power of riches we should think of these things not just as monetary wealth but as all privileges that we might have all power possessions status so many relationships that deep in our hearts we would really love to be our saviors in life and so in fact are the lords of our lives in reality not necessarily greed as such but it's rather the things that we look for to satisfy the hunger and the security that we need our search for peace our search for satisfaction for happiness for meaning it's right and it's natural that we should search for these things but the question is where do we really seek them and the truth is like this privileged man all too often the real answer is that we seek them in the material relationships we have in this world but Jesus says whoever would save his life by this world's relationships must lose it because all these things are idols they are false gods that only deceive we think that they're saviors that satisfy us that make us complete but the reality is they are the things that keep us out of the kingdom of

[27 : 33] God Jesus says in verse 23 it's hard in fact in verse 24 it's impossible for such idolatrous hearts for hearts that love this world to enter the kingdom of heaven verse 22 is very clear for this man his defining relationship was with his wealth and it led him only one way it led him away from Jesus Christ for this man it was his possessions and that relationship in the end owned him and possessed his soul wonder what Jesus question would be for you and for me what relationship he would put his finger on and say that's what's got to be left behind if you want to be complete could be many things besides our material comfort but we shouldn't be too quick to forget that as a real challenge nonetheless one scholar says this that Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he would issue exactly that command and we should remember that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man a man of wealth of privilege an intellectual professional an achiever a person of power a person of influence and for such a person to enter the kingdom of God it's impossible unless

God should act and intervene to make it possible God must lay his hand upon you otherwise it is because these things are so powerful but he does says Jesus and he will if we will make our relationship with him the defining relationship of our lives if we listen to him if we come to him if we follow him it doesn't matter who we are God will do it and that's exactly what we have a wonderful example of in these verses in the middle verses 13 to 15 the wonderful little interlude of parents bringing their infants to Jesus it's certainly no accident that that passage immediately follows what Jesus has spoken about to do with marriage since of course any attitude that dominates our attitude to marriage will also dominate our desire for children and it's no accident that that relationship with children and our desire for them has been sandwiched between these two other relationships of marriage and the material things because our relationship with our children and our desire for them especially in our own day can also be a powerfully idolatrous one can't it it's natural of course that we should have powerful feelings for our children powerful desires for them their own flesh and blood but there's also a great temptation isn't there to be this worldly and for our own desires and priorities for their lives to reflect our own worldly desires for worldly things well here's an example says

Jesus of true priorities for your children making their relationship with Jesus the defining relationships of their lives right from the start despite humiliation and opposition from the world even from the church the disciples display their own worldly misunderstanding in trying to keep them away and rebuking them the text actually says they rebuke the children as well as the parents but no whoever comes to Jesus out of faith and devotion and wants him to have the defining relationship in their own life and in the life of their family even as here infants who yet have no understanding of their own whoever makes that their priority Jesus will bless he loves to bless that attitude this isn't just an illustration either of those that Jesus blesses verse 15 says he lays his hand upon these very children he blesses them he says to such belong my kingdom it's his gift to them it's his blessing just as he receives all who will come into his presence whoever they are however impossible or unlikely it might seem the sick who came to him at the beginning of the chapter the disciples who have followed him and left all behind for him at the end of chapter 20 the blind men who follow him crying out to him for mercy in chapter 21 the blind the lame and the children again who cry out to

Jesus Hosanna Lord save us and friends those of us who are parents should not miss the wonderful encouragement that there is here for Christian parents who will bring their children to Jesus and commit them to him in faith and trust from the very earliest days of their life to desire for them that whatever the hostility there might be from the world whatever the rebuke there might be from the worldly church their relationship with Jesus Christ will be the defining relationship of their young lives the Lord Jesus Christ will not allow such a desire to be hindered and you should take great courage in that not just as you bring your infants to Jesus at the font and commit them to his trust publicly by baptism into the privileges of the household of faith but also throughout their young lives in all your decisions for them in all the priorities that you set for them in all of these things as they unfold through their lives make

Jesus the defining relationship for the lives of your children from the very start because Jesus says to such belongs the kingdom of heaven it's a great encouragement but of course it is also a challenge and a responsibility Jesus does mean real and total surrender of our children to him he's not offering us a cheap insurance policy we're not to live as though this world's gains were really what mattered for our children's lives wanting them to have the best of both worlds all the glory and the success of this world but at the end the safety net of heaven no that's to think like the rich man in this chapter it's to totally misunderstand Jesus message to surrender our children to

[35 : 06] Jesus means to surrender them to the way of his cross to the way of losing their life in this world for the gain of finding true life in Christ and that may mean that we as parents have to surrender many things for them to turn our backs on many worldly relationships on their behalf to help them to learn what it means for Jesus and his kingdom to be the defining relationship in their life and in our lives more important than the many competing relationships that are very powerful for our children and would take them away from the Lord Jesus Christ can take many forms maybe sporting relationships maybe social relationships maybe material things it may be certain kinds of entertainments all kinds of things but it is true discipleship for our children that

Jesus puts his hand of blessing upon for us and for our children and we're meant to take that seriously he calls us and he calls our children with us to the journey to the cross not to using him as a lucky charm or as an insurance policy to keep them out of hell that is this world's thinking but says Jesus do for yourself or for your children if that is the defining relationship in your life you will never be a loser and neither will they this world may think so but you will be free you'll be freed from slavery to yourself and to this world to the useless idols of this world you will be liberated for the glory of the kingdom of the new world and that's the great irony the great twist in this very last verse verse 30 what the world cannot see but what we must see we invest so much don't we in this world's relationships and we we we we we we we we we we serve us but the reality is that we serve them and that they are impotent to deliver we seek what the world offers us autonomy and security and satisfaction we strive to be first we won't surrender ourselves to

Jesus but in fact we're surrendering ourselves into slavery because this world's ways and this world's relationships are empty in the end we'll lose everything if that's our choice even the first in the world's eyes says Jesus will be lost cling to the relationships of this world the relationships that verse 29 speaks of and it leads only ultimately to nothing to total loss the first shall be lost but surrender all these things to Jesus Christ be content to be lost in the eyes of the world and that says Jesus is to receive in abundance a hundred fold give it all up all the most precious of the relationships this world affords and in fact you will receive a hundred times more even now in this life it's to know the riches and fulfillment of a life that is unknown to the people of this world and says

Jesus and eternal life for the last in the eyes of this world shall be first seeking first the relationships of this world in reality is all about deceiving and being deceived by this world seeking first the relationships of the kingdom of heaven by contrast is all about receiving and being received by the new world and by the king and the lord of glory Jesus Christ himself so friends the message of this chapter is this take heart listen to Jesus come to Jesus bring your family to Jesus follow him you'll never be a loser with

Jesus Christ in this world or in the next world everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name sake says Jesus will receive a hundred fold and will inherit eternal life many who are first will be last and the last first let's pray heavenly father the siren voices of this world are so strong in our minds and in our hearts we are creatures of the earth and this world has such a hold upon us but you call us to the glory of your kingdom of the new world of our home of righteousness to the joy and the peace and the wonder of sharing in your glory as sons and daughters of that kingdom may our minds and our hearts we pray be full of the desire to be in your dwelling place that even to be a doorkeeper there would be better to us than all the treasures and the pleasures that this world could ever afford but which will ultimately decay and may all our hope and our trust be in your glory for we ask it in

[41 : 45] Jesus name Amen