

## Two Paths, Two Ends (Part 2)

The word *destruction* in Matt. 7:13 – “*broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction*” – prompts some interpreters to assume Jesus is speaking of eternal condemnation. But the word is used in that fashion in only a few cases in the New Testament, and they are questionable. Vine says the Greek noun means, “loss of well-being, but not of being.” The word is often used to refer to ruin or loss. In Matt. 26:8 – the only other time this Greek noun is used in Matthew’s gospel – the disciples are upset that expensive ointment is being *wasted* on the feet of Jesus.

The word is also used to refer to the ruin of one’s life. In Acts 8:18-19 Simon the sorcerer, who is a new believer (see v.13), offers money to Peter to be given the ability to lay hands on people and endue them with the Holy Spirit. Peter rebukes Simon harshly in v.20 with the words, “thy money perish with thee.” Peter certainly does not pronounce eternal condemnation on Simon, who is saved, but rather warns him that both he and his money will come to ruin if he does not repent. That seems to be how Jesus uses the word *destruction* in Matt. 7.

Examining the verb form of the same Greek word for *destruction* adds further clarification. Consider the following passage that speaks of ruin:

*Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles **perish**: Matt. 9:17*

An even more fascinating use of the word can be found in another discipleship passage, Matthew 10:38-39:

*And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall **lose** it: and he that **loseth** his life for my sake shall find it.*

Twice we read *lose* and *loseth*, which is the same Greek verb, meaning “to destroy or ruin.” The idea is that whoever “finds” his life (i.e., lives selfishly and soulishly) here and now will have it destroyed at the Judgment Seat. Does that mean his life will be removed or cast into eternal punishment? No, in the context of dealing with disciples, it means he will lose the reward that his soul could have otherwise received for living righteously. Literally, it is destruction of one’s works at the Judgment Seat. That is the destruction in this verse.

Of course, the flip side is more glorious. The saint who loses his soul here and now – that is, he gives it up, for he chooses to squeeze through the strait gate and walk on the narrow path – will find it at the Judgment Seat, in the sense of reward. On the heels of this passage in Matthew 10, Jesus closes with the following statement in verse 42:

*And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.*

Again, the word *lose* is the idea of ruin or loss. To lose one's reward is to suffer loss. Incidentally, the phrase "lose his reward" in this verse provides a mini-commentary on the meaning of losing one's life (literally, *soul*) at the Judgment Seat. Clearly, it is not destruction of one's being, but destruction of one's reward.

Two additional passages may help to confirm our understanding of how the word *destruction* is used in Matt. 7:13.

*But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.  
Rom. 14:15*

Paul admonishes not to ruin a brother spiritually by selfish choices to continue in some offending practice.

Finally, the father's proclamation after the prodigal son returns home speaks of ruin:

*For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. Luke 15:24*

The Greek word for *destruction* is here translated *lost*. We must remember the prodigal son was a saved young man. How do we know this? He was a son! Nevertheless, he pursued carnal living for a time, ruining his life, but had since repented and returned home. The beautiful part of the story is the father's eagerness to receive back his son. Incidentally, the word *lost* in the New Testament is very often this same Greek word, meaning destruction, in the sense of waste or ruin. Context should determine (not one's preconceived notions) whether it is referring to eternally lost (unsaved) or temporally lost (a saved, but wasted life, in need of repentance).

Given a fuller understanding of key words in Matt. 7:13-14, we can now put the pieces together. Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to *destruction* – to waste or ruin of one's spiritual life now and consequently to one's reward at the Bema.

In what sense is it broad and wide? In the sense that there is no tribulation, no suffering for Christ, no being made conformable to His death, no counting the cost, no need to die daily, no need to take up the cross – just live however one desires. Many believers live in that manner. Thus, there are two gates, one representing Christ, the other representing the world. The way of Christ is the path of discipleship, obeying the law of Christ, which is costly. The way of the world is the path of fleshly desires

and passions, living for self and enjoying the here and now. The end of Christ's way is life and joy and peace and, ultimately, reward at the Judgment Seat. The end of the world's way is destruction, ruin, waste of one's life and, ultimately, loss at the Judgment Seat.

Sadly, many pursue the broad path of destruction, ruining their lives spiritually. Few pursue the strait gate and the narrow path. Does that not explain much in Christianity? First, it explains how so many people can be saved and not living like it. Second, it explains why there is so little teaching on the kingdom. Third, it explains why teaching on the kingdom is often rejected.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uses a different analogy to explain the two ways, providing a visual illustration of the end result of each.

*Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. Matt. 7:24-27*

Those who take heed to all Jesus has just preached will be like a house built on a rock that withstands the storms and tribulations of life. However, those who do not take heed will be like a house built on sand that collapses under pressure. When it collapses, great will be the fall of it. Of course, the two houses are representative of the two ways of life a saint can choose. Those who enter the strait gate and remain on the narrow path of life are like the house on the rock. On the other hand, those who enter the wide gate and pursue the broad path of ruin are like the house on the sand. These two houses are metaphors, not only for life and how one can live it, but also for the end result of life – the reward or loss one faces at the Judgment Seat. Paul uses a similar analogy in one of his letters to the Corinthians:

*For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. 1 Cor. 3:11-15*

Jesus is the foundation on which believers build their lives. Each individual

makes choices as to what type of building materials will be used in the construction (i.e., sanctification) process. There are two options. One is enduring because it is focused on the kingdom and eternity – gold, silver, and precious stones in quality. When the fire of God’s testing furnace tries the works of saved men, this structure will survive, like the house on the rock. Accordingly, this believer will be rewarded. In contrast, other believers will choose to use build of the stuff of this world – wood, hay, and stubble – which is neither substantive nor enduring. This house will be consumed in the fire, and the believer will suffer loss. Despite the temporal loss, this believer is eternally secure – saved, yet so as by fire. But the the spiritual loss is of enormous consequence, for it also equates to kingdom loss – no entitlement to reign with Jesus in His coming kingdom.

Examine your own life. Are you on the narrow path or the broad path? Are you building a house on rock or sand? Are you using materials of enduring, eternal value or of temporal, earthly value? Someday, the answers these questions will be manifest to all.

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## Two Paths, Two Ends (Part 1)

Jesus said the narrow way leads to life and the broad way leads to destruction.

*13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:*

*14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Matthew 7:13-14*

Remarkably, many have ignored the context and made the assumption Jesus was speaking of the paths to heaven and hell. But that raises some very important questions. What is the meaning of “life” in v.14? Is it actually heaven? What is the meaning of “destruction” in v.13? Is it really hell?

Furthermore, if v.14 is truly speaking of salvation, why is it referred to as a way, or pathway? Would that not imply salvation is a process? Yet in John 3:18 Jesus said that individuals are either not condemned or condemned already. There is no pathway involved, no process. In John 3:36 John the Baptist said that individuals either have everlasting life or the wrath of God abides on them. Again, there is no pathway involved, no process. It’s simply one or the other. Salvation is a point-in-time transaction, not a process, as in the metaphor.

Some may wonder, “What about John 14:6? Jesus said, I am the way.” Indeed,

but a careful examination of the passage and the context reveals Jesus was speaking to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion in the upper room, and He was not addressing matters of salvation but sanctification. In the midst of that endearing conversation, Jesus teaches His key followers about the way to fellowship with the Father, which is through Christ. This is the same subject John addresses at greater length in his first epistle.

To conclude that Jesus is speaking of heaven and hell in Matt. 7 seems to be making an assumption that is not grounded in the passage but rather on one's theological grid. It is of critical importance to interpret these verses in their natural context. We must first ask the question, "To whom is Jesus speaking?"

Of course, these verses are near the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in chapter five. According to Matt. 5:1-2, Jesus is addressing His disciples, people who are already saved and want to know more about how to progress in discipleship. They want to learn about the kingdom lifestyle, and it is that of which Jesus speaks. A study of the Sermon on the Mount shows that Jesus is concentrating on matters of sanctification, namely, how we should live here and now if we would enter into a kingdom way of living. There does not seem to be anything in these chapters about salvation from eternal condemnation.

For example, the Beatitudes in Matt. 5:3-12 are the virtues of a kingdom-focused saint – poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, etc. To suggest this is the means of salvation for the lost is to suggest salvation is by works. Furthermore, in Matt. 5:13, Jesus says, "Ye are the salt of the earth ... ye are the light of the world." Jesus is obviously speaking to believers. Unbelievers are never called "salt" or "light." The entire Sermon is geared to believers and the need to live a kingdom lifestyle if they would inherit the coming kingdom. Look at the verse immediately preceding our text:

*Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you,  
do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.  
Matthew 7:12*

This is commonly known as the "golden rule." Can a lost person become saved by keeping the golden rule? Absolutely not! But it is the way to sanctification, at least in part, for a saved person. So in the immediate context of verse 12 and the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount, vs. 13-14 seem to describe for saved people the two possible lifestyle choices they could pursue.

The word *way* in the Greek (per Vine) is used metaphorically in this context, to mean "a course of conduct" or "way of thinking." Speaking to His saved audience, Jesus says, "I want you to enter the strait gate that leads to life. I want you to pursue this pathway in life, not the broad gate that leads to destruction."

Thus, the overall interpretation of the passage becomes clear. The ways or pathways in these two verses are two possible lifestyles that could be chosen by saved people. One is beneficial and leads to life. The other is detrimental and leads to destruction. It is critical to define these words, *life* and *destruction*.

The way that leads to life is through the strait gate and down the narrow path. Notice the spelling of the word *strait*. It is not the same as the English word *straight*. There is a difference. The word in the text does not mean "unbending" or "without curves." It is strait in the sense of "narrow." Think of the Straits of Magellan, a narrow passageway for ships to travel through near the southern tip of South America, allowing a shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But it is fraught with dangers, for it is narrow, and ships can be crushed against the rocks.

The Greek word for *strait* in the text above carries the idea of being pressed for space. The gate is a very tight spot, a tight passageway. But that's not all. The Greek word for *narrow* means "hemmed in." The gate is "pressed" and the way is "hemmed in." Very close forms of these two Greek words are found together in another passage in the New Testament:

*We are troubled on every side, yet not **distressed**. (Emphasis added)*  
2 Cor. 4:8

*Troubled* is the word translated *narrow* in Matt. 7:13 and *distressed* is translated *strait*. Paul is using these terms in reference to his ministry. He had been hemmed in from every angle, no doubt by hardships and pressures and persecutions, yet he did not allow those circumstances to press him to the point of discouragement or being overwhelmed. He would not let the stresses that accompany life and ministry for Christ get him down.

We can now better understand how these words are used in Matt. 7. Using the picture of a strait gate and a narrow path, Jesus urges His disciples to choose to die to self and enter a way of living that is inherently full of hardship because of choices to serve Christ ("take up your cross and follow me") – a way of living that keeps one under pressure, hemmed in on all sides. Why should we deliberately choose this path, seeing it is difficult and doesn't come natural? We choose this path because Jesus admonishes us to and also knowing that suffering with Him qualifies us to reign with Him (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12; Phil. 3:10-14).

Furthermore, the strait and narrow path leads to life! But the life Jesus promises in this context is not eternal life. It is not heaven. It is a glorious kingdom way of living, here and now, that results in reward at the Judgment Seat. It is abundant entrance into the kingdom of heaven (which is the millennial kingdom). Incidentally, choosing the pathway of life is not something that happens once. We must die daily. Those who do not, by default, choose the other way, the wide gate and the broad path. That way is much more popular, for it does not require pain; it is not agonizing. Many take that path, but it leads to destruction.

In [Part 2](#) we will explore the meaning of the word *destruction* and explore the other metaphor used by Jesus in concluding the Sermon on the Mount.

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## [Entering Into Greatness Part 3](#)

In [Parts 1](#) and [2](#), we answered the following questions:

1. What does it mean to *enter into* the kingdom?
2. What characterizes the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

In this final installment we hope to answer two additional questions. Here is the third:

### **3. What is *greater* than Pharisaical righteousness?**

If we, as children of God, would *enter into* the kingdom, then our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. What is greater than Pharisaical righteousness? The answer is found later in Matthew 5:

*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect ([Matt. 5:48](#)).*

*Perfection* is greater than Pharisaical righteousness. But Jesus is not talking about the positional, imputed righteousness you have in Christ. He is calling you to a discipleship mode of living that leads to perfection of lifestyle. Now don't misunderstand. Jesus is not saying you must be *sinless* to inherit the kingdom. That's not even possible. He is saying you must be *perfect* to inherit the kingdom. There is a difference, as we shall see.

Our tendency is to snap back: “No one's perfect!” Nevertheless, God called Job “perfect and upright...one that feared God and eschewed evil” ([Job 1:1](#)). God also called Noah “a just man and perfect” ([Gen. 6:9](#)). In [Genesis 17:1](#), God instructed Abraham to “walk before me, and be thou perfect.”

The Hebrew word used of Noah's perfection means “without blemish,” like the lambs that were offered undefiled and without spot to God. It is also the word used in the following verses:

*For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it ([Prov. 2:21](#)).*

*The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way ([Prov. 11:5](#)).*

The Hebrew word used of Job's perfection means “complete, pious, undefiled,

upright." It is also used in this verse:

*Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace*([Psalm 37:37](#)).

In the New Testament we find the goal of the church is perfection:

*Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ* ([Eph. 4:13](#)).

Paul is obviously using the idea of growing unto a *perfect* man as a sanctification term—the goal of progressive sanctification.

What is perfection, according to [Ephesians 4:13](#)? It is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Paul's goal, as stated in [Colossians 1:28](#), is to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." In the context, he's not referring to salvation, but rather to sanctification. Later, in [Colossians 4:12](#), Paul prays that they might "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." James admonishes the saints that by works (i.e., righteous living), faith is "made perfect" ([James 2:22](#)).

Jesus calls all children of God to *perfection*, but that is not the same as sinlessness. There is a difference, and we can easily distinguish between the two by defining *perfection*.

The Greek word means "finished, complete, having reached its end." This word is a form of the same word used by Jesus on Calvary when He cried, "It is finished." According to Vine, the way the word is used in [Matthew 5:48](#) conveys "the idea of goodness without necessary reference to maturity."

Thus, perfection is the idea of complete sanctification—the kind of sanctification that progresses to the extent Jesus deems it worthy of hearing "well done" at the Judgment Seat. In a nutshell, perfection is consistent obedience to the will of God. Of course, that is not the nature of Pharisaical "righteousness." The Pharisees were characterized by outward conformity to the letter of the law but not inward submission to the spirit of the law.

It is important to recognize that in Matthew 5 Jesus is not teaching the doctrine of justification. In other words, He is not teaching that if one would go to heaven, he must have greater righteousness than the Pharisees, in the sense of having the imputation of Christ's righteousness at salvation (which makes a believer righteous in the spirit realm of his being).

Rather, Jesus is teaching *soul* perfection, which is the idea of living completely righteous, in conformity to God's will, both inside and out—unlike the Pharisees, who were primarily focused on the outside. Again, perfection doesn't mean sinless; it simply means not sinning. That may sound perplexing,



but perhaps it will become clearer when examining two seemingly contradictory verses in John's first epistle.

*Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God ([1 Jn. 3:9](#)).*

As saints, we do not sin in the realm of our *spirit*, because our spirit has been made completely righteous at salvation. Old things have passed away; all things have become new. The Spirit of God dwells in the realm of our spirit, and it is a completely holy habitation, having been justified and positionally sanctified.

However, the realm of the *soul* is an entirely different story. Thus, the apostle John could say this:

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us ([1 Jn. 1:8, 10](#)).*

The verses quoted above may sound in conflict, but they are not, when we understand that chapter 3 is referring to the *spirit* of man while chapter 1 is referring to the *soul*. For more help on this subject, refer to my previous article entitled, [The Three Tenses of Salvation](#).

Now look what happens when the *soul* of a saved man chooses to take his marching orders from his righteous *spirit*:

*Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not ([1 Jn. 3:6](#)).*

A believer lives righteously to the extent he is abiding in Christ (Who lives within the realm of that believer's righteous *spirit*). In fact, [1 John 1:9](#) makes it clear that a believer's *soul* can be cleansed of *all* unrighteousness! Therefore, it is possible for a believer to live consistently righteous (i.e., perfect), to the extent his heart is clean of sin—[1 John 1:7](#).

The objective is for the *soul* to learn to rely upon the provision in the *spirit* and thereby live righteously. When a Christian learns to live that way over the course of his life, his soul is made perfect (complete) in progressive sanctification. He is on the narrow path that leads to life, preparing to hear "well done" at the Judgment Seat.

That leads to the final question.

#### **4. How can we possibly fulfill the righteousness of the law?**

The question has already been partly answered by the passages in 1 John, but

let us return again to [Matthew 5:17](#) for a fuller answer.

*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil ([Matt. 5:17](#)).*

Jesus came to fulfill the law. He lived it perfectly, completely, and we can also, to the extent we let Him live His life through us. Notice something very beautiful in [Matthew 5:17](#). Look at the word *fulfill*. In the Greek, it is the idea of rendering full and complete. It is carrying through to the end and accomplishing. Now look carefully at the following verse:

*That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit ([Rom. 8:4](#)).*

The word *fulfilled* here is the same Greek word as in [Matthew 5:17](#). In Matthew, we are told that Jesus came to *fulfill* the law—to carry it through to the end.

Here, we are told that we have the same possibility of *fulfilling*—that is, carrying through the law to the end. How? When we choose in our *soul* to walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. Paul said it similarly in Galatians:

*Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh ([Gal. 5:16](#)).*

Does your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? If so, you will be *great* in the kingdom. If not, you will be *least* in the kingdom. There is no excuse for falling short of the perfection that Jesus requires for greatness, for Perfection dwells within your spirit. His name is Jesus!

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## [Entering Into Greatness Part 2](#)

In [Part 1](#) we learned that to *enter into the kingdom of heaven* means to live the kingdom lifestyle now, as defined by Jesus, which then qualifies one to inherit the millennial kingdom in the world to come. As discussed in the [previous article](#), I believe Jesus is speaking of matters of sanctification rather than salvation.

What is the kingdom lifestyle? Jesus answers that question throughout the book of Matthew, but most intensively in the Sermon on the Mount. In chapters

five through seven, and particularly in the Beatitudes ([Matt. 5:3-12](#)), Jesus teaches His disciples how they should live if they would enter into the kingdom way of living. We discussed those requirements in a previous series entitled [Seek First the Kingdom](#).

In the context, it seems Jesus is teaching that a believer fulfills the law to the extent he is living out the virtues of the Beatitudes. Of course, we realize the only way that can happen is when a child of God chooses to appropriate the provision of Christ living within. We will come back to that thought at the conclusion of the article.

For now, we need to take note how Jesus summarizes His initial teaching on discipleship:

*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:19-20](#)).*

In order to enter into the kingdom of heaven, a child of God must live in such a way that his righteousness exceeds (literally, surpasses) the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Again, I would challenge the reader not to think of *entering into the kingdom of heaven* as getting saved and/or going to heaven, but rather as living the kingdom lifestyle now with a view to inheriting the future millennial kingdom. Inheriting, I believe, is the idea of ruling with Christ in His kingdom as opposed to dwelling in the kingdom as a mere subject. I discussed that concept more fully in a previous article, entitled [Two Inheritances](#).

In the context of Matthew 5, if salvation from eternal condemnation is in view, then it would seem that keeping the Beatitudes (i.e., having righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees) would be a works-based salvation. Of course, Jesus is not teaching salvation by merit. This dilemma is resolved if we understand the passage to be referring to progressive sanctification.

If our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, then we must understand the nature of Pharisaical righteousness. That leads to the second of four questions posed in the previous article.

## **2. What characterizes the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?**

Formerly, I read [Matthew 5:19-20](#) with two prejudices. The first one you already know—I assumed entering into the kingdom was a reference to getting saved and going to heaven. The second one was an assumption that virtually all the Jews at the time of Christ were unbelievers, and especially the Pharisees. I now believe those assumptions were incorrect.

It is important to understand that the Jews at the time of Christ were

worshiping in the temple, offering animal sacrifices, observing the feasts, and looking for Messiah to come. Could it be said, they were believing God? Is that not how Old Testament people were saved—by believing God?

I now believe multitudes of Jews were already saved people when Jesus arrived on the scene, and thus His primary purpose (as spelled out in the synoptic Gospels) was calling the nation to repentance for their disobedience to God. In other words, He was calling them to a kingdom way of living, for the kingdom of heaven (the Messianic kingdom on earth) was at hand (near).

Certainly, Jesus was also concerned with saving lost people, and so we have John's Gospel that tells of His burden to go after unsaved individuals. But it seems He operated under the assumption that the great need of the nation, as the covenant people of God, was to repent, and return to a kingdom way of living. With the Messianic kingdom in view, much would be at stake!

Many in the nation were living licentiously, while others were living legalistically, and thus the call to repentance. Incidentally, does not licentious behavior and legalistic behavior characterize much of Christianity today, even amongst saved people in our independent, fundamental, Bible-believing churches? What is the problem? Multitudes of Christians have left their first love through fleshly choices. The cares of this world have produced a generation of indifferent Christians who are not looking for their Lord's return and they are certainly not prepared to rule with Christ in His coming kingdom.

In other words, I would allege the condition of the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century is much like the condition of the Jews in the first century, that is, full of believers who need to repent of their misbehavior and return to the kingdom way of life as outlined in the Beatitudes. To ignore such a call by our Lord is consequential, for it will result in a negative verdict at the Judgment Seat and disinheritance from ruling and reigning with Christ in His coming earthly kingdom (the very purpose for our millennial existence!).

Against that important backdrop, we find two cause-and-effect relationships in [Matthew 5:19-20](#) that were originally directed at the disciples of Christ but, by extension ([John 17:20](#)), apply to all future born-again believers, including us.

## **Cause-Effect Relationships**

### **First-Positive**

Cause in v.19: obeying the least commandments (and teaching others so)

Cause in v.20: righteousness surpassing the Pharisees (entering into kingdom living *now*)

Effect in v.19: called *great* in the future millennial kingdom *then* (idea of reward & inheritance *then*)

## Second–Negative

Cause in v.19: breaking the least commandments (and teaching others so)

Cause in v.20: righteousness on par with the Pharisees (not entering into kingdom living *now*)

Effect in v.19: called *least* in the future millennial kingdom (idea of recompense & disinheritance *then*)

Lawbreakers will be least in the millennial kingdom! Those who disobey God *now*, will bear the consequences *then*. Indeed, those Christians who break the so-called (by the Pharisees) *least* commandments (in the context, the virtues taught in the Beatitudes), passing them off as unimportant, and teaching others so, will be considered least in the kingdom. That is a frightful warning!

Jesus did not come to annul or abolish the law—He came to fulfill it ([Matt. 5:17](#)). In fact, not one jot or tittle will pass from the law, until all be fulfilled ([Matt. 5:18](#)). In other words, the very least aspects of the moral law of God remain as long as this present heaven and earth remain (and that includes the millennial world). That is what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, He raises the bar to a higher standard—the law of Christ.

The Pharisees would be least in the kingdom, for they were guilty of breaking what they deemed as least commandments and teaching others to do so as well. To break is to loose from obligation. Jesus did not distinguish between the commandments, but the Pharisees made an artificial distinction and taught by their example that lesser commandments could be broken with impunity. But that is not what [James 2:10](#) says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” Thus Jesus is warning His disciples that having a Pharisaical mentality and lifestyle will result in not living a kingdom lifestyle now, the ultimate consequence being called *least* in the kingdom *then*.

We typically think of carnal Christians out in left field, living like the prodigal son, who will be least in the kingdom. But what about carnal Christians out in right field, living like the prodigal son’s brother, the one who never left home but had an air of self-righteousness about him? They will be least in the kingdom too.

The Pharisees were like that, and I believe fundamental churches often breed pharisaical Christians. What is a pharisaical mentality? Or we could say, what is the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

In the context of Matthew 5-6 (cf. [Matt. 23:23, 27-28](#)), Jesus condemns the Pharisaical practice of observing the *letter* of the law, while ignoring the *spirit* of the law. In fact, in the following sections of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sorts out that problem. For example, the Pharisees could proudly say, “I have never murdered anyone.” But Jesus teaches that even anger and hatred in the heart are a violation of God’s law ([Matt. 5:22-26](#)).

The Pharisees had steered clear of adultery, but Jesus expands the definition of adultery to include lust in the mind ([Matt. 5:27-30](#)). Numerous other illustrations are also given by Christ to illustrate how Pharisaical righteousness falls short of God's requirement for kingdom living. If one is to be *great* in the coming kingdom, he must choose to live better than the Pharisees here and *now*. In essence, Jesus is saying that one could keep the ten commandments perfectly and still not be living a kingdom way of life.

Here's the point. If you want to be great in the kingdom, your righteous lifestyle must surpass that of the Pharisees, and that means...

- Your way of living must be characterized by the principles Christ is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
- You must be obedient to the entire law of Christ.
- You must not merely obey the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law.
- You must obey not merely outwardly, but from the heart.
- You must not add anything to what God requires.
- You must teach others what Jesus teaches.
- Then—and only then—will you be great in the kingdom.

In [Part 3](#) we will examine the provision for living greater than the Pharisees.

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## [Entering Into Greatness Part 1](#)

For many years of my life, whenever I read the phrases *kingdom of God* or *kingdom of heaven* in the Scriptures my mind automatically assumed the Bible was speaking of eternal life/heaven. *Entering into* the kingdom was the idea of getting saved. Thus I assumed verses such as the one below were references to salvation and possessing eternal life.

*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:20](#)).*

But in taking my former hermeneutical position I had a conflict on my hands. For in this passage—and several others like it—it sounds as if salvation is dependent on works. I had a great deal of explaining to do to make those passages fit my theological grid.

Here Jesus says that to enter the kingdom one must have righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. In [Matthew 7:21](#) Jesus says the one who enters the kingdom is the one who does the will of the Father. In [Matthew 18:3](#) Jesus says that to enter the kingdom one must be converted

(i.e., turn around) and become as a little child. In [Matthew 18:9](#) and [Mark 9:43-48](#) Jesus says that if one wants to enter life (which is equivalent to entering the kingdom) he has to radically exterminate sin in his life. If your hand offends you, cut it off, if your eye offends you, pluck it out—that's quite radical! In [Matthew 19:17](#) we learn if one is to enter life, he must obey the commandments.

Did you notice a pattern in all of these statements? In every case, man must *do* something. Operating under my previous hermeneutical grid—the way I had always been taught—I had a difficult time reconciling these passages with the Bible truth that salvation is by grace through faith alone, not of works. The Scriptures are clear on that point.

By interpreting these passages as Gospel passages, and by assuming *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* are referring to eternal life/heaven, one has to conclude (if consistent) Jesus is teaching a works-based salvation, or at least He did on occasion.

We all know better than that. Yet [Matthew 5:20](#) and these numerous other passages sound as if Jesus is inferring that works are necessary for salvation. In the past I dealt with this inconsistency in my thinking by saying what Jesus is really teaching is that perfection is required for entrance into heaven (cf. [Matt. 5:48](#)), and since no one is perfect—for all have sinned—we need the imputed righteousness of Christ as our substitute if we would have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Thus I claimed (unwittingly) that Christ's righteousness is the righteousness to which Jesus is referring in [Matthew 5:20](#).

The problem with that explanation is nothing in the Sermon on the Mount speaks of the imputed righteousness of Christ or of salvation in the sense of justification. Plainly put, Jesus is not giving the Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount.

I now realize how terribly wrong I was in my former interpretation, and I am ashamed to think I put words in Jesus' mouth. I have since come to understand that Jesus is not talking to those who are lost about salvation from eternal condemnation. He is talking to those who are already saved about sanctification and the need to prepare for the kingdom. Incidentally, [Matthew 5:48](#) is the goal, or standard, by which we will be judged at the Bema.

That means the *kingdom of heaven* in this context is not eternal life/heaven, but rather the coming millennial kingdom. Yes, the kingdom continues on into heaven after the Millennium, when Jesus delivers up His earthly kingdom to the Father to become the eternal kingdom (the two aspects collectively being referred to as the *kingdom of God*), but the focus of Jesus in the book of Matthew is preparing for His earthly kingdom (thus the use of the term *kingdom of heaven*).

Jesus is saying that unless our righteousness (i.e., obedience) exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will not enter into the kingdom way of life now, which then qualifies one to inherit the millennial kingdom in the future. If that is the correct interpretation, then we should take the matter

of our progressive sanctification very seriously. The scribes and Pharisees were very meticulous about keeping the law—or so they thought—and so we must be exceedingly focused on obeying our Lord if we would inherit Christ's coming kingdom. But, as we shall see, this is not in any way suggesting we must be Pharisaical. Quite the contrary.

In Parts 1 and 2 of this article I hope to answer four questions:

1. What does it mean to *enter into* the kingdom?
2. What characterizes the "righteousness" of the Pharisees?
3. What is *greater* than Pharisaical righteousness?
4. How can we possibly fulfill the righteousness of the law?

Let's start with the first question.

## 1. What does it mean to *enter into* the kingdom?

According to [Matthew 5:20](#), the one who *enters into* the kingdom is the one who has righteousness that is over and above that of the Pharisees. Does that imply the *only* ones in the millennial kingdom will be those whose behavior surpasses that of the Pharisees? No! This is one of the reasons we know Jesus is not referring to the imputed righteousness of Christ. He is referring to the righteous behavior of saints.

We need to remember, according to [Matt. 5:1](#), that Jesus is speaking to His disciples. Here's what He tells these saved men:

*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:19](#)).*

Jesus assumes *all* saints will be in the millennial world. But He clearly distinguishes the two different statuses of saints in the millennial world. To use our Lord's exact words (in English), some will be called *least* and some will be called *great*. Both groups are *in* the millennial kingdom, but they are not of equal standing. As a child of God, you will be raptured and be either *least* in the kingdom or *great* in the kingdom, depending on your verdict at the Judgment Seat. Either way, you will be in the kingdom, but there is a vast difference between *least* and *great*, which is outside the scope of this article.

Examining v.19-20 together, we must conclude that to *enter into* the kingdom (by having righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees) is equivalent to being called *great* in the kingdom. On the flipside, not entering into the kingdom (by breaking one of the least commandments) is equivalent to being called *least* in the kingdom.

The phrase *enter into the kingdom of heaven* cannot mean to possess eternal life and go to heaven, as has already been demonstrated. Nor can it mean to *inhabit* the kingdom, for all saints will inhabit, both least and great.



Contextually, to *enter into the kingdom of heaven* must mean to be *great* in the millennial kingdom, which is akin to the term *inherit the kingdom*, used elsewhere in the New Testament, the idea of ruling and reigning as an heir with Christ, awarded only to those who qualify.

Those children of God who are called *great* will inherit. All other saints will not inherit and will be called *least* in the kingdom. To be *least* is to be a mere subject, and with that status comes shame and profound regret, including weeping and gnashing of teeth. For the *least* in the kingdom will be in the darkness outside while those who are *great* in the kingdom will be in the brightness within, so to speak—not referring to actual places, but different statuses.

Therefore, we can conclude, based on this passage, when we see the term *enter into the kingdom of heaven* or *enter into life* in the Scriptures, the meaning is greatness and inheritance in the kingdom. However, the reference is not merely to the future; it also has a present day application. To *enter into the kingdom* is to live *now* with a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees so that your verdict at the Judgment Seat is *well done, good and faithful servant*.

The reader is challenged to study the following verses, exchanging the words *enter into the kingdom of heaven* or *enter into life* with *inherit the millennial kingdom*. Notice what a difference it makes in one's interpretation of the Scriptures.

[Matthew 5:20](#); [7:21](#); [18:3](#); [Mark 10:15](#); [Luke 18:17](#)

[Matthew 19:23-24](#); [Mark 10:24-25](#); [Luke 18:24-25](#)

[Matthew 23:13](#)

[Mark 9:43-50](#); [Matthew 18:8-9](#)

[Matthew 19:17](#)

[John 3:5](#)—Note: In [John 3:3](#) Jesus emphatically tells Nicodemus that if he wants to see (i.e., inhabit) the kingdom, He must be born again. That must come first. Then, if he wants to *enter* (i.e., inherit) the kingdom, he must qualify by being born of water (the Word) and the Spirit (Spirit-filling).

In other words, Jesus is giving Nicodemus the two qualifications for *inheriting* the millennial kingdom: salvation by grace through faith alone followed by a life of obedience to the Lord.

Previously I had viewed all of these passages as soteriological, referring to salvation. However, forcing that hermeneutic on these passages requires one to conclude (if consistent) that salvation is by works. Now I realize those passages do not refer to salvation at all, but rather to sanctification—qualifying to *inherit* the millennial kingdom. Of course, that means a life of discipleship now.

In [Part 2](#), we will examine the second question.

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## Why We Should All Care About the Kingdom

In His final forty days on earth before ascending to heaven, Jesus spoke to His disciples of “the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). His future Messianic kingdom on earth was the burden of His heart from the very start of His public ministry – “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” – and it was on His heart to the very end.

Yet, His focus was not merely on the fact of the millennial kingdom or the nature of it. Much had already been said by the Old Testament prophets concerning the coming kingdom. Repeatedly, through the synoptic gospels, we find Jesus honing in on the requirements for living the kingdom way of life here and now, which then qualifies one to inherit the coming millennial kingdom.

If Jesus cared so much about getting His disciples ready for the kingdom, how much more should we? Is the church of Jesus Christ really focused on the kingdom? If so, then why aren't more Christians motivated to prepare for the Judgment Seat of Christ and what follows? Could it be that many do not take the Judgment Seat seriously?

The apostle Paul's warning should be sobering to us all:

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. 2 Cor. 5:10*

All children of God will appear (i.e., be made manifest) at the tribunal of Jesus. Every one will be recompensed according to how he lived on earth. The verdict will be good (“well done, good and faithful servant”) or bad (“thou wicked and slothful servant”) and will determine the extent of every man's reward or loss as he enters the Messianic kingdom of Christ on earth.

*Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. 1 Cor. 3:13-15*

Work of an inferior nature (i.e., temporal and self-dependent) will be consumed in Christ's “testing” fire, and be considered a loss in the kingdom. That saint of God, though eternally secure, will be ashamed at the Judgment

Seat, and will consciously regret his verdict throughout the Millennial kingdom, having no opportunity to rule and reign with Christ (the very purpose of our millennial existence!). Only work of an abiding nature (eternal and Christ-dependent) will survive and be rewarded in the kingdom.

Because we fear our God Who is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29), we should passionately convince fellow believers of their coming appointment.

*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. 2 Cor. 5:11*

In other words, we should be actively engaged in warning saints of the awfulness of the Judgment Seat of Christ and helping them prepare to give a good account.

Unfortunately, I believe an error has crept into the church in modern times. Many assume because they are eternally secure the Judgment Seat of Christ will be merely an awards ceremony of sorts. They imagine shuddering momentarily at the Bema, perhaps receiving a mild rebuke, then continuing on into the millennial kingdom with all the honors and privileges supposedly conferred upon children of God. They expect a “happily-ever-after” millennial existence, complete with no tears or sorrow. Nothing could be further from the truth!

There are three problems with this mentality. First, it assumes no difference between the kingdom of heaven (millennial kingdom) and heaven. But there is a big difference! Second, it assumes all children of God are, by nature of their standing, automatically qualified to rule and reign as firstborn sons. But that is not what the Bible teaches. Third, it assumes the Judgment Seat of Christ will be a mere formality, no big deal. But this way of thinking is flippant and misinformed and will certainly be regretted in the future.

Out of a passion to help saints prepare for the coming kingdom, the author is offering this website to provide Biblical teaching on the coming Judgment Seat of Christ and the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ to follow. Oh, may all saints of God prepare *now* to hear “well done” *then*, that they might glorify Christ by reigning together with Him in His coming kingdom.

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## Two Inheritances

For years I misread [Romans 8:16-17](#). In my defense, I never heard it preached or taught correctly, that I can remember. But, to my shame, I fell into a trap—and the trap is making assumptions about Scripture passages rather than honestly interpreting the passages, even if the interpretation doesn’t fit our theological grid.

I personally believe that is a major problem in Bible-believing Christianity—assuming, based on what we have been taught or always known. But what if our teachers were incorrect on a particular point? Are we obligated to perpetuate an erroneous tradition? God forbid! I appreciate my teachers, and learned much from them, but I am now convinced they missed some things, and I’m sure I have too—no one of us has all the answers. That is why having a teachable spirit is so critical.

Putting aside preconceived notions, let’s approach this Scripture passage with an open mind.

*The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together ([Romans 8:16-17](#)).*

I always assumed all believers become both heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ at the point of salvation, as if there were a period at the end of that statement. However, I have since realized that, according to the verse, inheritance with Christ is conditional— “**if** so be that we suffer with him.” Somehow, I had missed that.

The point I desire to make in this article is that in the Bible, we find not **one** inheritance for Christians, but **two**. The first is an unconditional inheritance. It is guaranteed and bestowed on all saints based on our *position* in Christ—the inheritance is eternal life, because we are sons of God and, as sons, heirs of God.

*Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ ([Galatians 4:7](#)).*

The other inheritance is conditional. It is not guaranteed, but is awarded at the Judgment Seat only to those who qualify, based on faithfulness and perhaps other factors (i.e., how one progresses in sanctification). The inheritance is the privilege of ruling with Christ in the millennium as a co-heir with Christ. Notice the following chart:

<b>Unconditional Inheritance</b>	<b>Conditional Inheritance</b>
Guaranteed	Not guaranteed
Bestowed on all saints	Awarded to qualified saints
Based on position in Christ— “Heirs of God”	Based on faithfulness— “co-heirs with Christ”
Inheritance = Eternal Life	Inheritance = ruling with Christ in the Millennium

Our unconditional inheritance can never be forfeited, for it is based on sonship. However, our conditional inheritance can be forfeited, for it is

based on qualifying as a firstborn son.

In Bible times, firstborn sons received a double portion. Nevertheless, while it was referred to commonly as the inheritance of the firstborn, the father was under no obligation to give it to the firstborn. He could choose to give it to another, if he did not deem the firstborn son worthy of the firstborn inheritance. In other words, if a firstborn son disqualified himself for one reason or another, he would lose the special inheritance for firstborn sons.

A classic example of this is Jacob and his firstborn son. Reuben was the firstborn son and normally would have received the double inheritance, but Reuben disqualified himself by taking his father's concubine as his own. Thus, Jacob pronounced Reuben unworthy of receiving the double inheritance and, instead, gave it to Joseph, blessing Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben still received the unconditional inheritance guaranteed to all sons, but he did not receive the conditional firstborn inheritance. That was given to another who was declared worthy.

God reminds New Testament Christians that *"all these things happened unto them [Old Testament Israel] for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come"* ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)). In other words, what happened to Old Testament Israel is to serve as a spiritual example to us, so that we might learn and not repeat the mistakes of Israel.

Consider the Exodus. How many of the Israelites—at the point of the Exodus, when they left Egypt—were saved people? Every one of them! How do we know this? They *all* believed God, and they *all* applied the blood to the doorposts, as God had said. The angel of death passed over *all* of them, and they were *all* delivered from bondage in Egypt. Of course, the Passover is a beautiful picture of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Thus, we sing that wonderful hymn, "When I see the blood, I will pass, I will pass over you."

Knowing the entire nation of Israel was saved at the Exodus, what does God have to say about their inheritance? First, they received an unconditional, guaranteed inheritance. Jehovah God declared Himself to be the God of Israel. Their inheritance was Jehovah.

*And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God ([Exodus 29:45-46](#)).*

God says this long before Israel takes possession of Canaan land. His unconditional promise (their unconditional inheritance) is that He will be their God. Obviously, individuals born after the Exodus would have to decide whether to believe on God and thereby enter into the national promise. In like manner, individuals today need to make their own decision to depend on Christ alone for salvation and thereby enter into the unconditional inheritance of eternal life that He gives to all who believe.

What was their conditional inheritance? Israel could take possession of the land only if they would obey God and depend on Him for victory over the enemy.

*For if ye shall diligently keep all these commandments which I command you, to do them, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to cleave unto him; Then will the Lord drive out all these nations from before you, and...every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be yours ([Deut. 11:22-24](#)).*

The condition for inheriting (i.e., taking possession) of the land was obedience to God's Word and faithfulness (i.e., full dependence on the Lord for victory). Here's the point: saved Israelites unconditionally received God as their inheritance, but possession of Canaan land was conditional, depending on their obedience and faithfulness to Jehovah.

Reformed theologians make the mistake of equating Canaan land with heaven, but that is a hermeneutical error in my opinion. We believe Canaan land is a picture of two things: (1) spiritual victory in the present life, which leads to (2) inheriting Millennial rest in the life to come. Incidentally, even after taking possession of Canaan land the Israelites had the potential of losing it, if they became unfaithful—see [Deut. 28:58, 63](#).

As children of God, we are guaranteed eternal life; it is our inheritance as heirs of God. However, we are not guaranteed millennial inheritance; that is the reward for faithfulness. All believers will be in the millennial world, but not all will inherit that kingdom or enjoy the benefits of ruling and reigning with Christ.

I liken that condition to being a subject in a medieval kingdom, for example. The king would own and rule a vast territory. His subjects would benefit from living in the village, under the king's protection and bounty, but only those heirs living in the castle would be able to fully participate in reigning and enjoy the beauties and luxuries and opportunities of the king Himself.

There is a difference between merely living in the millennium and possessing it, just as there was a difference for Israel living in the promised land and possessing it (see [Deut. 11:31](#)). Abraham sojourned in Canaan land, but He did not possess it, according to [Heb. 11:9, 13](#). Furthermore, for many centuries of Israel's existence in the land, they did not possess the land, even though they lived there. Instead, foreign powers controlled the land and taxed the Israelites.

Incidentally, from my understanding of Scripture, possession of the promised land was God's gift to Israel from the very beginning of the nation's salvation. In other words, at the time of the Passover, I believe God granted the conditional inheritance to His people. For God refers to Israel not only as His son (unconditional inheritance) but also as His first-born son (conditional inheritance)—read [Ex. 4:22-23](#).

This is also conceptually true for the New Testament Christian. God assumes

from the point of salvation His children are not only sons—due an inheritance—but first-born sons—due a double inheritance.

*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren ([Romans 8:29](#)).*

However (and this is a big however), just as the disobedient Israelites disqualified themselves and were disinherited from possessing the promised land, so disobedient Christians whom Jesus deems unworthy are disinherited from taking possession of the millennial kingdom. They lose their status as first-born sons. Paul warns of this possibility in three of his epistles: [1 Cor. 6:9-10](#); [Eph. 5:3-5](#); and [Gal. 5:19-21](#). It seems to me God also uses Esau in Hebrews 12 as a warning to Christians to beware losing their inheritance. The loss of inheritance is not to be equated with the loss of salvation, for that is unconditional, but with the loss of millennial privilege, for that is conditional.

Now the warning of [1 Cor. 10:12](#) makes sense: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Israel’s unbelief and repeated testing of God in the wilderness resulted in disinheritance. Even Moses disqualified himself because of disobedience! If this could happen to Moses, how much more should Christians beware?

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## [Get Ready to Be the Bride](#)

On the heels of teaching His disciples about the imminence of the rapture in [Matt. 24](#), Jesus shares the parable of the ten virgins in [Matt. 25](#) to illustrate the urgency of kingdom-readiness. He wants all believers to enter into the realm of discipleship, so they will be worthy of inheriting the Millennium. This parable demonstrates what happens to those who choose to submit to discipleship and those who do not.

*Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish ([Matt. 25:1-3](#)).*

Parables are metaphors that use everyday situations to illustrate spiritual truths. In this case, Jesus uses the concept of Jewish virgins getting ready for marriage in their culture to get across the utter importance of being ready to be His bride.

We must not read our western cultural traditions regarding marriage into the passage. Rather, we must interpret according to the marriage customs

prevalent during Bible times. Following is a brief overview of the five aspects of marriage during the New Testament era:

1. **Betrothal.** The bridegroom-to-be would meet with the father of the bride-to-be and agree to marry his daughter. The result, if they could come to an agreement, was a legally binding marriage transaction. The couple was considered married at that point, but they would live apart for a year while the bride prepared for the wedding and the groom prepared the home.
2. **Processional.** The bride would be transferred from her father's house to the house of her new husband. This would typically happen at night in a torch-lit procession, involving guests. The bride did not know what day the groom would appear, so she had to be prepared for his arrival. A town crier of sorts would come by a little in advance to warn the bride of the groom's arrival.
3. **Festivities.** An entire week of feasting and celebrating with friends would typically precede the wedding ceremony.
4. **Ceremony.** The actual wedding observance would be held toward the end of the week of celebration.
5. **Marriage Supper.** A large concluding supper would be held at the end of the week, after which the groom and his bride would be ushered off to their home to start their lives.

It is important to keep this custom in mind when studying the parable, for it is vivid in the psyche of the Jewish audience Jesus is addressing.

The moral of this story is simple: those who are faithful and ready (i.e., spiritually prepared) at the rapture will be allowed to participate in the wedding festivities, including the wedding supper, which inaugurate the Millennium. Those who are unfaithful will be excluded from the celebrations. This does not mean they are unbelievers, but rather believers who have not lived righteously. They are *saved; yet so as by fire (1 Cor. 3:15)*. Accordingly, they do not qualify to rule and reign with Jesus in His millennial kingdom.

As stated in a previous article entitled, [The Wedding Garment](#), the necessary preparation for attending the wedding festivities is a proper wedding garment. Contrary to popular belief, the wedding garment is not the imputed righteousness of Christ.

[Rev. 19:8](#) specifies the garment of *fine linen, clean and white* granted to wedding participants *is the righteousness of saints* (emphasis added). The Greek word translated *righteousness* is plural, and should literally be translated *righteousnesses* (plural). In other words, the garment is the righteous acts of saints! The acts are righteous because they have been imparted by Jesus, as He lives His life through the saints.

Again, this is not a reference to the imputed righteousness of Christ (justification), but rather to a righteous garment Jesus imparts to those He deems worthy at the Judgment Seat, based on their righteous lifestyle here on earth. That is, only those who progress in sanctification to the point of discipleship, according to the will of the Lord, will be suitably dressed –



and thereby qualified – to be included in the marriage festivities. Could this be implying that only faithful Christians – as determined by Jesus at the Judgment Seat – will comprise the bride of Christ? Fellow believer, do you understand the significance of your Judgment Seat verdict?

Some would have us believe this passage is referring to saved and unsaved. The five ready virgins are those who are saved, they say, and the five unprepared virgins are those who are unsaved. However, despite the popularity of that interpretation, it is not consistent with the text, as we shall see.

First, all ten women in the parable are virgins. The natural man is never compared to a virgin, which is a picture of positional righteousness and purity. That imagery would be inappropriate for unbelievers, who are dead in trespasses and sins and enemies of God. Furthermore, the apostle Paul said in [2 Cor. 11:2](#), “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” He was speaking to saints at the church of Corinth, not to the lost. His intent was to be able to present them as chaste (pure) virgins, a prospect which is possible for believers because of our position in Christ. However, presentation as a pure virgin at the Judgment Seat is not a given, for it is conditional, based on one’s lifestyle.

Some insist this kingdom parable refers to the Jews rather than the church. They say these are Jews waiting for Christ’s second coming at the end of the tribulation. That is unlikely, for in [Matt. 21:43](#) Jesus had pronounced that the kingdom would be taken from the Jewish nation and given to a “nation” bringing forth the fruits thereof. We understand that “nation” to be the church of Jesus Christ, for in [Matt. 8:12](#) Jesus said “the children of the kingdom” (i.e., the Jews) would be cast into outer darkness – not a reference to hell, but to the relative darkness outside the realm of Christ’s bright presence in the banqueting hall, so to speak.

Furthermore, the context ([Matt. 24](#)) of our text ([Matt. 25](#)) is focused on being prepared at the rapture and not being surprised, like the arrival of a thief in the night. If this were referring to the second coming, it would be predictable. The element of surprise would be missing. Thus, this parable of the virgins and the one preceding it (the parable of the household servant) and the one following it (the parable of the talents) must apply to the church and not to Israel. These virgins represent the saints. In fact, the number ten, according to several Bible commentators, is the number of completion. The ten virgins symbolize the entire church.

The storyline is simple. The ten virgins are preparing for the coming of the bridegroom, but according to the marriage customs outlined earlier, they don’t know when that will be. Since the bridegroom will come at night, they have lamps, filled with oil, and the wise virgins have vessels of surplus oil besides. The foolish virgins do not have the extra oil.

Oil in the Scriptures is typically a picture of the Holy Spirit. Another indication that these virgins are all saved is that they all have oil in their lamps – representing the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Those who have surplus oil, we could say, not only have the Spirit’s indwelling, they also are filled with the Spirit – they are walking in the Spirit, living

the Christ-life.

The wise virgins are like Christians who have renounced the self-life and have let go of worldly pleasures. They are regularly appropriating God's grace by faith to let Jesus live His life through them. They are fruit-bearing, victorious Christians. In contrast, the unfaithful are living for themselves, captivated by the world, indifferent to the Lord's return, not walking in the Spirit.

Since the hour is late, all of these virgins go to sleep. Soon they are awakened by the crier at midnight, who says, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him." Notice the emphasis on readiness to meet the bridegroom – in our case, readiness to meet Jesus at the Judgment Seat.

They all get up and trim their lamps to meet the bridegroom. This is very likely indicative of the rapture (which is contextual). A picture of the Judgment Seat follows, for while five of the virgins are faithful, being filled with the Spirit and therefore ready to meet the bridegroom, the other five are unfaithful, not being filled with the Spirit and therefore not ready to meet the bridegroom.

In the parable, the unprepared virgins don't have enough oil, so they must go and buy some for themselves. The wise virgins cannot give any of their own, since every person will stand before Christ, accountable only for him or herself. Spirit-filling is a personal thing and cannot be shared with others. Every man (or woman in this case) must be filled, independent of others. The wise virgins are wise because they have been living for Jesus; the foolish virgins are foolish because they have been living for self.

While the foolish virgins are off trying to obtain more oil for their lamps, the bridegroom comes. The wise virgins enter the wedding banquet hall, and the door is shut. The unprepared miss their opportunity to attend the marriage and related festivities.

Incidentally, what door is shut? The door to heaven? Absolutely not! Jesus is not talking about heaven; He is talking about the millennial kingdom. In particular, the marriage of Christ and His church that inaugurates the Millennium.

In like manner, unfaithful Christians are excluded from the marriage festivities, indicating millennial disinheritance, no opportunity to rule and reign with Jesus in His coming Kingdom.

Think of it! Jesus will be the King of the kingdom, and His bride will be the queen, so to speak. The queen will rule and reign with the King throughout the millennial kingdom.

That is why the unfaithful church is not included in the marriage festivities or the marriage itself – because they will not be ruling as Christ's bride (His queen) in the kingdom.

What becomes of the unfaithful Christians (or we could say the five foolish virgins)?

*Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not (Matt. 25:11-12).*

The statement of Christ in v.12, "I know you not," tends to confuse some into thinking these virgins cannot possibly represent Christians. However, a brief explanation of the Greek wording used can clear up any potential misunderstanding.

Jesus is omniscient, and obviously knows everybody, so His statement "I know you not" cannot refer to intelligent comprehension. He is using the term relative to the context.

The Greek word translated "know" in v.12 is the idea of intimate knowledge. Vine says Christ's statement suggests, "you stand in no relation to me." That doesn't mean they are lost and condemned. Relative to the parable and the context, it means they are not fit to be His bride. They are not closely related to Jesus, because of their unrighteous lifestyle that has resulted in broken fellowship. Thus, they are not allowed entrance to the wedding festivities and the marriage, for they do not qualify to enter the banquet hall.

It is as if Jesus is saying, "you five foolish, unfaithful virgins are not worthy to be my bride; my relationship to you is not close. You will not rule and reign in my kingdom as my queen." Immediately following Christ's pronouncement, "I know you not," He admonishes His disciples:

*Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh (Matt. 25:13).*

In dispensational Christianity, it seems the tendency is to assume that *all* believers will inherit the millennial kingdom, *all* will rule and reign with Christ in some degree, *all* will inherit the promises for overcomers, *all* will live happily-ever-after, and *all* will live without sorrow in the Millennium. But it seems to this writer that such theology is not only inconsistent with the Scriptures, but also contributes unwittingly to licentious behavior.

It is high time that saints get ready to be the bride!

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**[Thief in the Night: Rapture or Second](#)**

## Coming? (Part 2)

The purpose of this two-part article is to demonstrate that the thief-in-the-night metaphor in the New Testament refers to the rapture and not the second coming. The question is of critical importance, for it determines how we interpret the following parables:

- Parable of the Household Servants – [Matthew 24:42-51](#); [Luke 12:35-48](#)
- Parable of the Ten Virgins – [Matthew 25:1-13](#)
- Parable of the Talents – [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

If a thief in the night is an analogy of surprise at the rapture, then the characters in the above parables are all Christians, some of which are faithful and ready for the rapture, while others are unfaithful and shocked by the rapture.

In [Part 1](#) we considered the following: 1. The timing of the rapture is unknown, but the timing of the second coming is precisely prophesied and therefore predictable. 2. If the thief in the night metaphor does not refer to the rapture, then nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach His disciples about the rapture. Let us now consider a third point.

**3. Jesus teaches about the rapture, the tribulation, and the second coming in Matthew 24-25. Much of His teaching is parabolic, for the purpose of instructing believers how to live in light of the rapture.**

Our western minds tend to think chronologically, while eastern minds tend more toward conceptual thoughts. We see that in Matthew 24-25, where Jesus is not speaking chronologically, but conceptually. Jesus gives the following survey of end times events in response to His disciples' questions (24:3): When shall these things be? What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?

**24:4-14 Description of the end of the present church age and the first half of the tribulation.** Many of the events in this passage are already occurring in the present age, and will continue on with greater intensity in the first half of the tribulation. Certainly, we know that Jesus is speaking more broadly than the first half of the tribulation alone, for He had mentioned in vs. 1-2 the destruction of the Temple, and His disciples had just asked, "when shall these things be?" We know the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70, but that event was still future for them and was very much on their minds as Jesus is speaking about the present era. He comes back to the present era in v.32.

**24:15-28 Description of the last half of the tribulation,** starting with the abomination of desolation and ending with preparations for Armageddon.

**24:29-31 Description of the second coming of Christ,** preceded by signs in the heavens.

**24:32-36 Parable of the fig tree.** Jesus now backs away from describing the

events of the end times to return to the present era, and He uses a parable to make His point.

*Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled ([Matthew 24:32-34](#)).*

It is of utmost importance to remember: parables are not for an unbelieving audience with the intent of giving them the Gospel. Parables are for the express intent of concealing truth from those who have chosen unbelief and rejection of Messiah. They are for revealing truth to those who have received Him and need further instruction in discipleship. Jesus never concealed the Gospel in parables!

Parables are predominantly for teaching believers how to prepare for the kingdom (i.e., the millennial kingdom, a literal Messianic reign on earth, which would have been in the psyche of His audience). We should not be surprised then, to learn that, starting in v.32 (the parable of the fig tree), and continuing on to 25:30, Jesus turns to the subject of the rapture and the believer's readiness to meet Him unashamed. He starts with the parable of the fig tree, which helps believers see what conditions will be like in the final generation preceding the rapture.

The fig tree is a symbol of Israel's prosperity as a nation. In the case of the withered fig tree ([Matthew 21:19](#)), it pictures a nation living in blindness and unbelief, *until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in* ([Rom. 11:25](#)). Indeed, from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the nation has also been scattered and not in possession of the land until very recently.

However, the parable of the fig tree in [Matt. 24:32-35](#) shows an entirely different tree, one having "tender" branches and leaves beginning to bud, a reference to the nation beginning to prosper again. Jesus uses this as a sign, of sorts, to signify that "all these things" are "near, even at the doors." When we see this sign, we are to know that "summer is nigh."

Summer is the time when figs bear fruit. Notice carefully the language. When we see the tree *starting* to bloom, we are to know that summer (harvest) is near, but not actually here yet. In the context of Israel and the end times, summer must be the millennial kingdom, when the nation is again thriving in the land. That will not happen again until after the return of Christ.

Some prefer to limit the phrase "all these things" to the immediately preceding verses (vs. 29-31, referring to Christ's second coming), but it is more natural, given Christ's use of the phrase "all these things," to apply it to His full discussion.

That being the case, what is Jesus saying to His disciples? In a nutshell, Jerusalem will be destroyed, the nation scattered (see also Luke 21),

horrible things (tribulation) will happen on earth, and to the nation of Israel in particular, followed by the second coming of Christ and the gathering up of the “elect.” However, the timing of the nation’s blessing and ultimate return to the land in the Millennium will be near when we see the fig tree (i.e., the nation) *starting* to bloom again. When that starts to happen, then all the events of vs. 4-31 will come to pass in a generation (the average lifespan of a person), culminating in “summer” – Israel entering the millennial promise-land.

Israel re-formed as a nation in 1948, and was recognized by the United Nations. Since then, Israelis have been flocking back to the land of Canaan, as God prepares His nation for the end times. It is reasonable to say the fig tree is beginning to blossom. Could the rapture be nigh? We don’t know for sure, but signs of the times certainly point that way. Thus, it is appropriate for Jesus to tell His disciples at this point in the narrative:

*But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. (Matt. 24:36)*

**24:37-42 The rapture likened to Noah’s ark.** Contextually, this verse appears to be a reference to the rapture, not the second coming. The passage that follows (vs. 37-42) also seems to be rapture-focused, even though some have interpreted otherwise.

The wicked conditions of Noah’s day are very similar to conditions in our present era. Noah’s ark is a beautiful picture of the rapture – salvation from the wrath to come (the tribulation). As the flood carried away the wicked, so the tribulation will carry away all those who reject Messiah. They will all be killed at the Battle of Armageddon. Just as the wicked were surprised at the arrival of the flood, so those who reject Jesus Christ will be surprised when Christians disappear and the unsaved are left on earth to endure the horrors of the tribulation.

The three parables listed at the beginning of this article are then shared by Jesus to illustrate the importance of rapture-readiness. A discussion of these parables is outside the scope of this article. Following these parables on the theme of rapture-readiness, Jesus drops the use of parables and returns to teaching about the second coming – the sheep and goats judgment (25:31-46).

Jesus wants His children to be ready for the rapture, and not to be caught by surprise, like those who are unsaved. His admonition to Christians is emphatic: *watch ... for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come (24:42)*. He warns His disciples in vs. 43-44 of the possibility of living in unfaithfulness, resulting in shock and surprise at the rapture, experiencing the Son of man’s coming in the clouds as a thief arriving in the night. Faithful servants are not taken by surprise. While they don’t know the hour, they are ready for the rapture, regardless.