

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 *dosomething*. 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.