

June 24, 2018
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THE OTHER PAIN MED CRISIS Matthew 19

Laurie and I had just watched a movie on television that turned out to not be very good. I had suspected it was not going to be great, and it turned out to be even less than I suspected. We had gone into the kitchen and were cleaning up. Laurie had her back to me and I thought she said, “That was the most disappointing movie.” I was thinking that I had low expectations for it. I was just about to say, “Yeah, I had low expectations, and it was pretty much what I expected.” But before I could speak she went on and said, “I should have had the chocolate one.” I found myself at a total loss. She should have had the chocolate movie? What is a chocolate movie? What in the world was she talking about? Man, was I confused.

I finally said, “The chocolate one? What does chocolate have to do with a movie?” She looked at me like I had two heads and said, “Movie? I didn’t say anything about a movie. I said, “That was the most disappointing smoothie.” She had bought a smoothie that day at the grocery store and debated about a fruit one and a chocolate one. She bought the fruit one and it was not good. She was taking it out of the refrigerator when she commented on it.

Oh, boy, we’re getting old. That exchange reminded me of the classic conversation between old guys when one says, “I’m kind of thirsty,” and the other guy answers, “What are you talking about? It’s not Thursday.” It was a tad disturbing. But it also was an example of the kind of mistake you can make when you don’t understand what is actually going on. That one was just humorous and trivial, but it is possible to make a grievous mistake when we don’t understand what is actually happening in life. Today we will see an example of it. It is an example that serves as a warning to us, for failing to understand what is really happening is not just common among us humans, it is almost universal. Let’s look at Matthew 19.

JESUS DOESN’T BELIEVE IN LOOPHOLES

At the beginning of this chapter Jesus leaves Galilee in the north of Israel where he has spent much of his time and goes south to the Judean area. He lands east of the Jordan River. Large crowds are following him and he continues to heal people, drawing even more. He is now getting close to the center of Jewish life, the city of Jerusalem. The religious leaders are getting even more disturbed by him, so some

come to question him and in the process hope to back him into a corner and lessen his popularity.

They decide the issue of divorce is one where they can cause him some problems. This is still a hot button issue in the church today. Divorce is so prevalent in our society that many in the church have made a large issue of not being soft on divorce. This passage seems black and white. Jesus says in verse 9 “Anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” This seems to draw a pretty definitive line in the sand. In many parts of the church divorce has become almost like it is the one unforgiveable sin.

I am not going to spend a lot of time on this passage today, but I do want to say that it is not quite as black and white as it seems on the surface. We need to understand it in its historical context. Notice how the religious leaders pose their question in verse 3. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any and every reason?*” There was a debate going on in the Jewish culture of that day. The debate was not about whether divorce was “lawful” before God. Both sides maintained that divorce was “lawful” or allowed by God. In fact, they thought it was actually *commanded* by God. But one side taught that there was a limited number of circumstances under which it was lawful. The other side claimed that divorce was allowed for any reason whatsoever. A man could decide that his wife’s snoring at night was intolerable to him and that was grounds for divorce. If she overcooked the expensive filet mignon, that could be grounds for divorce if he wanted it to be. The highly respected Rabbi Akiba claimed that a man had legitimate grounds for divorce “if he found another fairer than she.”

The way the religious leaders put the question to Jesus tells you that they weren’t asking whether divorce was allowed. They were asking if it could be allowed for any reason at all, no matter how trivial. This was an attempt to get Jesus to deny what was a rather popular position, thus undercutting him. That liberal view of divorce was quite popular and they felt that if Jesus took a hard stand it might turn people off.

Jesus basically ended up endorsing the more restricted view. The “sexual immorality” clause in verse 9 is actually a shorthand answer that is broader than it sounds. It takes the position that divorce for any old reason a man could make up was not acceptable. But his real point is larger than the debate that was going on at the time. Actually what he did was to shine a light on a larger problem.

Observe how Jesus answered the question. In verses 4-5 he said, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” He concluded at the end of verse 6, “What God has joined together let no one separate.” He went back to God’s original design.

The problem here is not just divorce, but the tactics of the religious leaders. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus highlighted how the leaders of Israel habitually looked for loopholes in God’s laws. They looked for ways to convince themselves and others that they were keeping those laws while in fact tromping all over them. It was fine to have hatred and anger in your heart toward someone as long as you didn’t actually kill them physically. You could be consumed with lust, but as long as you didn’t actually commit the act of adultery you were fine. They looked for ways to work it so they could actually cheat others financially by not keeping their promises but claim they were still being faithful to God’s commands. We saw a couple of chapters back how they worked it so that they could duck their responsibility to care for their own aged parents because of some religious loophole they claimed to find in the law.

They did the same thing with divorce. They wanted to convince themselves that they were faithful to God’s law by obeying its supposed “command” to divorce their wives. Notice in verse 7 they ask “why did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” In other words, we’re just doing what God commanded when we divorce our wives. The more holy did at least restrict the circumstances, but the point is, their whole approach to the marriage and divorce thing was they were looking for a loophole that in their minds allowed them to think they were obeying God while doing whatever they wanted in regard to divorce.

God doesn’t want divorce, for it is painful and damaging to all involved. However, he made provision for it in his law because of the hardness of human hearts. He knew our fallen, broken nature would lead to broken relationships. His point here is not that anyone who divorces is forever to be viewed as rebelling against God, but that we should not be looking for ways to avoid God’s ideal and call what we

are doing something God has commanded. We should not be trying to see what we can get away with. We should be seeking God's best with all our hearts.

Jesus wasn't giving a new law and saying that anyone who has ever divorced is an adulterer, and must be regarded as an unrepentant sinner, marked forever from that time on. He was saying, "Quit trying to find ways to disobey God and call it obedience." As he points out in verse 8 the problem was the hardness of their hearts. Jesus still isn't interested in loopholes. His system isn't set up as a series of laws that we try to see if we can technically keep them, but actually aim at something completely different than true godliness. It wasn't a bunch of laws that you tried to technically not break while actually pursuing whatever selfish end you really wanted. That is what religion did back then and still does today. Jesus was about transforming people from the inside out, actually changing their "want to" faculties so that they would never look for loopholes, but want to be and to do all that God commanded. That message will take center stage later in the chapter.

JESUS BELIEVES IN LITTLE ONES

There is a little vignette in verses 13-14 where Jesus reiterates something he said at the beginning of chapter 18. It is about how Jesus insisted that kids be allowed to come to him. We know how that goes. When adults are together they want to be involved in the important, adult discussions going on. They don't want to be talking to 3 year olds. Hey what adult wants to be assigned to the kids' table at Thanksgiving? But Jesus loved kids. And he insisted that they actually are a living picture of the kind of person who will be in his kingdom. Not because they are childish, or trusting, but because they occupy a humble position and aren't bothered by that. They are not obsessed with establishing their importance in this world. That is true of those who will be in his kingdom as well.

Why did this show up again in Matthew's biography of Jesus? This is just a guess on my part, but I think there are a couple of factors. First, I think it made a big impression on Matthew when Jesus on numerous occasions made time for little kids that everyone else wanted to not be distracted by. When Toby graduated from med school a few weeks ago it was a big deal. This was as adult and as important as it gets. But when he went up on the stage to receive his hood, the acknowledgement that he is now a medical doctor, he held his two little children in his arms. It made an important statement that could not be missed. I suspect Matthew never forgot the mental image of Jesus stopping everything to hug a little child. The second factor is he wanted to drive home how absolutely central

humility is to the kingdom of God. It will be an inevitable and identifying mark of all who are in it. If a person does not have that kind of humility it is highly likely they aren't in the kingdom. This is why I am seriously disturbed by some well known pastors of megachurches who are arrogant and step on little people. There is serious reason to wonder if they are even in the kingdom of God.

JESUS BLOWS UP THE WORLD'S SYSTEM

In verse 16 we come to a major incident in this chapter. A man comes to ask Jesus a question. We know from other accounts that this man, who was young, held a position of power and influence. We also know from verse 22 that he was extremely wealthy. He asks Jesus, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

Jesus' response is a bit puzzling. "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." That sounds like he's saying you have to be really good to enter life. You have to keep all the commandments. But he had just said no one is really good, so this seems contradictory. The rich man, knowing this, is confused so he asks, "Uh, which commandments?" Jesus cites the second half of the Big Ten, and the questioner says, "Well, I've done all that. What am I missing?" Jesus' answer is a stunner. He tells him to sell off all his assets and give all the proceeds to the poor. Then he should go and follow Jesus, know he will have the kingdom of God.

This is the only time Jesus ever said the way to enter the kingdom of God was to give away everything you have. He discussed having the life of the kingdom numerous times, but never again said this. What is going on here? Jesus understood this man's heart. He knew that he was serious about his faith, but not serious enough. He loved God, but not as much as he loved his wealth. His response tells us what really owned his heart. Verse 22 says, "He went away sad, because he had great wealth." In other words, he wanted the kingdom of God, but he wanted to be rich even more. If he was faced with a choice between being poor and having the kingdom of God on one hand, and being rich but not having the kingdom on the other, he would choose being rich.

What Jesus asked of this man was a bridge too far. He would do a lot of things to have the life of the kingdom of God, but he wouldn't do that. He was certain he could never be happy without his money. That is the reason Jesus hit on this point. He knew very well that the rich man loved his wealth more than anything else.

Seeing the young man walk away Jesus made a comment that in his society was inconceivable. “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” He followed that up with a picture. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. This is another one of those examples of Jesus’ sense of humor. You may encounter teachers who will talk about how there was a low gate into the city of Jerusalem and for a camel to get through it they would have to unload the camel and then the camel would crouch low. This, it is claimed, is a picture of a rich person having to divest himself of his wealth and humble himself to enter the kingdom of God. I’ve read that people have even heard that story from tour guides in Israel.

There are several problems with that interpretation. The first is that there is no historical evidence that there was ever a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of the needle. The second problem is that the words Jesus used meant a literal sewing needle, not a gate. The third problem is that Jesus intended this as a picture that is so funny it is vivid. Imagine squinting really hard to put thread through the eye of a needle. Then replace the thread with a camel. “Hey, let me try. I think I can squeeze that beast through that tiny hole.” It’s hilarious.

Finally, and decisively, observe what Jesus’ point was in verse 36. When asked who can be saved, who can enter the kingdom of God, Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” His point wasn’t that it is really hard, so like that camel losing his load and crouching down, you have to do some really hard things to get in. No, the point was that it is impossible, as impossible as trying to cram a real live camel through a tiny hole in a needle.

But I mentioned Jesus’ teaching here was inconceivable in his culture. That’s why the disciples were astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” They were astounded and dismayed. The reason is that in the culture of that day it was taken for granted that rich people are the ones who are in God’s favor. A shallow glance at the Old Testament causes us to see the many passages where God promised abundance and wealth to those who obey him. Never will those who do God’s will be poor. Those who disobey are the ones who will be cursed with hardship in this world.

The corollary that everyone drew from this is that if you were rich it had to be because God had blessed you, and God surely would only bless those who had his favor. It was, thus, assumed that anyone who was rich was in God’s favor and

would have his kingdom. When Jesus said it was hard, no impossible, for a rich man to get into God's kingdom, the obvious concern was, "Then where does that leave the rest of us? The rich already have God's favor, and if he doesn't let them in then surely there is zero hope for us." In fact, the conclusion would be there is no hope for anybody! No one is going to get into God's kingdom. What a depressing state of affairs!

Imagine that you are a singer and you want to try out for a show like American Idol. Suppose that you have a number of friends who are singers and you all go to audition. As you wait you are in a room full of wannabe singers, and one of your friends is clearly the best. You have a good voice, but you know this person is far better. The auditions begin and one person after another comes out after their chance crestfallen, having been rated not good enough. You grow concerned as people you think are better than you are rejected one after another. Then your friend, who is the best, gets her chance, and you expect she will blow the judges away and get her chance on the show. She comes out after her audition looking stunned, and admits that she didn't make it either. What are you thinking at that point? If she can't make it, then I have no chance! I might as well not even bother doing the audition. That's what Jesus' contemporaries thought when Jesus said it was impossible for a rich man, the person who is clearly favored by God, can't make it into his kingdom. If he can't, then there's no hope for any of us!

The disciples were wailing, "Then there's no hope!" Jesus came through with the best news yet. With humans, that's true. On their own, humans will fail. It is impossible for them to be saved. But with God, all things are possible. God will make a way. At that point, Jesus essentially said, "Stay tuned." The way to be saved would become clear later. When Peter said to Jesus, "We've given up a lot to follow you," the Lord replied that it was all going to be worth it. Don't worry Peter, you've made the right choice, and you will be rewarded for it.

IMPLICATIONS

KINGDOM LIFE IS WHAT WE LONG FOR

What did that rich young man want? He said, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" We tend to think that means how do I assure myself that when I die I will go to heaven? It does mean that, but it means a lot more than that. Notice Jesus' comment at the end of verse 17. "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." Enter life. What did he mean by that? He meant more than live in heaven after you die.

The biblical understanding is that the kingdom of God is that place where God rules, where he is truly king. When God is king that place will be characterized by a particular kind of existence. It will be a life of, as the ancient Hebrews put it, shalom. Shalom means peace, but it means more than that. It is about being whole, complete. Yes, it is a life of peace, but it is also a life of fullness, meaning, joy, contentment and hope. More than anything it is a life of love.

The biblical picture is that when we enter the kingdom of God, we enter into that life. That's what Jesus was talking about. We enter the life of the kingdom of God, that life of shalom. It means a life where one is truly at peace in the very core of his or her being, because that person is connected to the Almighty God, knows that God, and knows that God is their Father who loves them unconditionally, abundantly and eternally. That person is never alone because the Father is always with them. That person has joy because he or she is forgiven loved, has hope in every situation. That person has fullness of life because every second of life is filled with meaning. That person is full of life knowing that there is never cause for despair because God is there. It is a life of hope, because the person who has the life knows that it is eternal. That person is full of life because he or she loves other people as God loves, and that is the most important and fulfilling thing we can do in this life, or any other for that matter. Jesus understood that this man wanted that life. Yes, he wanted hope of life in God's eternal kingdom after death, but he also wanted the life of the kingdom right that moment.

Think about this man's circumstances. This guy wasn't just rich, he was *very* rich. Think billionaire, not millionaire. Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to be absurdly wealthy. What would it be like to never have to worry about being crammed into a middle seat in coach on an airplane? Toby and Anna last month got to fly first class on their trip home from Hawaii. They said the flight was a delight. They actually enjoyed it rather than endured it. How cool would that be? Laurie and I were thrilled on our last flight because we got exit row seats. The leg room seemed spacious. But Toby and Anna had seats that folded down totally flat and Toby said with it completely flat he still had room between him and the seat in front of him. Being rich you could always go first class. Ticket prices would not be a concern. Or even better, you could have your own private jet! That would really make flying easy. Laurie and I are dealing with a laundry list of things that need to be fixed or updated on our house. Some of them are rather pressing. But we can only afford to pick them off one at a time, knowing that we are adding to the bottom of the list while we are crossing things off the top. How cool would it be to just be able to pay to have it all done in one fell swoop? Of course we think about

the future and wonder how we're going to be able to live in our old age. Surely if I had great wealth, had all the money I would ever need, then life would be grand. I'd have just what I've always wanted, right?

The rich guy had it all. He had enough money to do everything and anything he wanted. He never stressed about money. But what was he asking? How do I get eternal life? How do I get the life of the kingdom? I don't have that life and I want it. He wasn't a materialist who only cared about money. This man was devout. When Jesus brought up God's commandments he said, "I've been obeying all of those." He was religious to the max. He had been trying his hardest to do everything right, to be what God wanted him to be, but he knew that something was wrong. He didn't feel as connected to God as he wanted, he didn't have peace, his life was missing something and he knew it.

We are like that rich man. We want to enter life. We want the life of shalom, the life of God's kingdom. We sense that it is out there, that there is a life where our souls will be at peace, where we will experience joy, hope and confidence, where we will know our lives really mean something lasting and valuable, where our hearts will be full and we will be content. We go through life identifying things that we think are missing in our life that if we could just gain them, then we'd have that life. High on most people's list is money. But approval, friends, fame, success and others typically nudge their way in. This man's experience is important for us to observe. He had it all, and he was still longing to enter life. He didn't have it, despite his wealth, position, and best religious efforts.

Kathleen Vohs is a professor at the University of Minnesota's School of Management. She has been researching this topic. She and her colleagues have found that even the mere suggestion of getting more money makes people less friendly and less sensitive to others. Does this sound like the life of shalom to you? Well known social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says, "wealth...has only a small effect on happiness because it so effectively speeds up the hedonic treadmill."

In an article in *USA Today* on June 9 Kirsten Powers quoted actor Jim Carrey as he discussed fame and wealth. He said, "Achieving all your goals provides the opposite of fulfillment; it lays bare the truth that there is nothing you can purchase, possess or achieve that will make you feel fulfilled over the long term." Carrey is expressing exactly what that rich young man in Jesus' day experienced. He had it

all, he had tried it all, and all it showed him was that nothing he had or tried gave him the fulfillment, the life, the peace that he so badly wanted.

Jesus tells us the life, eternal life, real, full life, the life of the kingdom, is found in what God does for us, not what we can achieve by ourselves. All of our striving will only verify what Jesus said. “With humans this is impossible.” The life comes from God, just as all life comes from him. And it comes through him doing something for us that we could never do for ourselves. So this life is found in what God does for us through Jesus. It is trusting in what Christ did in his life as the only thing that can make us acceptable to God, that connects us to him. Living in that reality brings immense meaning to every day of our lives.

WEALTH IS NOT WRONG, BUT IT IS DANGEROUS

It is important to keep this incident in the larger context of the Bible. Is having wealth evil? Does it put us in opposition to God? Must we sell everything and give it to the poor in order to have the life of the kingdom? This story seems to say that’s the case. But remember this is not the message we hear throughout the Bible.

If having wealth puts us in opposition to God, why would God have promised Abraham that he would bless him and also anyone who was good to Abraham? Genesis 13:2 says, “Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” Why would God do that if it was inherently wrong to be wealthy? This suggests that having success or money is not wrong in and of itself.

In John 6:28 a bunch of people ask Jesus, “What must we do to do the work God requires?” Though it is phrased different, they were asking the same question that the rich man asked Jesus. How do we get eternal life? What must we do in order to get the life of the kingdom of God? Based on Jesus’ answer in the story we are looking at you would expect him to say, “Give away everything you have,” right? But look at what he says in verse 29. “The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent.” In other words, believe in Jesus! That’s a very different answer to the same question.

This tells us that Jesus’ instruction to this rich man wasn’t intended as doctrine about the way everyone must enter God’s kingdom. It was specifically tailored to help that man see where his heart was. It also tells us an important truth about wealth. It is not inherently wrong, but it does have a tendency to distract us from what really matters.

In Matthew 5:5 Jesus launched the radical, revolutionary Sermon on the Mount by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The financially poor generally were the ones who were poor in spirit in that day, for they were the ones who were humble and much aware of their lowly state and their need. But Jesus did say “poor in spirit” because, though rare, it is possible to be wealthy in the things of this world and still be poor in spirit. But from the onset of his ministry Jesus highlighted that it is generally the poor and needy who will be in the kingdom of God. Those who are the wealthy, the powerful, the somebodies of this world most often will miss on God’s kingdom because they are focused on this world. The rich guy in our story is the poster boy for that reality. 1 Timothy 6:9-10 says, “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

You could substitute a number of other possibilities for “money” in those verses. It could be success, approval, fame, popularity, achievement. The love of success is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for it, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. So too with approval, fame, popularity and the rest.

I am sure you have had the experience that I have had where you have some medical procedure or maybe an injury and your doctor prescribed a pain killer. That medicine gives nice relief, but it might come at a price. It dulls more than your pain. Have you ever taken some that makes you feel loopy? You move around in this sort of unreal feeling foggy world. You move in sort of slow motion, and feel on the cusp of just drifting off to sleep all the time. It’s good not to hurt, but feeling so dopey is not so great.

The stuff of this world that we fixate on as the solution to our desire for the life of shalom, the life of the kingdom of God, is like that pain med. It doesn’t actually heal the problem. It dulls the pain of life to some extent, but it makes us spiritually dopey. The spiritual world seems less real, and certainly less appealing to us. It tends to dull our ability to sense and hear God’s voice. And it makes us grasp all the more desperately for more of the pain med, even can cause us to become dependent, addicted to it.

Pain meds aren't evil, but they can be dangerous. Similarly, the glittering stuff of this world that seems to magnetically draw our attention and promise us so much is not evil, but it can be dangerous. It can deaden us spiritually. In the case of the rich young man who came to Jesus it killed him spiritually.

CONCLUSION

What should we do in light of what we have seen in this incident?

BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

The rich young man thought he wanted to be rich. But he should have been able to see that he was already rich and it wasn't enough. He was asking Jesus for something he didn't have, and when offered what he wanted he walked away from it to keep what he had. Which means he doomed himself to ever lead a life of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

On our vacation last month Laurie and I did a little stand up paddle boarding. We haven't done this much and it has been several years since we last tried, so we were a bit uncertain about it. When we started out we launched out through the waves and paddled for a bit on our knees. It was nice and steady. I felt confident and secure doing that. But it is called stand up paddle boarding, not kneel down paddle boarding. I faced a decision point. I could just stay on my knees and feel secure. Or I could try to stand up and have the considerable risk of falling off the board. I had to decide what I wanted. Did I want to be safe and secure, or did I want to actually stand up and enjoy what the sport is supposed to be about? I had to be clear about what I wanted out of the experience. I realized I wanted to actually get up on the board, so I took the risk and managed to stand up.

We face that decision point every day. What do we want? Do we want to hang on to the stuff of this world? Are we like that rich young man, not willing to let go of the baubles of this life, or do we want to really live? In Matthew 6:33 Jesus said simply, "Seek first the kingdom of God." This is what is most important. This is the only way to live out the life of the kingdom. This is the only way to the life of shalom. What would you be willing to give up to have a more dynamic relationship with God and a more full life?

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR SPIRITUAL CONDITION

Do you find yourself dull to the spiritual and interested only in the stuff of this world? Is the call of eternity only faint and unreal at best to you? Do you feel spiritually dopey? If you experience any of that, somewhere in your heart you are like that rich young man. You think you want the life of the kingdom, but there's

something else you think you want more. Whatever that thing is, the pursuit and even the experience of it may be working like those pain meds. They are dulling your spiritual senses. So identify what it is that has occupied your heart. Let go of it, and seek God's kingdom. We are hearing a lot about the opioid crisis in our nation and the fact that the abuse of opiates is rampant and destroying lives. There's another even larger crisis, and it is the crisis of spiritual opioids that dull us to the Spirit of God. Let's kick the habit.

The problem is those pain meds wear off, and when they do the pain is back. Furthermore, they become addicting. We think we need them, just like that rich guy was sure he needed his money, and the addiction ends up driving us away from the very thing that we need, the thing that will give us the life that we actually long for. Is there anything that, if you discovered it was keeping God from being more real to you, you would still refuse to let go of it? If there is, that thing is keeping you from experience the life of God's kingdom to some degree.

