

Entering Into Greatness

IN the preceding chapter we established that to “enter the kingdom” is a very pregnant phrase. Depending on the context, it can mean different things. In this chapter we will discuss the passages that are calls to greater honor in the Kingdom, i.e., greatness. To be great in God’s kingdom one must cultivate the surpassing righteousness and move beyond the entry level of discipleship that characterizes many believers.

In this chapter, we will discuss that aspect of the kingdom which we expand on the call the kingdom way of life. To “enter the kingdom” is used in the sense of an entrance into fully committed discipleship, leading to a higher status and an abundant entrance into the restored Davidic theocracy. The Apostle John referred to it as an entrance “by the gates” (Revelation 22:14). We will see that this insight is key to unraveling the apparent contradiction between Matthew 5:19 and 5:20, which will be discussed below. It will also resolve the apparent contradiction between Matthew and Paul regarding the faith-alone requirement for personal salvation, as taught throughout the New Testament.

However, before discussing this point, we must digress and examine an important issue. Who is being addressed in the Sermon: believing disciples (Matthew 5:1-2), or a mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers? This is crucial because if the sermon’s intended audience is only believers, then Jesus is clearly explaining to believing disciples how they should behave if they want to enter the kingdom.

The Intended Audience of the Sermon

While some argue, based on Matthew 7:28, that the Sermon on the Mount was aimed at a mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers, Matthew explicitly states that the sermon was directed to believers, His disciples. One would think that his opening statement would settle the issue.

*And when He saw the multitudes [Gr ochlos], He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, **His disciples came to Him**. And opening His mouth He began **to teach them**, saying (Matthew 5:1-2).*

Yet at the end of the sermon, the crowds were amazed (Matthew 7:28), indicating they were indeed listening.¹ However, Luke, in agreement with Matthew says, “*And while all the people were listening, He said **to the disciples***” (Luke 40:45).

There is a common tendency to view the “crowds” in the Gospels as passive spectators, just curious “hangers-on” who lack a genuine connection to Christ. Why?

Minear suggests, “One answer would point to the nondescript nature of the words for *ochlos* (crowd), which modern lexicons have made standard. English readers tend to interpret the Greek text with the neutral or negative connotations in modern speech of crowd, people, throng, and multitude.”

However, the Gospels portray a different picture. Often, these crowds are his followers. They are part of a larger group of believers from which the twelve were chosen; they are believing crowds.

Regarding the multitude (*ochlos*) sitting around him, Jesus states that they are “my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:32-35).

We can also see that the intended audience of the Sermon was true believers, as Jesus describes them as regenerated. He tells them, for example, that when they face persecution, they will be rewarded in heaven (5:12). He calls them “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (5:13-14).

¹ Wayne Baxter challenges the assumption that the crowds were part of the *intended* audience on three grounds. “First, the crowds listen to the Sermon (4:25-5:1a), but Jesus explicitly addresses ‘his disciples’ and not simply the ‘crowds’ (5:1b-2). Second, as was probably the case here, Jesus was not averse to teaching His disciples in the presence of an audience (Matthew 23:1; 21:45). Third, much of Jesus’ teaching is not ‘evangelistic’ per se but presupposes a ‘beyond-entry-level’ discipleship.” See Baxter, “The Narrative Setting of the Sermon on the Mount,” 35.

He tells them, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and “they shall see God.” He adds, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11). This is not the gospel for a mixed crowd. Additionally, He talks about their “reward in heaven.” His disciples have been so moved by Jesus’ message that encourages them, saying, “*Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven*” (v. 16). The “crowds” heard all these teachings.

Does one instruct non-believers on prayer, rewards, almsgiving, and fasting (Matthew 6:16-18), then tell them these are conditions for personal salvation? Those addressed offer sacrifices at the altar (v. 24), “give to the poor” (6:3), and are told that God is their “Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:11).

Would this apply to unbelievers as well? Those addressed are told to “*lay up treasure in heaven*” (6:20-21). The Sermon on the Mount, as France describes it, is “The Discourse on Discipleship,” not a presentation of the gospel. That’s why, in Luke’s introduction to the Sermon, even though both a large “throng” (Gr *plēthos*, “number”) of people and a sizable “crowd” (Gr *ochlos*) of disciples were present (Luke 6:17), we read of Jesus, “*Turning His gaze toward His disciples He began to say, ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’*” (Luke 6:20).

While it is possible that the Sermon was directed toward the four disciples just mentioned (Peter, Andrew, James, and John, as in Matthew 4:18-22), the word “disciple” (Gk. *mathtes*) appears seventy-two times in Matthew and, by my count, refers to the twelve or eleven disciples sixty-three times. That said, Jesus was fully aware that the “crowds” were listening in. If Jesus believed they were an unsaved group and that his sermon was intended to convict them of sin — as some believe — and thus prepare them for the gospel, he would have given them the gospel. There is no reference anywhere in the sermon to believing in Christ or His death for sin. The unsaved would be left with the idea that salvation is by works if the sermon was meant for a mixed group of saved and unsaved, and if “enter the kingdom” meant “go to heaven when you die.”

Luz and Koester argue that both the Twelve and crowds are equally part of the intended audience, based on Matthew 7:29. They conclude that “the Sermon on the Mount has two concentric circles of hearers: disciples and people.” Recognizing that the ethical instruction is appropriate only for those already saved, they say the crowds are “proleptically ... already following Jesus.” The Sermon on the Mount is not an evangelistic speech. It is an encouragement to believers to make a full commitment to discipleship. That is why Joachim Jeremias states that the sermon is “intended to show the young Christians, who have not only heard the message of Jesus but also opened their hearts to it, what manner of life they should lead in the future.”

He is urging these believing people, the Twelve and the crowds, to enter the kingdom. But if they have already entered the kingdom through personal salvation, why would those who have already entered be called to enter again?

The Apparent Contradiction between Matthew 5:19 and 20

Verse 19 states, “*Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*” The future tense “shall be” emphasizes this person’s status in the future reign of Christ on earth.

Jesus was accused of abolishing the Law. However, He states that even the least important laws must be obeyed. The person mentioned in this verse will be “in” the kingdom, but he has not only disobeyed even the smallest commandments but has also actively taught others to do the same. He himself not only “disobeys” (Gr *luō*, “to do away with, destroy, bring to an end, abolish”) but also causes little ones to stumble, as in Matthew 18:6. He is a dangerous teacher because he claims that God said things He did not say, thus incurring the judgment of James 3:1. He is a saved person, but as Allen points out regarding Matthew 5:19, he will have the lowest status. If any of His disciples taught men to disobey any of His commandments, he would be placed in an inferior position in the coming Kingdom. If he were a faithful servant of the law and upheld its authority before men, he would receive a high rank in the Kingdom.

Betz agrees, “One should note that a remarkable paradox results from this evaluation, for, contrary to what one would expect, **a place in the kingdom of God is not denied even to the disloyal teacher who seeks to set aside Jesus’ teaching.** Thus, one may assume that in the honorific title, ‘great,’ is promised to a loyal teacher in the heavenly kingdom.”²

The issue is status, not soteriology.

² Betz and Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, 188.

The traditional interpretation sees “enter the kingdom” in verse 20 as meaning entering heaven or gaining access to the millennium. This creates a contradiction between Matthew 5:19 and 5:20. In verse 19, a person without the surpassing righteousness is considered “in” the kingdom. Yet, according to verse 20, he does not have the surpassing righteousness, greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, which is necessary to enter it.

However, if “enter the kingdom” refers to currently adopting the lifestyle of the future kingdom, then there is no contradiction. Living that way now leads to a higher status later, an abundant entrance (2 Peter 1:11), and a reward: greatness in that future kingdom. Both “entering” and “greatness” refer to sanctification and status, not soteriology. The person in verse 19 is the regenerated saint who was “salt,” but has become one of the “saltless” ones mentioned in verse 13. Their fate—having taken the broad way and avoided the narrow path of discipleship—is “destruction” (Matthew 7:13-14), which can involve spiritual, psychological, and possibly physical ruin. Their life is of no more value, according to Jesus, than flavorless salt cast onto a manure pile (Luke 14:35). Paradoxically, this man who is declared to be “in” the kingdom does not, according to Matthew 5:20, possess the righteousness needed to “enter” it! Surprisingly, many commentators do not address this problem.

Carson, for example, in his thoughtful explanation of the Sermon on the Mount, leaves careful readers confused. On one side, he admits that being least in the kingdom refers to “ranking within the kingdom” and notes that these rankings depend on obedience to Jesus. On the other side, he states that those without surpassing righteousness which, according to Carson is justifying righteousness, cannot have access, that is, be saved.

Does Carson believe that those who disobey even the least of the commandments and who teach others to do the same possess the necessary surpassing righteousness to enter the kingdom? He never clarifies this. How can someone be “in” the kingdom if they lack the surpassing righteousness needed to enter?

There have been six possible ways to interpret these verses. First, one might argue that the man in verse 19 who is “in” but considered ‘least’ is only in the kingdom in a professing sense. He is not truly born again because if he were, he would have submitted to Christ's Lordship and obeyed Him. This was the view of Augustine, Chrysostom, and Martin Luther. This interpretation suggests that the kingdom in verse 19 is merely the sphere of profession. In contrast, in verse 20, it refers to “the sphere of reality.” However, there is no hint in the context indicating such a shift in meaning. Are we to assume that the one who is “great in the kingdom” is also just a professing Christian? To be “in the kingdom” is to be truly saved.

A second solution to this challenge is to say that the man who is “least” is regenerate, but that being “least” means he *“had kept the law for the most part.”*

A more nuanced version of this approach suggests different levels of righteousness. The lowest is the unbelieving Pharisee; the next level is the man who is “least,” and the highest includes those who do greater righteousness. The idea here is that the person who is “least” is definitely better than the Pharisee who reduced righteous to mere external obedience, but ignored the spirit of the law. Therefore, there is no contradiction between verses 19 and 20. In this view, the person does have the greater righteousness needed to enter a Kingdom way of living because it surpasses that of the Pharisees.

But, one must ask, “How much greater righteousness did Jesus have in mind?” The problem with this interpretation is that it reduces the “greater righteousness” to something only slightly above that of the Pharisees. Jesus does not define the greater righteousness that way. He describes it throughout the Sermon as a fully committed kingdom lifestyle. He provides this definition especially in the verses immediately following, where he outlines the six antitheses that clearly clarify what he means.

We must ask, “How is it possible that a person who disobeys God and teaches others to lessen their commitment to Christ by teaching them things God did not say, has ‘kept the law for the most part,’” or, for that matter, has kept it at all? “How is it possible that this level of greater righteousness is the kind of ‘greater’ righteousness needed for kingdom entrance, which Jesus had in mind?”

Neonomians cite Matthew 5:20 as evidence that entry into heaven is “conditioned” on God-produced, non-meritorious works of righteousness. For example, Alan Stanley asserts that he (Stanley) is not teaching that salvation depends on works because he is not “arguing that the righteousness required for entering the kingdom originated with man himself,” but that it comes from God’s work in the heart. Yet Stanley never explains how the carnal person of v. 19 could perform those good works and enter the kingdom.

The third option is to deny that any tension exists between these verses. The Pharisees in verse 20 are actually regenerate carnal believers and are therefore the “least” mentioned in verse 19. This solution also fails because surpassing righteousness is necessary for entrance, and since the Pharisees lack that righteousness, this view would lower the high standard of surpassing righteousness to the level of someone who disobeys and teaches others to do

the same. Additionally, Jesus' ongoing condemnation of the Pharisees indicates that many of them were not in the kingdom at all. He calls them fools, blind guides, hypocrites, and whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:17-33).

A fourth view is that in verse 20, Jesus tells His disciples that since the Pharisees cannot enter the kingdom by following their version of righteousness, why would the disciples want to follow a way of life as believers that could never get them into the kingdom in the first place? In other words, they should be motivated to pursue a higher form of righteousness as part of Christian living because the kind of righteousness the Pharisees pursue only leads to separation from God. However, this overlooks the challenge to true believers and the warning of any consequences for ignoring it.

A fifth interpretation suggests that, starting in verse 20, the intended audience changes. Before verse 20, believers were addressed, but this verse and the following are directed at a mixed group, warning them that they might not go to heaven when they die, meaning not to enter the kingdom. However, this does not align with the plain words of the text. Addressing the believing disciples, Jesus says, *"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom."* He is clearly urging his believing disciples to live according to an inner righteousness. But, if they are believing (and thus saved) disciples, how is it that they will not enter the kingdom, if "enter the kingdom" means personal salvation?

Additionally, there is no difference in the descriptions of those mentioned in 5:17–7:29 compared to those in 5:1-16. They are described as people who have God as their Father (6:1), a title only given to those who have already believed in Jesus' name (John 1:12-13); they can receive rewards in heaven (6:1, 3, 5); and they are provided with instructions on how to pray (6:9), among other things.

Throughout the rest of the sermon, the instructions are for those who already believe, and there is no evidence to suggest that a different group has suddenly become the focus.

The sixth explanation is that greater righteousness isn't about behavior but a different kind of righteousness entirely — the imputed righteousness of Christ. This was already covered in Chapter 18 above. Although many Bible scholars support this view, doubts remain. Why? As discussed in Chapter 18, righteousness in Matthew always refers to character and conduct, never to forensic justification.

All of these solutions fail because they all assume that entering the kingdom is connected to soteriology. Instead, we believe that it pertains to sanctification.

As argued earlier, the call to enter the kingdom is aimed at those who are already in the sense of personal salvation; for them it is a call to complete discipleship. The focus of the sermon is on sanctification and status, not soteriology.

This provides a final explanation for the apparent contradiction between Matthew 5:19 and 5:20. It also clarifies the perceived conflict between the works-based salvation taught in Matthew and the clear teaching of Jesus and Paul that salvation is by faith alone.

In summary, it will be helpful to restate the apparent contradictions before proceeding.

1. In Matthew 5:19, Jesus talks about a man who is "in" the kingdom but clearly lacks the inner righteousness required by verses 20-48 to enter it.
2. If entering the kingdom in Matthew 5:20 refers to the final entrance into heaven or the millennium, and if the surpassing righteousness required is only external deeds, then entering the kingdom depends on works, not faith alone. This would conflict with Jesus' teachings elsewhere and what Paul taught in Romans and Galatians.

The preceding discussion has established three things:

1. "Surpassing righteousness" refers to the spirit behind the command, not just following it as outlined in Matthew 5:21-48—not just avoiding murder, but dealing with anger; not just avoiding adultery, but lust; not just practicing eye for an eye, but turning the other cheek, etc. For a complete discussion of the "surpassing righteousness," see p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
2. The sermon is aimed at those who are already saved.
3. The call to enter the kingdom is for those who are saved to become fully committed disciples by living out the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew 5:19-20, Jesus connects entrance into the kingdom now and in the future with the outcome of an inner life and honor in the future reign. He is expressing what he has said elsewhere, but differently: by adopting the way of living in kingdom, believers will save their souls for eternity—that is, find their life's ultimate meaning and significance—and be honored with high status in the future reign of the servant kings.

That final entrance is described by Peter as an abundant entrance, “*For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you*” (2 Peter 1:11). The apostle John described this final entrance as entering “*through the gates [the way of victory and honor] into the city*” (Revelation 22:14). Let’s explore this concept in more detail.

Becoming Great in the Kingdom

Supporting the view that Matthew 5:20 refers to earning greater honor in the future kingdom by obeying the true spirit of the law—which means surpassing righteousness—it is important to note that verse 20 points back to verse 19. Verse 20 begins with “for.” Questions naturally raised by the contrast between the least and the greatest in verse 19 include, “What is the definition of ‘great’?” and “How can I become great?” These questions were commonly discussed among the disciples. Verse 20 answers them: greatness comes from obeying the spirit of the law, not just external rules like the scribes and Pharisees did—such as in the case of adultery versus lust. In other words, high status results from living out the inner principles of the Sermon on the Mount.

The only other time the phrase “enter the kingdom” appears in the Sermon on the Mount is in 7:21. There, we are told that the condition for entering the kingdom is “doing the will of the Father.” I will examine this phrase in more detail later. My conclusion will align with the view of most Matthean scholars that, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, doing the “will of the Father” means obeying its teachings.

The idea that entering the kingdom requires living in a way that leads to greatness is supported by a similar passage in Matthew 18. That chapter begins with this statement: “*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’*” (Matthew 18:1). Again, the focus is on “greatness” in the kingdom. The passage is aimed at the regenerate Twelve, and once again, Jesus discusses entrance into honor.

“Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 18:2-4, NASB)

Verse 4 begins with “whoever then” or “whoever therefore,” linking it closely with what came before. It seems that entering the kingdom and becoming great are two sides of the same coin. Experimental Predestinarian writer Craig Blomberg agrees, “So the criterion for greatness is precisely the criterion for entrance.” *Luomanen* notes that “it is interesting to see how Matthew answers the question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven by introducing the requirements of entrance.” However, Jesus is not speaking about soteriology here, because those he talks to are already in the kingdom, in the sense of being saved. To paraphrase, we might say, “Unless you are willing to accept a lower status and serve everyone, you will not enter the kingdom lifestyle and achieve greatness in the millennium.”

R. T. France correctly states, “Usage so far in this gospel indicates that ‘the kingdom of heaven’ here refers to the new values which Jesus is teaching.” Entering the kingdom refers to entering the part of the kingdom I’ve called the experience of the kingdom lifestyle—that is, into “discipleship.” Conversion (v. 3) and cutting off one’s hand (vv. 8-9) are necessary, not faith alone (Revelation 21:6). This leads to the status the disciples aimed for. Jesus introduces a child as a model for how the disciples are to think about their desire for greatness. France explains that it is

*About accepting for oneself a position in the social scale which is like that of children, that is as the lowest in the hierarchy of authority and decision-making, those subject to and dependent on adults.*³

The phrase “humbles (Gr *tapeinoō*, ‘to lose status’) himself” or “take the lowly position” in verse 4 confirms this understanding of what the context already demands. Children are socially as well as physically “little ones” (v. 6). If the disciples’ question about being “great” was prompted by a desire to exercise authority over others, they have started at the wrong end. Their “grown-up” sense of social position puts them out of sympathy with God’s value scale.

All Christians enter the realm of the kingdom. Still, Jesus says that only those who change their lives (NASB, “are converted” [Gr *strephō*, “to turn”]), and take on a servant role—living out the higher righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount—will enter a kingship (Matthew 25:34, five cites, ten cities, etc.), meaning they will become great there. Regarding “converted,” R. T. France asks, “Its use here is surprising, since we have been led to assume throughout the gospel that the disciples are already within God’s kingship, as opposed to those depicted in 5:20 and 7:21 who are in danger of never becoming true people of God.”

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 676–77.

The condition for achieving greatness, not personal salvation, is that one must change one's life. Initial salvation is not the focus here. The need for life change applies to those who are already saved, the disciples: *"At that time some of the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"* (Matthew 18:1). What is being addressed is the transformation of those who are already saved! As some have observed, "the Christian life is a life of conversion." To "convert" means to shift from desiring to be the greatest to wanting to be the least, the servant of all. Or, as Davies and Allison explain, "to start one's spiritual life afresh." The issue concerns sanctification, not soteriology—greatness in the kingdom, not initial entry.

Additionally, the parallel phrase in Luke 18:17 clarifies the connection between "entering the kingdom" and receiving the kingdom. *"Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all."* To receive a kingdom does not mean "be saved." It means to "receive royal authority" in the kingdom (Luke 19:15). Therefore, to "not receive the kingdom" means, "will not receive authority" in the kingdom, i.e., he will not "inherit" it.

For example, in the parable of the nobleman who went to a far country, Jesus says that the nobleman's purpose was to "receive a kingdom for himself" (Luke 19:12), meaning he was to gain ruling authority over a kingdom. Clearly, Jesus equates entering the kingdom with receiving ruling authority there, not with initial salvation. The section starts and concludes with questions about greatness and rewards.

The meaning is that one must earn the right to rule by accepting the lowest status, that of a child, or they will not enter into a kingship—that is, attain greatness in the kingdom, which is an open invitation (2 Peter 1:11). Jesus repeatedly stressed this idea and demonstrated it throughout his life (Philippians 2:5-11). All Christians will go to heaven when they die, but not everyone will share in His rule. This open invitation (ruling with Him) is only given to those children of God who have persisted in a life of discipleship until the final hour. *"We have become Partners of Christ,"* the writer to the Hebrews says, only *"if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm to the end"* (Hebrews 3:14).

For this reason, Christians need *"endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised"* (Hebrews 10:36), which is called a "great reward" (Gr *misthapodosia*, meaning "payment of wages," Hebrews 10:35). This interpretation of "enter the kingdom" not only explains the apparent conflict between Matthew 5:19 and 20, but also addresses the issue of kingdom entrance seemingly being based on works in several passages. These passages refer to sanctification and status, not soteriology.

Matthew is not examining salvation from different perspectives, such as its beginning and end, as Neonomians assert; in fact, he isn't focusing on salvation at all! Instead, he is highlighting "entering the kingdom" rather than "salvation." Writers often assume without evidence that these two ideas are always clearly the same.

Applying the above discussion to Matthew 5:20, we might paraphrase this way:

For I tell you, disciples, that unless you have an inward righteousness that surpasses the external legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom lifestyle that leads to greatness in the future kingdom.

Taken in this sense, the calls to enter the kingdom are calls for fully committed discipleship that will lead to greater reward in the future restoration of the Davidic theocracy (Acts 1:6).

Entering the Kingdom (Life, Way of Life, Greatness)

If the above interpretation is correct, one might say that entering the kingdom encompasses three realities: abundant life, discipleship, and abundant entrance on the final day. All three dimensions of the kingdom are inextricably linked to each other. One cannot have one without the other. In a given context, one of the three may be in view, but all must be assumed because it is impossible to have any one of the three without the other two.

Therefore, when Jesus says that one must have an inner righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees in order to enter a kingdom way of living now, resulting in high honor in the millennial kingdom in the future, this necessarily includes the idea of entering into discipleship now to qualify for this abundant entrance. That is why Jesus, in his conversation with the rich young ruler and with the lawyer, equated life, entering the kingdom, inheriting the kingdom, treasure in heaven, and salvation from a meaningless life as overlapping or equivalent terms.

In other words, entering the kingdom in the sense of entering the kingdom way of life is not only an event, but it is also a lifetime of choices. It certainly includes an event—an abundant entrance into the restored Davidic theocracy in the future—but it entails a process of living out the kingdom way of life now.

Experimental Predestinarians should not object to this. They do the same in their discussions of faith and works. They say that one entails the other. One cannot have faith without works; they are inextricably linked to each other.

Thus, in their view, to say one enters the kingdom by works assumes prior faith and merely describes the character of the saved, not conditions for entrance. They should therefore not object when the Partners say that entering into greatness (an abundant entrance, 2 Peter 1:11) in the kingdom in the future necessarily entails entering into a kingdom way of living now, a commitment to full discipleship in the present.

Do Some Believers Miss the Kingdom?

No. In the discussion above, we have shown that the warnings about not entering the kingdom refer to a failure to enter into a kingdom way of living, resulting in greatness. Only those who heed this call to discipleship will enter into honor and greatness in the future and hear the King say, “Well done!”

Yet, some understand these entry passages to teach that those who disobey the least of His commandments and teach others to do the same will miss the kingdom altogether. They will either spend the millennium in the darkness outside the kingdom in a kind of Protestant purgatory. These views were held, for example, by Watchman Nee and some of the older Brethren writers (Govett, Pember, Pantton) and, more recently, Whipple, Finley, and Faust.

However, the only scriptural evidence for this view is the very passage we have been discussing, which we understand to teach that failure to enter means failure to enter into a kingdom way of living leading to greatness, not missing the kingdom, i.e., not enter the millennium.

Furthermore, there are compelling reasons to reject their viewpoint.

First, Jesus clearly says that these disobedient Christians *will be in the kingdom*. They will be in it, but are called “least” there (Matthew 5:19). They clearly do not “miss” the kingdom; they will be “in” it in a soteriological sense, not in a “darkness outside” the kingdom.

Second, in our discussion of 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 in Chapter 32, we will demonstrate that whether a believer is “awake or asleep,” they will obtain salvation, which is deliverance from the wrath of the tribulation. The terms “awake or asleep” refer to two kinds of Christians. Some are awake, alert, and expectantly await and prepare for the Lord’s coming. Others are “morally” asleep and not watchful. Yet both will “live together with Him.” Earlier, Paul said that when believers are snatched away from earth at the rapture, they “*shall always be with the Lord*” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). They will not be in the darkness outside. Instead, they will be in the Kingdom on earth “*with the Lord*.” Of course, in eternity future, they will be with the Lord on the new earth.

Another passage that refutes the idea that some believers will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven is the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27). In this parable, the King, the Lord Jesus, gives a mina to three servants. The mina probably represents an opportunity to serve him, that is, to invest their lives for His glory. While two of them do invest their lives and receive ten cities or five cities (metaphors for opportunities for service and responsibility), one did nothing. When the King returns at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), the servants will give an account of what they have done with their lives.

It is important to note that each of the three servants, including the unfaithful one, do get into the kingdom in a salvation sense. The one who did not invest his life has what he was given taken from him. He is “saved through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). We know that he is in the kingdom, because he is contrasted with those who are not! J. B. Hixson notes, “Here’s the key: ALL servants get into the Kingdom, though the one who did nothing with his mina does not have any rewards (cf. 1 Cor 3:15). The ones who are *excluded* from the kingdom are the unbelieving citizens (i.e., unbelieving Jews) who rejected their Messiah.”⁴ As Jesus put it, “*These enemies of mine, who did not want Me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in My presence*” (Luke 19:27).

Summary

Let us now summarize the various threads of discussion in the preceding chapters. We have demonstrated that the phrase “enter the kingdom” encompasses several distinct concepts. First, it involves entering into a kingdom way of living, variously described as “entering into life,” seeking the “kingdom and His righteousness,” entering the narrow gate, receiving the kingdom as a little child, doing the will of the Father, pursuing the surpassing righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount, or being converted.

Second, the entry sayings involve entrance into royal authority in the kingdom, ruling with Christ, or, as Matthew states it, greatness. The idea that entering the kingdom consists of entering into rule is established on four grounds.

⁴ Thanks to J. B. Hixson for this suggestion. Personal communication, March 10, 2011.

1. The most effective way to explain the apparent contradiction between Matthew 5:19 and 5:20 and to reconcile the numerous passages in the New Testament that appear to teach works as a condition for entering the kingdom of heaven with the clear teaching that faith is the only requirement for final salvation, is to reject the common idea that entering the kingdom always relates to soteriology. Instead, it often refers to entering a way of living in the kingdom that leads to ruling with Christ in the future.
2. Matthew 18:1-4 equates entering the kingdom with being great there.
3. Luke 18:17 equates entering the kingdom with “receiving the kingdom.” Receiving the kingdom does not refer to becoming a Christian; instead, it relates to receiving royal authority in the kingdom (Luke 19:12).
4. In his discussion with the rich young ruler, Jesus promises the disciples that “*they will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Matthew 19:28), thus equating “entering the kingdom,” treasure in heaven, entering life, and inheriting eternal life with the action of judging/ruling in His kingdom.⁵

In science, a familiar axiom is used to assess the effectiveness, or “explanatory power,” of a theory: the ratio of data points to assumptions. The higher the ratio, the stronger the theory. Those who believe that “enter the kingdom” refers to soteriological entrance, based on this measure, have an extremely weak theory. They must assume that surpassing righteousness is anything other than ethical behavior, or that all “true” Christians possess it; they must believe that all true believers “do the will of the Father,” even though Matthew 5:19 indicates some do not; and most importantly, they must assume that even though the sermon never mentions the cross, faith in Christ, or His death for our sins, listening and obeying it provides enough information for a person to enter heaven after death.

Of course, they have explanations for all these issues that seem, on the surface, to support their theory. But when one has to explain away passage after passage in this manner and utilize a theological system to do so, we have to ask whether something is wrong with their view of entering the kingdom. However, when using *one* exegetically derived assumption — interpreting “enter the kingdom” as a dynamic relationship with God that encompasses entering into life, i.e., entering into a kingdom way of living, and an abundant entrance into the restored Davidic theocracy — all this data is correlated and consistent with Pauline theology. The so-called conflict between Matthew and Paul evaporates. The theory proposed in this chapter is highly effective and highly explanatory.

That being so, why not simply acknowledge that the phrase “enter the kingdom” often refers to New Testament concepts of entering life, discipleship, and rewards, rather than to soteriology? To enter the kingdom is to save one’s soul, that is, to find the final significance of one’s life, to save it for a reward-inheritance in eternity. When the phrase is associated with good works, there is no need to assume that soteriological entrance into heaven is meant. Instead, this is a call to enter the kingdom way of living, a call to discipleship. Jesus promises that obedience to this call will lead to greatness in the future millennium. All believers will enter the realm (no believer “misses” the kingdom), but, as the New Testament abundantly confirms, only the faithful believers who have persevered will be great there and have an inheritance there.

While the Partner viewpoint is a minority one, it is interesting that in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) compiled a commentary on the works of the fathers, including one by Pseudo-Chrysostom (5th or 6th century AD), which proposed a similar interpretation of Matthew 5:19-20. He suggests that for a man to be *in* the kingdom refers to soteriology, that is, to be numbered among Christ’s people. However, the Christian who breaks the commandments will be among the least of them. But he who enters into the kingdom in the sense of entering into the kingdom way of life, becomes a co-heir ruling with Christ in the kingdom.⁶ Therefore, he who does not enter into the kingdom way of living will not have a part of Christ’s glory, yet shall he be *in* the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ For full discussion of Christ’s encounter with the rich young ruler see chapter 24 below.

⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman, *St. Matthew*, vol. 1, Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, collected out of the *Works of the Fathers* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1874), 174.