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September 27th: Zechariah 7 & Matthew 19:16—20:16

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The fast of the fifth month. The rich young man and the labourers in the vineyard.

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 7. In the fourth year of King Darius the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Kislev. Now the people of Bethel had sent Chiriza and Regammelech and their men to entreat the favor of the Lord, saying to the priests of the house of the Lord of hosts and the prophets, Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years? Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me. Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the south and the lowland were inhabited? And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another.

Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart. But they refused to pay attention and turned a

stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts dumb and hard, lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets.

Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. As I called and they would not hear, so they called and I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts. And I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known.

Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate. After an initial prophecy delivered shortly after the people started rebuilding the temple, following the word of Haggai, the first six chapters of Zechariah are mostly concerned with the eight night visions of the prophet, a section introduced with the superscription of chapter 1 verse 7. Those visions were most likely all received near the end of the second year of Darius, the year in which the temple rebuilding work was taken up again. Chapters 7 to 8 serve as a bridge between those visions and the oracles of chapters 9 to 14.

They are a unity, starting with a new superscription and the questions of verses 2 and 3 which are addressed at the end of chapter 8. However this chapter also continues themes of earlier chapters. Mark Boda and other commentators have observed ways in which chapters 7 to 8 can be read as a recapitulation and digest of the earlier chapters of the book of Zechariah and even also the book of Zechariah's companion prophet of Haggai. The prophecies of chapter 7 come two years into the rebuilding project, which started in 520 BC and would be finished in 516 BC in the sixth year of Darius, 70 years after the temple of Solomon had been destroyed.

While the prophets prior to the exile had largely dated their messages relative to the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel, now the dating is relative to a Persian king. The Jews are under the reign of the Persian Empire and the dating reflects this situation. The prophecy is introduced with a brief narrative section.

The city of Bethel was formerly within the northern kingdom of Israel and a key site of its idolatry. Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, had set up a rival sanctuary there to that in Jerusalem. It was now part of the Persian administrative province of Yehud or Judah, as we see in Ezra chapter 2 verse 28, where men of Bethel and Ai are listed among the returnees to the land.

The people of Bethel had sent an official delegation to Jerusalem, seeking the Lord's favour and also enquiring of the priests and prophets of the Lord concerning the continued observance of the fast of the fifth month. Bethel does not seem to have been the same centre of false worship after the return from exile. Now they largely seem to share the same worship as the rest of the people, centred upon Jerusalem.

Although the temple had not yet been completed, it was already a site of sacrifice. The

altar had been set up again, the better part of twenty years previously, and the rebuilding was already well underway, so perhaps other parts of the temple and its complex were in use at this time. Almost seventy years previously, in 586 BC, the temple had been destroyed.

After its destruction and the fall of the kingdom of Judah, it seems that the people had observed a ritual fast in the fifth month, which according to 2 Kings chapter 25 verse 8, was the month that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. Two months later, in an event grimly reminiscent of the story of the brothers' betrayal and the selling of Joseph, Gedaliah, the Jewish governor that the Babylonians had established, was assassinated, spelling an end to the possibility of Jewish autonomy within the Babylonian empire. The fast of the fifth and the seventh months commemorated the devastation of the first temple and the death of Gedaliah, events that together marked the utter ruin of the nation.

Both of these fasts continue to be practiced by Jews today, Tish'a B'Av and Som Gedaliah. The people of Bethel, however, were unsure of whether they should continue the fast of the fifth month, now that the temple was being rebuilt. Was it time to leave that fast behind them? Presumably the leaders of Bethel need clarity on the matter as they determine whether or not that fast would be observed in the following year.

The word of the Lord that Zechariah receives is addressed not merely to the delegation from Bethel but to the priests and all the people of the land. The message interrogates the practice of the fast, exposing its real motives, although the narrative concerning the delegation from Bethel only mentions the fast of the fifth month. Zechariah's message also speaks of the fast of the seventh, the fast commemorating the assassination of Gedaliah.

In the prophecies of Jeremiah and Daniel, the period of Babylonian hegemony is given as seventy years. In 2 Chronicles 36 verses 20-22, the seventy year period is related to the period of Babylonian dominance but also to the period of the lands lying desolate. In Zechariah 1 verse 12 and 7 verse 5, the seventy years seem to extend over two decades beyond the period of Babylon's dominance to relate to the time of the temples lying in ruin.

This period would end very shortly as the temple would be completed in 516 BC, seventy years after its first destruction. The Lord wants the people to examine the motives that drive their fasting. In Isaiah chapter 58 verses 3-5 we find another example of the prophetic questioning of the practice of fasting, fasting that has bad motives or is otherwise displeasing to God.

Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a

wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Zechariah's prophecy challenges the people to ask themselves whether their fasting was really a mourning of their sins, a turning away from their iniquity and a setting of their whole hearts upon seeking the Lord and his mercy. Or was their fasting merely hypocritical, perhaps mourning the devastation that was the consequence of their sins, but not the sins themselves, nor truly addressing themselves to the Lord. Their fasting, the message implies, has been self-serving, as have their feasts.

Their religious rituals mask the fact that their hearts are still not set upon the Lord. As a consequence their religious rituals are illegitimate and indeed offensive to the Lord. It is unclear whether verse 7 belongs more with the verses that immediately precede it or those which follow.

It might fit with either, highlighting the consistency of the word of the Lord through Zechariah with the messages delivered through the earlier prophets. Prior to the exile, during periods when Judah enjoyed a prosperous and independent existence in the land, the Lord had addressed Judah by his prophets, warning them of the importance of practice that was congruent with their profession and their religious performance, as we see in verses 5-6. Alternatively, if we take verse 7 in relation to the verses that follow, it underlines the consistency between the message of the Lord prior to the exile and now following the exile.

Although verses 9 and 10 might initially be read as words addressed to the people after the exile, verses 11 and following focus primarily upon the response of the people prior to the exile and the way that the exile was a consequence of their rejection of the Lord's word. Looking back at places like Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 5-7, we can see what Zechariah is picking up upon here. Judah had failed to respond properly to that word and now the same word is addressed to them again, but now attended by the cautionary example of their fathers before them.

The Lord's focus in this charge is particularly upon the need for justice within the life of the people and their society. The perversion of justice, especially in the case of the weakest and most vulnerable and dependent within the society, is frequently a matter for which the Lord condemns his people within the prophetic literature. The Lord is the guardian and defender of the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner and the poor, marginal figures who depend heavily upon the justice, the mercy and the kindness of the people in the society more broadly.

Where they are mistreated, the Lord will act against their oppressors. The response of the people to the Lord's warning prior to the exile was stubborn refusal to listen. It

wasn't as if it was hard to hear.

The Lord sent many former prophets by his spirit, each bearing the same message, but the people hardened their hearts against him, preparing themselves for judgment as a result and provoking the Lord's wrath. For their refusal to hear, they received poetic justice. The Lord called to them by his prophets and they refused to hear.

So when they call upon him, he will refuse to hear. The Lord then came like a whirlwind upon them, scattering them among the nations, devastating and desolating the land that he had given them. A question to consider, where else in the scriptures would we go to find teaching concerning appropriate fasting? Matthew 19 verse 16 to chapter 20 verse 16 And behold a man came up to him, saying, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life? And he said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.

If you would enter life, keep the commandments. He said to him, Which ones? And Jesus said, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. The young man said to him, All these I have kept, what do I still lack? Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.

When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter said in reply, See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And anyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace. And to them he said, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.

So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour he did the same.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing.

And he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You go into the vineyard too. And when evening came the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last. The end of Matthew chapter 19 to the beginning of chapter 20 focuses upon Jesus' response to a young man asking what good thing he must do to obtain eternal life. This man is a rich man and he turns out to be unwilling to follow Christ at the expense of his riches.

Peter Lighthouse has observed that this passage is divided in two sections, one beginning and ending with a reference to eternal life. In verse 16 the young man asks about what he must do to have eternal life and in verse 29 we are told that they will inherit eternal life. The second part involves a discussion of the first being last and the last first.

It begins with the statement in verse 30 of chapter 19, But many who are first will be last and the last first. And then it ends with the statement in verse 16 of chapter 20, So the last will be first and the first last. Note that there is a reversal of the order there.

In the first one it's the first will be last and the last first and in the second it's the last will be first and the first last. It brackets that whole section. It bookends it and stresses its unity.

The first half focuses upon wealth and rewards and the second half continues some of those themes to a degree. The first begins with Jesus questioning why the young man asks him about what is good, saying that no one is good but God alone and then the complaining workers are asked, literally, is your eye bad because I am good? In both cases someone is being identified as good. The parable answers in many respects the earlier question and addresses the issue of wealth.

Many people have misread Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler. The idea for many is that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law.

He's driving the man to despair of his righteousness, of his good deeds and to get him to come to Christ for hope of salvation.

But this is not actually how the story goes. We would need to read a very great deal into the passage to see this particular connection. Rather, Jesus teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into eternal life.

The twist is the way that this is understood. Jesus' initial response to the question is, if you would enter life, keep the commandments. And then Jesus responds to the follow-up question, which ones, by highlighting the second table of the law in particular.

You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself. The young man's response is not to despair of his righteousness. Rather, he says, all these I have kept.

What do I still lack? Jesus' response to this is not so much a suggestion that it is impossible to keep the law, but a challenge to a different kind of law-keeping. Jesus did not mention a few key commandments the first time around. He didn't mention commandments 1 to 4, and he didn't mention commandment 10.

He didn't mention the commandments concerned with loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and he didn't mention the law concerning covetousness. What does the man lack? Whatever he lacks, it would seem to rest with those other commandments that were not mentioned. Jesus' statement to him should be seen against the background of those commandments.

What must he do? He must sell what he possesses and give it to the poor, and he must go and follow Christ. The first instruction is one that fulfils the tenth commandment. How do you fulfil the commandment not to covet? Well in the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 26, that commandment is fleshed out, and it's fulfilled not just in the negative act of not desiring or envying something that belongs to someone else, rather it's fulfilled in something deeper than that.

It's fulfilled in the act of celebrating what God has given to you, being thankful, of showing charity and generosity to others, and of expressing contentment with what you have. And what Jesus is suggesting to the young man here is even more radical. It's expressed in being willing to give up what you possess, giving it in charity to others, and having contentment in that fact.

And then he calls him to follow him. Now that commandment should be seen over against the other great commandment, the greatest commandment of all, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What does it look like to fulfil that commandment? Well it looks like following Christ, relating to him as your Lord and

Master.

As Jesus teaches throughout the book of Matthew, the law is fulfilled in a deeper level by this following of him, by this obedience to him, and by forms of practice that are not just negative practices of avoidance, of not actually killing, and not actually committing adultery, but positive ones of resisting and establishing different forms of positive alternatives. It's seen in the way that rather than just avoiding covetousness, the rich man fulfils the law concerning covetousness by being prepared to give up what he has, by giving to others in charity. It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding murdering the person he's angry with, reconciles with them.

It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding stealing, gives and shows generosity. As this rich young man leaves, Jesus expresses once again the danger of riches, those things that weigh us down, that tie us to something that prevents us from serving and following our true Master. You cannot serve both God and mammon.

If you find yourself devoted to riches, you will find yourself unable to follow Christ as he calls you to. This makes us uncomfortable, and it really should. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us.

Now Christ does not ask this more generally. However, if he did, we would have to submit. Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom, and Jesus teaches this in no uncertain terms.

Wealth is something that can master us, and we, living very prosperous lives for the most part, should be very fearful. It's something that we can become enthralled by. It's something that can dictate the course of our lives, our values, our commitments.

Even if we are poor, this can be something that drives our concern. That is something that prevents us from throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into the service of our Saviour. It is only with great difficulty that those with riches can enter the kingdom of heaven.

As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. If you want your heart to be invested in the kingdom of God, then invest your treasure there as well. Be someone who's committed to that.

Now this is exactly what Jesus is teaching the rich young ruler. Invest his money in serving the poor, and he will find, as he invests his money in serving the poor, that that's where his heart will go. But as long as that treasure lies elsewhere, as long as that treasure is caught within the affairs of this world, that is where his heart will be.

And until he deals with that primary location of his heart, by relocating his treasure, he will not be able to enter the kingdom of God. After Jesus has taught this, Peter pipes up and, speaking for the rest of the disciples, draws attention to the fact that they have given up everything. What is their reward going to be? They have done pretty much

what the rich young ruler was asked to do.

And what is their reward? Jesus makes clear that there is a reward for them. They will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve will exert authority within the kingdom.

Now, Judas is among them at this point, but it's referring to the twelve as a group. And Jesus extends the statement to say that everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for his namesake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. Here Jesus presents something of an answer to the original question of the rich young ruler and it's seen in an act of renunciation.

People must give up to enter the kingdom. They must give up all these things that they were formerly attached to. And that act of surrender is something that will lead to them inheriting eternal life.

This is a terrifying teaching for us, but it should not be sugarcoated. We are called to renounce things, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to be those who are willing to be stripped of all our possessions, our attachments, in order to enter into the kingdom. This does not mean that we'll be permanently bereft of these things.

They may be returned to us, but they may be returned to us only after we have surrendered them. Only after we have given them into God's hands. Those who want to save their lives will have to lose them.

And following on from this discussion of rewards, Jesus goes into a parable. A parable bracketed in statements about the first being last and the last first. This parable of the workers on the vineyard is one that has a number of different stages to it.

As we're going through it, we naturally sympathize with those who are called first. And as they are being paid at the end of the day, it starts with the last people to be called, the last people to be commissioned to work on the vineyard, and then gradually moves to the payment of those who came to the vineyard first. And they're scandalized because they do not get anything more than those who came last.

And we can often feel scandalized for them too. One of our basic moral instincts is equal pay for equal work. And yet, they do not receive equal pay for equal work.

Those who worked for a long time receive much the same pay as the people who worked just for a couple of hours. How does this parable relate to what has gone before? Well, perhaps we could relate it to the rich young ruler and the disciples. The rich young ruler is someone who observes the path of the law in many ways.

He is someone who probably has social standing and respectability. He's an observant law keeper, all these sorts of things. And the disciples are people who come along later.

They're people who are fishermen. They're a tax collector. They don't have the same social status.

But yet, they will receive the same payment. God will reward them as if they had been faithful law keepers throughout their whole lives. Perhaps that's something of what's going on.

For me, a more likely explanation is one that relates it to the story of Israel more generally. Israel is the vineyard. The people being called to work on the vineyard are prophets and righteous men and all sorts of other people.

And the disciples come along at the end of the line of that in many ways, late on in the day. And yet, they receive the same reward. And then people called after them.

Even though they may not suffer the heat of the day and the difficulties of the situations that martyrs and prophets that have gone before them experienced, they will receive the same reward. This payment that God gives as the owner of the vineyard is not according to the merit of the work that they have done. Rather, everyone who works on the vineyard gets the same reward.

The disciples may have given up many things, renounced many things, but they remain continually concerned about pecking orders. And the difficulty of self-denial and the desire to get what's due to us can persist even when we've given up many things. And Jesus' parable here challenges that at the root.

There is a reward for following Christ. There is a reward for going out into the vineyard. But that reward does not follow the same pattern that we are accustomed to in human wages.

Rather, it's given to every single person that serves on this vineyard. Every single person receives that same payment. Someone like Peter might want to be assured that he's going to get special treatment.

They've gone out, they've faced the heat of the day, they've faced the difficulties, they've stood with Christ in tough situations. Shouldn't they be rewarded accordingly? And yet, out of the goodness of God, people who have not suffered in the same way, who have not experienced the same difficulties, will experience the kindness and generosity of the owner of the vineyard. Everyone who renounces their possessions and their family and all these other things that attach them to this age will be rewarded.

But they will be rewarded in a way that foregrounds the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, not the merit of their labours. A question to consider. Jesus calls the rich young ruler to an act of great generosity.

And the owner of the vineyard is later on defined by his generosity. How does the

practice of generosity enable us to overcome some of the issues that Jesus is highlighting and tackling here?