

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 14,

Matthew 16-19

6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we're diving into the radical, completely upside-down kingdom that's described in the book of Matthew. We're going to see how its core principles really challenge our modern ideas about power, about success, and even something as simple as forgiveness. It's a journey that's going to redefine what it means to be truly great.

So let's start with a big question that gets right to the heart of Jesus' teachings. What's actually more powerful? A miracle that can literally move mountains or a simple act of human forgiveness? The gospel of Matthew really forces us to wrestle with that tension. All right, our journey kicks off at the very peak of a mountain with one of the most stunning events in the entire New Testament, the Transfiguration.

It's this moment of pure, unfiltered divine revelation. So picture this: Jesus is up on a high mountain, and suddenly his entire appearance changes. He's shining with this incredible divine glory, and he's not alone.

He's there talking with Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet. This is a massive moment. It's like a bridge connecting Jesus directly to the foundational pillars of Jewish history and faith.

Now, the original audience would have instantly understood the powerful difference being shown here. They all knew the story of Moses, how his face shone after he was in God's presence, but that was a reflection of glory. What Matthew is showing us here is that Jesus is the very source of that glory.

He isn't just reflecting the light; he is the light. So right after this incredible divine vision of power on the mountaintop, the story immediately yanks us back down to earth. We go from the peak right down to the foot of the mountain where a much more human, much messier drama is playing out.

And the contrast is just jarring. While Jesus was revealing his glory, his other disciples were down below completely failing to heal a suffering boy, and Jesus' diagnosis of the problem is blunt: because your faith is so small. The gap between heavenly power and human weakness could not be any clearer.

This whole theme of human limitation, of this small faith, builds right into our next section. Jesus tells this incredibly powerful story, a parable, to explain how this lack of faith directly affects our ability to live out one of the most radical ideas of his kingdom, the absolute non-negotiable nature of forgiveness. And you know, just as a quick refresher, a parable is basically an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Jesus used them all the time to make these profound spiritual truths understandable and accessible to everyday people. So the parable kicks off with a servant who owes his king an absolutely astronomical sum, 10,000 talents. Now that number is very deliberate.

It was literally the largest number you could write in ancient Greek. To put that into perspective, the scholar Dr. Craig Keener actually calculated this. It would take an average worker over 230,000 years to pay this back.

And that's without spending a single penny on food or rent. The point is crystal clear. This debt is completely, totally unpayable.

It's an impossible, life-crushing amount. So faced with this impossible situation, the servant begs for mercy. And in this act of just staggering generosity, the king doesn't just give him more time.

He cancels the entire debt, wipes it completely clean. It's just an unbelievable act of grace. And now the story takes a very sharp, very ugly turn.

That same servant who was just forgiven an unpayable fortune goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a laughably small amount, a hundred denaria. This debt was worth about three months' wages. I mean, it's nothing, but compared to what he was just forgiven, it's basically pocket change.

And yet he grabs the man, chokes him, and when he can't pay, has him thrown in prison. The hypocrisy is just shocking. And well, that's exactly the point Jesus is making.

So how do these huge ideas about faith and forgiveness actually work in everyday life? Well, in our final section, Jesus lays out some very practical rules for how people in his kingdom should relate to one another. When there's a conflict, Jesus gives this really clear step-by-step process. First, you handle it privately one-on-one.

If that doesn't work, you bring in one or two others to help mediate. And only as a final last resort, do you bring it before the entire community. It's a process designed for restoration, not for public shame.

From community conflict, Jesus moves straight into one of the most personal and heated debates of his time, the grounds for divorce. And this wasn't just some private matter. It was a major point of disagreement between different religious schools of thought.

So on one side, you had the very strict school of Shammai, who said divorce was only okay for serious marital unfaithfulness. But on the other side, the more lenient school of Hillel argued a man could divorce his wife for almost any cause, even for something like burning his dinner. This is the debate that Jesus walks right into.

But Jesus doesn't just pick a side. Instead, he goes all the way back to the beginning, to God's original ideal for marriage and creation. He argues that the law permitting divorce was actually a concession to human sinfulness, what he calls our hardness of heart.

It was never God's perfect plan. His focus is on protecting the vulnerable from being unjustly cast aside. And all of this brings us to the ultimate takeaway.

You see, the disciples were kind of obsessed with power, with status, with who was going to be the greatest. But Jesus just continually flips that entire value system completely on its head. So who is the greatest in this radical new kingdom? It's not the powerful or the wealthy or the religious elite.

Instead, Jesus points to the humble and dependent like a child. He tells stories about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one that's lost. Greatness is found with the marginalized; this is where the heart of his kingdom lies.

Which leaves all of us with this final question to think about. In our own lives, in our communities, and in our world, what would it actually look like to put the last first?