**JESUS’ NEW MATH**

**(Matthew 20:17-28)**

It began in the mid-1960’s and was abandoned at some point in the 1970’s after it was widely criticized by parents and declared to be a failure by some experts. The term, however, has survived, and it is often used to refer a novel approach that is eventually discredited. What I am talking about is new math.

Did any of you raise children in the 60’s and 70’s, and did you have trouble helping them with their math homework?

Well, I was a student back then, and I had trouble with math. I felt like Charlie Brown. Back in 1973, the cartoonist Charles Schultz drew Charlie Brown at his school desk. Charlie throws up his hands and asks, “How can you do new math with an old math mind?”

Here’s how new math came about . . . In 1957 the Soviet Union became the first nation to send a man-made satellite into orbit around the earth. The satellite was called Sputnik. Upon learning of what the Soviets did, Americans feared that we were losing the space race. In 1961, those fears were seemingly confirmed when the Soviets put the first man into space. His name was Yuri Gagarin. He completed one orbit around the earth before safely returning. He is viewed as a national hero by the Russians.

In the late 1950’s, responding to the concerns that the Soviets were outpacing us, money was thrown at education at all levels. It was decided that we needed to improve science and math education. Educational experts revamped the math curriculum and math textbooks with the idea of helping students to understand math theory and not just to work math problems. Math teachers were told to focus their efforts not on helping teach students how to work a problem but to understand the concept behind the answer.

As a result, many students failed to learn their math facts, and they didn’t memorize the multiplication table, and they were worse off than before.

One critic offered this tongue-in-check appraisal of math instruction through the years:

**Traditional Math Question:** A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100. His cost of production is 4/5 of this price. What is his profit?

**New Math Question:** A logger exchanges a set L of lumber for a set M of money. The cardinality of set M is 100 and each element is worth $1.

1. Make 100 dots representing the elements of the set M.
2. The set C representing costs of production contains 20 fewer points than set M. Represent the set C as a subset of the set M.
3. What is the cardinality of the set P of profits?

**Dumbed-down Math Question:** A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100. His cost of production is $80 and his profit is $20. Underline the number 20.

**Whole Math Question:** By cutting down a forest full of beautiful trees, a logger makes $20.

1. What do you think of this way of making money?
2. How did the forest birds and squirrels feel?
3. Draw a picture of the forest as you’d like it to look.

As far as I can tell, Jesus was never a math teacher, but He was a Teacher. In fact, He was a Master Teacher. What Jesus taught, however, often flew in the face of conventional thinking. For instance, people were generally agreed that the first was first, and the last was last, and less was less, and more was more.

It appears that Jesus taught a kind of new math because Jesus taught that the last was first and the first was last. He framed the story we looked at last week with that very declaration. Look at 19:30 and 20:16. I believe He drew attention to that truth by reversing the order in which he stated the truth. Jesus also taught that less was more and more was less.

Somewhat like the teachers of new math, Jesus’ goal was that we would truly understand spiritual truth. We, however, just want to use our faith to solve problems. We feel that our faith is validated when it solves our problems.

That is why when confronted with the truth claims of the Christian faith, people want to know: Does it work? Will the Christian faith solve my problems? That is the wrong question. The real question people should ask is, “Is it true? Is it true that Jesus is the Son of God? Is it true that Jesus died for my sin on the cross? Is it true that He rose from the dead? Is it true that if I turn from my sin and turn to Him in faith that He will save me?

I can’t tell you that if you pray for your wife that she will be healed of her cancer. I can’t tell you that if you go to church your business will begin to turn a profit. I can’t tell you that if you become a Christian that the Christian faith will work for you in the way you want and expect it to work.

We don’t trust Jesus because doing so works. We trust Jesus because He speaks the truth. More than that, He helps us to understand the truth. He also helps us to understand that what we have always believed isn’t necessarily true.

When that happens, your response may be much like mine when I was confronted with that new math. You may scratch your head and say, “I don’t get it.” That’s what the disciples did. Today’s text is Matthew 20:17-28. In Luke’s account where we read that Jesus announced of His approaching suffering, death, and resurrection, we are told of the disciple’s response: “But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said” (Luke 18:34). Three times in one verse we are told the disciples didn’t get. It was as clear to them as new math was to me.

We are going to look at the ways in which Jesus employed a type of new math to help us understand three truths.

1. **JESUS’ NEW MATH HELPS US UNDERSTAND THE BENEFIT OF**

**SUFFERING.**

Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, but they haven’t yet arrived. Now, for the third time, Jesus tells them what is going to happen to Him on this trip after they get to Jerusalem. The first announcement was made back in Matthew 16:21. Peter reacted badly. That was before they began this journey. At the beginning of the trip, Jesus gave them a second warning. Look at Matthew 17:22-23. This time, the result of Jesus was warning was the disciples were distressed. They were upset. They were shaken by His words. This third time that Jesus warned the disciples was while they were in route, and as far as Matthew is concerned, the result was silence. You might could have heard crickets chirping. In a little bit, we’ll see how the topic of conversation was quickly changed.

The truth is that we don’t like to talk about suffering, ours or anybody else’s. I seriously doubt that during your dinner conversation this past week that anybody discussed the persecution of Christians that is going on in Communist China or Iran or Indonesia.

The problem of suffering is often met with silence. We just don’t want to talk about it; so, many people do, literally, suffer in silence. Maybe we are afraid to admit suffering because we are fearful that we will have to conclude that our Christian faith doesn’t really work, after all. Well, it does work. It just doesn’t work that way that you think it should. Our faith doesn’t prevent suffering, but it does give us hope in the midst of suffering.

That is why Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). Paul did not deny his suffering. He just said that something much better is on its way that will make the suffering seem insignificant.

Jesus said something similar to His disciples after they completed their trip to Jerusalem. Literally, just hours before his arrest, mistreatment, and death, look at what He told His disciples. Look at John 16:20-22.

We don’t deny suffering in this world. It is a reality, a tough reality. Some suffering is physical. Some suffering is mental and emotional. That suffering is real, and it is painful. We should not act as though it isn’t. But what we need to do is to look beyond it to the joy, and the release, and the glory that is to come.

Scott Larson tells a story about a woman who along with her husband had been a missionary to Western Europe. While serving there, the woman, whose name was Annette, had to have back surgery. Something went wrong with the surgery and it left Annette bedbound and in excruciating pain. In time, she and the family had to return to America. Several years after the accident, Scott was invited by the husband to have lunch at his home. Scott wasn’t sure in what kind of condition in which he would find Annette. He knew she refused to take painkillers even though she still had much pain. He suspected she might have to excuse herself after visiting for just a bit.

He reported what he discovered:

What I encountered when I entered their home was a beautifully dressed woman whose outward expression revealed little of her physical pain. During my five-hour visit, Annette served as a gracious hostess who shared her story with honesty. She told how when she first came out of the surgery, she and everyone else focused on praying for God to heal her. When that didn’t happen and she was confined to 24-hour care at home, she became very depressed. Most people stopped connecting with her. Their lives moved on while Annette’s came to a screeching halt. Bible college and missionary training had not equipped her to deal with a life tied to a wheelchair and filled with constant pain.

“I felt that I was left with three choices,” said Annette. “To kill myself and end the unbearable suffering for all of us; to abandon my faith in God and merely exist on painkillers; or to put my energies to discovering God in the midst of all of this suffering.”

Annette’s face beamed. “I chose the third,” she said. “And as I began slowly reading the Bible again through the lens of pain and suffering, what I saw was a God who was familiar with both. I thought my pain and suffering had taken me to a place where God could never be found; instead, it was a place where he became more real to me than I had ever known him to be.”

I am reminded of the poem:

I walked a mile with Pleasure;  
She chatted all the way;  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.  
  
I walked a mile with Sorrow;  
And ne’er a word said she;  
But, oh! the things I learned from her,  
When Sorrow walked with me.

Suffering is not to be avoided at all costs. It is not be kept hush-hush. When suffering comes our way, it is to be embraced. We are to learn from it. And then we are to look beyond it to the joy that will be ours.

1. **JESUS’S NEW MATH HELPS US UNDERSTAND THE BEAUTY OF**

**SERVANTHOOD.**

The world over, Jewish mothers are known as being champions for their children. I remember reading a story about a Jewish mom who was in the park with her two young sons.

A stronger stopped and said, “How cute! How old are they.”

The Jewish mom answered, “The rabbi is three, and the doctor is five.”

In our text, a Jewish mom was looking out for the future of her two sons.

There was an awkward silence after Jesus announced what the future held for him. The mother of James and John broke the silence. I can see it in my mind’s eye. The mother (Salome) says, “Jesus, I have a favor to ask.”

Jesus replies, “What do you want?”

She says, “It’s nothing much.”

He asks, “What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just a little thing,” she says.

More insistent this time, Jesus asks, “What is it?”

She continues, “Well, when you sit on your throne, I would like James on one side of You and John on the other side. That’s all.”

The other disciples overhear this request. Their eyes get wide. Their mouths drop open. They shoot a look at James and John. When they regain their power of speech, they charge, “You put her up to, this didn’t you? I can’t believe you would ask that! How dare you!”

Commentators say the others were so displeased that those two asked for what the other ten were wanting, but James and John beat them to the punch.

Jesus also looked at James and John. I think Jesus shook His head and said, “Guys, you don’t know what you are asking for?” He said that the seating arrangement in heaven was not up to Him, but He hinted that the qualification for such an honor would involve suffering and even death.

At that point, Jesus pivoted, and He contrasted His new math with the old math with which His disciples were familiar. The old math taught that **position + power = greatness.** Jesus taught **lowliness + voluntary servanthood = greatness.**

Look at what Jesus says in vv. 26-27. Jesus calls upon us to be both a servant and a slave. The word used her for *servant* is the word from which we get the word *deacon.* In the minds of some, a deacon is a position of honor and prestige. It could be a source of pride. A servant, however, doesn’t it Lord it over anyone. He comes underneath and meets the needs that people have.

The word Jesus chose that is translated as slave was the lowest slave in the household. He did the chores the other didn’t want to do.

It wouldn’t be long before Jesus would illustrate in living color what He meant. The last full day Jesus spent with His disciples involved them observing the Passover meal. Before the meal began, Jesus took of His robe and wrapped Himself in a towel. He took a basin of water. He knelt before each disciple and washed their feet. That was the duty of the lowest slave in the house.

At the conclusion of this lowly service, Jesus said to His disciples, “You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you are right for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” Jesus added, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:13-15).

The truth of the matter is that many of us are willing to serve, but we aren’t quite so willing to become a servant. There is a huge difference between serving and being a servant. When you choose to serve, you retain the right to serve whom you wish, how you wish, and when you wish.

You are more likely to serve someone who can repay you in some tangible way over the person who has no clout and no standing.

Also, you are more likely to serve in a public way that will be noticed and quietly applauded by others over serving in secrecy away from the eyes of others. That also means you will serve in a way that is comfortable to you.

Finally, you will serve at time when it is convenient to you over serving at a time that will require you to miss what you were wanting to do. By choosing to serve, you are still very much in control.

When you become a servant, however, you give up the right to determine who, how, and when. Others will make that choice for you.

Don’t choose to serve and then proceed to pat yourself on the back for being so spiritual. Choose to be a servant, then when you serve, you will just be doing your duty.

It has become clear to me that much of my life I have served, and in doing so I have chosen who, how, and when. Rarely, have I become a servant and did what needed doing and what other didn’t want to do.

Brothers and sisters, let’s become servants to one another, not so that we will be considered great but because our Master is great and that is what He showed us to do.

1. **JESUS’ NEW MATH HELPS US UNDERSTAND THE BASIS OF**

**SALVATION.**

Look at the last thing Jesus said in v. 28 as to why He came. Jesus came to ransom many.

Our old nature says we can save ourselves by being good, by going to church, by obeying the Golden Rule, by being good little boys and girls. That old math is just plain wrong.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I bought my first car. It was a 1976 Plymouth Duster. It had a white exterior and a green interior. It also had an 8-track tape deck that the previous own had installed. I bought a few 8-track tapes to listen to as I travelled to college and back. One of those was Amy Grant’s Age to Age album that came out the year I graduated. The second song on that 8-track was the song, “I Have Decided.” Here are some of the lyrics:

I have decided  
Being good is just a fable  
I just can’t ‘cause I’m not able  
I'm gonna leave it to the Lord

So, forget the game of being good  
And your self-righteous pain  
‘Cause the only good inside your heart  
Is the good that Jesus brings

Jesus is the One who ransoms and the only One. We are not going to get to heaven by what we do or by what we don’t do. We get there by trusting what He has already done.

The world teaches us to avoid suffering, to reject servanthood, and that we have the power to save ourselves. It is time to accept and teach Jesus’ new math on those things.