

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part X)

20:1-16, The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house (landowner): Jesus often uses an employer, master, or ruler as a relatable point of reference in His parables. He uses this one to answer a question asked by His disciples in previous chapter, "...We have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matthew 19:27)

Jesus already taught them the principle that the first will be last, and the last first, but that principle needed to be reinforced, and this parable illustrates for them the principle that God's design and desire for offering "reward" or "what is owed" is nothing at all like man's typical practice of giving reward.

Early in the morning: Literally "at dawn," usually meaning about 6:00 A.M. These workers hired at the very beginning of the working day agreed to work for a denarius for the day, the common wage for a workingman putting in a full day's work.

And going out about the third hour...: The third hour was about 9:00 a.m.; the sixth hour 12 noon; and the eleventh hour 5:00 in the afternoon. Why continually go back looking for more hands to work the vineyard?

Commentator Barclay:

If the harvest was not ingathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour to the work.

Whatever is right I will give you.: Note that the Boss Man promised the earliest workers an exact amount, a day's wage. But the other workers that he hired throughout the day were not promised a specific wage, only "whatever is right." In all cases promised to pay all workers fairly, according to His judgement.

...Give them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first: Typical of day laborers, all are paid at the end of each day. When it came time to pay the workers, the men hired last were paid first. No doubt it was to everyone's surprise that they were paid a denarius, the amount normally offered for a full day of work!

The order in which the laborers were paid is important to set up the crux of the teaching

...Each of them also received a denarius: The men hired early in the morning, who had worked all day, got paid exactly what the landowner had promised them. One wonders if the disciples are yet understanding that Jesus had put them in this parable?

They grumbled at the master of the house: After being paid, the men who were hired first complained to the owner of the vineyard. They were offended that He gave the men who worked less equal pay to those who worked through the entire day.

It's easy to sympathize with these who had worked all day! They worked while the others were idly waiting around. They worked in the fields enduring heat of the day while others hung out in the shade. Shouldn't they expect a greater wage or reward.

C'mon, man, that's the way the world works!

Friend, I am doing you no wrong.: The landowner responds not harshly, but warmly. He reminded them that he had been completely fair to them. He did them no wrong, and most importantly, had not broken his promise to them.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?: This rebuke comes in the form of a question that the disciples will need to ask of themselves regarding "rewards" in the Kingdom of Heaven. In the parable, the landowner did not need to explain why he did it, other than simply to say "I choose." The reasons for the master's generosity were completely up to him, grounded in his good pleasure and will.

So the last will be first, and the first last: The disciples had given up a great deal to follow Jesus. Peter and the others wanted to know what they would get in return. Through this parable Jesus assured Peter and the disciples that they will be rewarded, but the principle of “many who are first will be last and the last first” (19:30) meant that God rewards *perfectly*, and may not reward as man expects.

This is the emblematic of God’s grace; He rewards and blesses us according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what we *deserve*.

It’s important to remember that the landowner in the parable did not treat anyone unfairly. However, he *was* more generous to some than to others. We can be assured that God will never be unfair to us, though He may, for reasons we may or may not understand, be more generous with someone who seems less deserving in our eyes, or less generous with someone we deem to be more deserving.

The point of the parable isn’t merely that we all have the same “reward” of eternal life. The point is that God rewards based on His love and grace, and we should therefore expect surprises. We’re probably not equipped to completely understand “fair” when it comes to how God decides to reward us. God reserves the right to be more than fair as it pleases Him. God’s grace is always a righteous grace.

It’s also important to remember that this parable is not supportive in any way of works righteousness, that one must “work” at least a little bit to receive any reward at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. Perhaps we could extrapolate that one must be chosen to receive reward. But in context, the disciples were still wrestling with law & grace, faith & works, and with this parable Jesus is helping them to see that it is God’s decisions and work that matter in all things.

20:17-19, Jesus Foretells His Death a Third Time

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem: This was not a surprise to the disciples. Their travels south from Galilee at about the time of the Passover feast would make it pretty obvious that Jerusalem was the destination. But the rest apparently needed to be reiterated for the disciples.

The Son of Man will be betrayed: Jesus is very explicit here, but no reaction from the disciples is recorded by Matthew. Did these words (still) go over their heads? Was the notion of betraying Jesus just too much to understand at this point? Did they think He was speaking in a dark parable of some sort?

And He will be raised on the third day: The wording here is fascinating, as Jesus speaks these verses entirely in the passive voice. These are things that will be inflicted on Him, and even His resurrection is something that will happen **to** Him. Perhaps it's no wonder that these were difficult things for the disciples to process or comprehend.

20:20-28, A Mother's Intercession

The mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Him with her sons: It's likely that James' and John's mother (Matthew 4:21) was a regular member of the group that traveled with Jesus and the disciples. She knew they were present at Jesus' transfiguration (though we don't know how much they talked about it, given Jesus' instruction to them coming down from the mountain). Her involvement in her sons' welfare (and ambitions!) is understandable.

Grant that these two sons of mine may sit...: Out of context, this might seem presumptuous or even ridiculous. However, not long before this, Jesus had told His disciples, "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." (Matthew 19:28) So asking for prominent positions (right hand and left hand) for her sons in Jesus' messianic administration does not seem so far out of line.

Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink: Their answer ("We are able") seems to come a little too quick. Jesus recognized that they didn't really understand, but they would.

You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: James was the first martyr among the apostles, and John was the only apostle to not die through martyrdom.

But to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give: Jesus here as the Son of Man shows remarkable submission to His Father. He would not even claim the right to choose how His servants were rewarded, but yield that to His Father.

And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers: The other ten disciples apparently thought that some great honor had just been bestowed on James and John by Jesus. They did not know that Jesus could have made the same promise (of suffering to come!) to any of them.

Yet it shall not be so among you: Their desire for position and status showed they did not yet know the true nature of Jesus in respect to leadership and power. The rulers of the Gentiles (unbelievers) do indeed “lord it over them”, but it should be *different* among God’s children.

20:29-34, Jesus Heals Two Blind Men

Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!: These two, like so many before, call out to Jesus for mercy. Calling Him “Son of David” tells us they recognize Jesus as the Messiah. They must’ve been pretty obnoxious about it, as the crowd tried to quiet them down. But it seems they were desperate.

What do you want Me to do for you?: This is a wonderful, simple question God has not stopped asking. Even today, there are times we do not have because we do not ask (James 4:2). God wants us to ask, because we would never ask if we didn’t believe. The act of supplication is a supreme act of faith.

It’s not that Jesus didn’t already know what these men wanted. He asked this question with full knowledge that they were blind. He knew what they needed and what they wanted, but God still wants us to tell Him our needs as a constant expression of our trust and reliance on Him. He doesn’t need us to ask. **We** need us to ask!

And they immediately followed Him: And there it is, the best possible result. Not only were they healed, but they also followed the very Messiah they believed in, the One who saved and healed them.