

Matthew 19:30-20:16 – “Labourers in the Vineyard” – May 26, 2024

1. “*What does God owe you?*”
2. After Ascension and Pentecost, we re-enter the gospel of Matthew
3. We left off with the account of the rich young man who wanted to gain entrance into the kingdom of God by his behaviour
 - a. Christ took him through the Ten Commandments to show him that this was impossible
 - b. By refusing to give up his self sufficiency and submitting to Christ, this man is actually showing himself to be a law-breaker
 - c. He prides himself in keeping the law of Moses, and Jesus tests him in such a way as to start from the top, and the rich young man fails instantly
 - d. Self-sufficient rich men cannot enter the kingdom of heaven
 - e. Entrance is gained only by the rebirth
 - f. In 19:27, Peter picks up on this theme and notes that the disciples have shown their willingness to submit to the lordship of Christ because they have given up everything they had in order to follow Him
 - g. Jesus assures them that their sacrifice will be paid many times over (v.29)
 - h. He offers them a place of prominence, sitting on Twelve Thrones judging the Twelve Tribes when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne (v.28)
 - i. Providentially, we just marked Ascension Day, and this is when Christ took His throne
 1. This is the start of the new world that Jesus talks about in v.28

- i. But then, after Jesus has promised the twelve a rich repayment for their sacrifice, Jesus illustrates His point with a story
- 4. V.30 – *“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”*
 - a. I intentionally left this verse out last time because it transitions into the parable that Jesus is about to give
 - i. Unfortunate chapter break right here
 - b. At the end of the parable, Jesus repeats the same thing, but in reverse order (20:16)
 - c. So the principle of the first being last, and the last being first is given before and after the parable of the labourers in the vineyard
 - d. The way Jesus sets this parable up, and the way He ends it the same way He starts it, by repeating that the first will be last, and the last first, shows that it is part of His answer to Peter’s question in 19:27
 - i. A self-sufficient man refused to die to himself
 - 1. Thus he is excluded from the kingdom
 - ii. The disciples have died to themselves and Jesus promises a reward
 - 1. The Twelve are promised a great reward, to sit and judge with Christ as the first messengers of this new covenant/new world order
 - e. But understanding the human heart, Jesus tells a story that should serve as a warning for all of us
 - i. If we are not intentional about seeing the world correctly, we are going to lose focus and get severely distracted

5. VV. 1, 2 – *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”*

- a. Day labour was a common practice
- b. Men would go to the marketplace and hire themselves out in the hopes that someone would need their services
- c. Jesus is describing what the kingdom of heaven is like
 - i. At the dawn of a new day, the master of the house goes to hire labourers
 - ii. The master of God’s kingdom is Christ; and as this new world emerges, as the dawn of this new era in redemptive history comes, the master goes out to hire workers to help in the harvest
 - iii. A vineyard is a fitting image for the people of God, as it is language used to describe Israel in the OT (Ps. 80:8-13; Isa. 3:14; 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1) and it will show up in another very significant parable in Matthew 21
- d. The master goes out first thing and hires a group of men for a denarius
 - i. This is a fair wage
 - ii. And notice carefully in v.2 that both the master and the labourers agreed to this wage
 1. This becomes very significant by the end of the parable

6. VV. 3-5 – *“And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I*

will give you.’ 5 So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.”

- a. The ancients counted their day from sun up to sun down
- b. The work day was from 6am to 6pm
- c. So the master goes back to hire more workers at 9am (the third hour)
 - i. Notice here that there is no negotiation
 - ii. They come on the master’s promise to treat them fairly
 - iii. That is good enough for them as three hours of the work day has already passed, and they are still without work
 1. Their ability to negotiate has been weakened
- d. The master comes back at 12pm and at 3pm (6th and 9th hours)
 - i. Again, no negotiation
 - ii. The workday is going by quickly, and these men still have no work to provide for themselves and their families, so they are just happy to get hired on for whatever they can get

7. VV. 6, 7 – *“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?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.”*

- a. The day is almost over; the 11th hour would be 5pm
- b. There are still some men who are standing idle and the manager sends them to work
- c. This is a blessing for these men to have something useful to do

- i. Idleness is an invitation for slavery and sin; idle hands are the devil's playground
- ii. Idleness and a lack of purpose or mission also makes men susceptible to bribes and enslavement
 - 1. A bribe is different than honest wages
 - 2. A bribe is meant to destroy and emasculate a coward
 - 3. Wages are the reward of a man who has been freed to do productive and useful things
- iii. An idle man may very well go to hell that way, but a man on his way to heaven must be busy serving his master
- d. These 11th hour workers are no doubt highly thankful that their day has been salvaged
 - i. In a very real sense they may be the most thankful of all of those who got hired that day
- e. No matter what time these workers got hired on, the fact that they get hired is a blessing
 - i. The alternative is hunger
 - ii. The manager of the vineyard owed none of these men work
 - iii. Rather, the work he offered was a blessing for these men
 - iv. There's an economic and vocational principle here that work is a blessing – it is not owed to us
 - v. When we exchange our time for someone else's money, both parties win
 - 1. This is indeed a biblical approach to work and economics

2. These are free exchanges
 - a. The man who gives up his time does so because he has placed more value on the paycheck than he places on his free time
 - b. The man who gives up his money does so because he has placed more value on the help that he is getting than on the money he is spending
3. This is Basic Economics 101, and it has followed Christianity around wherever it has gone
 - a. The blessings of abundance that we enjoy are by no means obvious or automatic
 - b. They are the fruit of a Christian attitude towards work and money
 - c. This is why western Europe and North America have historically enjoyed blessings that have not been enjoyed in areas that have not known the gospel or the law of God
 - d. This isn't a parable that is primarily aimed at economics, but there are principles here that we must remember if we're going to have a biblical worldview
 - i. We're going to end up here with very drastic income inequality
 - ii. There is not equal hourly wages at the end

- iii. There is a principle that the owner can do what he wants with his money
 - iv. And that workers are free to voluntarily hire out their services at whatever price they like
 - v. And Jesus says that this is what the kingdom of God is like
- e. This is a very different view than the one that mandates a minimum wage or that says that income inequality is proof of injustice
- i. Some men get paid at a rate of 1 denarius for 12 hours, some get 1 denarius for 9 hours, some get 1 denarius for 6 hours, 3 hours, and even 1 hour
 - ii. The last workers have a wage 12X greater than the first workers
 - iii. Rather than this being a parable of systemic injustice, Jesus uses this to describe how God has ordered His kingdom to operate
- f. But this is an application and not the main point
- i. Because it is clear that the manager is Christ, that the vineyard is the kingdom, and that the workers are those who have been called into the kingdom by God
 - ii. What do we deserve?

8. V.8 – *“And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’”*
- a. The practice of the vineyard owner and the foreman also demonstrate a commitment to biblical law and justice
 - b. The Mosaic law code made it clear that employers needed to keep their word to pay what they promised and to make sure his employees received prompt payment at the end of every day (Lev. 19:13; Deut 24:14; cf. James 5:4)
 - i. After all, these men needed this money to feed their families
9. VV. 9, 10 – *“And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.”*
- a. Here we see the free grace of God to reward these last workers as He sees fit
 - b. They receive the same as the morning workers, for 1/12th of the work
 - c. John Gill – *“So the same church privileges and benefits are common to all believers, Jews or Gentiles, sooner or later called; and equal title give to the same eternal life and happiness, which will be enjoyed alike, by one saint as another: they are all loved with the same everlasting love by God; they are chosen alike by him in his Son, at the same time, in the same way and manner, and to the same grace and glory; they are interested in the same covenant, in all the promises and blessings of it; they are bought with the same price of a Redeemer's blood, are justified by the same righteousness, and are called in one hope of their calling; they are equally the sons of God, and their glory and happiness are always expressed by the same thing, as a kingdom, a crown, and*

inheritance, &c. They are all equally heirs of the same kingdom and glory, and are born again to the same incorruptible inheritance, of which they will all be partakers; they will all be called to inherit the same kingdom, they will sit on the same throne of glory, and wear the same crown of righteousness, and enjoy the same uninterrupted communion with Father, Son, and Spirit.”

- d. What should strike us here is the unmerited grace that these last ones get
- e. Again, this is the main point – the freedom of the master to do as He pleases
 - i. The sovereignty and freedom of God’s grace
 - 1. If grace is *owed*, it is no longer grace
- f. But human nature gravitates towards envy instead of thankfulness, so look at how the manager’s generosity gets interpreted

10. VV.11-15 – *“And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 12 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.’ 13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’”*

- a. Instead of seeing that kindness of the master to give the later workers more than they deserved, there is clamour at the “*injustice*” of it
- b. The morning workers seem to be striking the same note as those who today cry for “social justice”

- c. What they see is that some people benefited more than they did, so they are thinking of forming a labour union here so they can strike over the fact that someone else did better than them
- d. What a perversion of the concept of justice
 - i. This mindset continues to plague us
 - 1. In our day we think that “justice” means that someone is owed a certain wage regardless of what they do, how many hours they work, or their level of competence
 - 2. “justice” has come to mean “free chocolate milk for everybody”
 - ii. Biblically defined, justice means that we honour God’s law, we keep our word, and we use honest weights and measures in our dealings
- e. In this case, remember back to the beginning – the only group of workers who negotiated and agreed to a specific wage was the early morning workers
 - i. They got exactly what they agreed to!
 - ii. There is absolutely no injustice here whatsoever
 - iii. In fact, they are the only group of workers who get justice!!
 - 1. The rest receive grace
- f. On a gut level we may understand why the morning workers weren’t happy that the 11th hour workers got paid the same amount as them, after they endured the midday sun for hours while these were standing idle
 - i. But again, when they negotiated their wage, they factored that in!
 - ii. At 6am when they got hired, they knew that it would be hot and uncomfortable work in the heat of the day, and they agreed to those terms

- iii. Absolutely nothing unjust happened here
- iv. Assume for a minute that the master didn't go back to the marketplace to hire additional workers, so the 6am workers were the only ones there all day
 - 1. If they agreed to a denarius for 12 hours, they worked 12 hours, and the master paid them exactly what they agreed to, everyone would go home perfectly happy
 - 2. The problem here is envy, not injustice
 - 3. Matthew Henry – *“It is incontestably true, that God can do no wrong. Whatever God does to us, or withholds from us, He does us no wrong. If God gives that grace to others, which he denies to us, it is kindness to them, but no injustice to us; and bounty to another, while it is no injustice to us, we ought not to find fault with.”*
- g. This is the crux of this parable – the freedom of God's grace
 - i. The rich young man was unwilling to submit to the Lord
 - 1. He wanted to negotiate his way into the kingdom because he really thought he had something to offer
 - 2. The disciples just dropped their stuff and accepted Jesus's terms without really even knowing fully what they were
 - 3. The rich young man is like the morning workers who feel like they're coming in from a position of strength

- a. *Those who come to Christ empty handed are like the later workers who are just overjoyed that Jesus didn't pass them by!*
 - b. The later it gets, the less we see ourselves in a position of strength – we're just happy to be invited
 - i. We're so happy to be called by the Master that we don't get caught up in a negotiation
 - ii. We have nothing to negotiate – we just overflow with thanksgiving that He saw us and put us into His service!
- 4. *When we think we come to God from a position of strength, we almost always expect too much, and then live in a state of constant frustration and disappointment, just like the morning workers*
- ii. The disciples did submit to Christ, but Peter's question about being rewarded for their sacrifice brings up an ugly truth about the human heart, even among those of us who are saved
- iii. We all want mercy for ourselves and justice for everyone else
- iv. We're all okay with inequality as long as I'm the one who has more
- v. Jesus uses this parable to show the sovereignty of God's grace
 - 1. All creation is His, and He is free to do exactly with His creation as He sees fit
 - 2. God may indeed owe us justice, but He owes mercy to no one

- h. Just as the workday was broken into four segments of three hours, so some see a connection to the different times in redemptive history
 - i. Adam to Moses – before the law
 - ii. Moses to Christ – under the law
 - iii. During Christ
 - iv. After Christ/Last days
- i. The kingdom and the covenants are about to be stripped away from the unbelieving ones among the Jews and Christ is going to start grafting in Gentiles
 - i. The faithful Jews who accepted Christ and become the seed of the church may feel ripped off
 - ii. After all, they have been labouring under the sun for a long time
 - 1. They wandered through the desert
 - 2. They had the heavy weight of the ceremonial law on them
 - 3. They have been exiled
 - 4. And now Gentiles can just come waltzing in and enjoy the Messiah just the same as they can?!
 - iii. *“God gave Israel the supreme privilege of being the temporary tenants and construction workers of the Messiah’s kingdom. But scaffolding, concept art, and sketches are not needed when the building is completed. The benefit for Israel was that though they were tenant workers in the Son’s vineyard, and though their kingdom and covenants were dismantled, they were still invited to take their place along with the rest of the world*

on the same free and gracious terms. In fact, they were privileged to be the first recipients.” (Renihan)

1. The Old Covenant was grace from first to last, and now as the Old Covenant gives birth to the New Covenant, and all nations are commanded to come to Christ, the Jews don't see God's grace getting bigger and wider; they see an injustice. Their envy causes them to think that God is breaking His word at precisely the point where He is keeping it – through Abraham shall *all the nations* of the earth be blessed.
- j. Of course, we don't have an objection to this since we're mostly Gentiles here
 - i. But what about the effort you've put in to honour God with your life?
 - ii. You've fought to keep your family together, you paid your debts in full, you worked hard to build a business and a reputation, you gave your free time to the church and to people who needed a hand
 - iii. Now the undisciplined clown from high school who has had zero discipline, left a trail of broken relationships, debt, and addiction gets called by Jesus at the 11th hour
 1. Both of you are going to enjoy the same eternity with Christ
 - iv. Suddenly it's harder to see the beauty in the sovereignty of God's grace, isn't it?
 1. *But what injustice has been done to you if God grants late repentance to another?*

- k. People complain about God's grace as though it's an injustice instead of a free gift
 - i. Whether we're talking about election, or about temporal benefits, or about how early or late in life someone converts, we become just like the morning workers
 - ii. What do we all say – "*God, that's not fair!*"
 - iii. To whom did the master owe a job? To whom was an injustice done? To whom did God break His word?
- l. The early morning workers receive justice. The late afternoon workers receive grace.
 - i. *Nobody receives injustice*
- m. When you start thinking
 - i. His wife is prettier than mine
 - ii. Her husband is more understanding than mine
 - iii. He grew up in a wealthier family than me
 - iv. She's so much more gifted than me
 - v. Diagnostic question – "*Are you the kind of person who typically gets bad service at restaurants?*"
- n. Then stop and ask yourself what injustice God has done to you
 - i. The morning workers weren't unhappy because of what they got; they were unhappy because of what someone else got, and that makes no sense
- o. Here's the easiest application I can make for everyone here this morning
 - i. *Write down a list of everything that God owes you*

- p. Now, much harder
 - i. *Write down a list of everything that you owe to God*
 - ii. *Write down a list of everything God has blessed you with that you do not deserve*
- q. If you've ever asked me how I'm doing, you've heard me answer "*Better than I deserve*"
 - i. I do that to remind myself (and others) of what God owes to me
- r. Here's another way to frame this;
 - i. If God gave us what we deserved, what would we receive?
 1. Eternal hell with no way of escape
- s. Yet in the gospel God not only frees us from that, but He secures paradise for us
 - i. And in between He gives us breath and taste buds and children to love and a church family to worship with
 - ii. And if you're alive in this age and on this continent right now, He has also seen fit to make you one of the wealthiest people who have ever lived in the history of planet earth
 1. He has blessed you with indoor plumbing and electric heat and gas powered vehicles and a device that can allow you to talk to anyone you want or access any information you are curious about
 2. How many men would it have taken King David or King Solomon to do all that for them?
 - a. And you have to work about 3-5 hours a month to pay for all that, and it fits in your shirt pocket!

iii. All of it undeserved!

t. I'll ask again, *What does God owe you?*

u. Jesus ends this parable the same way He started it

11. V.16 – “*So the last will be first, and the first last.*”

a. The rich young man saw himself at the front of the lineup

i. His life warranted salvation, and Jesus wastes no time demoting him

b. the disciples forsake their lives and get moved to the front of church history

c. the manager in the parable pays the workers in the opposite order of how he hired them

i. the last to get hired are the first to get paid

ii. this is no doubt what causes the morning workers to start expecting more than they were promised

d. The Pharisees and Jewish leaders saw themselves at the front, and in Ch. 21 Jesus is going to use very plain language to let them know that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom before they are

e. The Jewish people are the first to be called by God, yet overall they are the last to enter, according to the logic of Romans 11

f. This is a somber warning for all of us who may be tempted to think we have done something to deserve God's grace; or that we deserve more grace because our neighbour has also been given grace

12. CHARGE

a. *If there is any sentiment that has no place in the Christian's heart, it is the sentiment that God owes us something. He owes us nothing. The only title we own*

free and clear is to our sin. Yet in His sovereign grace, God freely gives us title to the kingdom. So the charge is this; whether God has called you in the morning, or whether He has called you at the eleventh hour, meditate on the fact that the calling itself is an undeserved mercy. In the power of the Holy Spirit, turn thoughts of envy into joy that God has also been pleased to bless your neighbour. “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7)

13. BENEDICTION

- a. Romans 11:33-36 – *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” 35 “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”*