

# Matthew 20:1-28

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Date: 20 March 2016

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[ 0 : 00 ] I would like us to turn once again to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, and reading at verse 1. Matthew 20 and at verse 1.

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.

The kingdom of heaven is like a master who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

The Lord uses parables on all for two reasons. To warn the scribes and Pharisees as to their lifestyles and their judgmentalness.

And to encourage them to turn away from such a lifestyle. And to seek the Lord while he was to be found as he's described in the parables. As a loving father, as a forgiving God, as one who would welcome even the worst of sinners.

[ 1 : 21 ] But he also speaks it towards believers. Very often, as believers, we think we have a full grasp of the Gospel, not realizing fully the radical nature of what the Gospel tries to impart to us.

And for those of us who think we do know it fully, it only declares how ignorant we really are of the radical nature of the Gospel itself.

And that's another reason that the Lord is framing parables to tell those who come to seek him, the publicans and the sinners.

To encourage them in their desire to seek the Lord while he may be found and to call upon him while he is near. To declare to them that he will not turn away any that come to him seeking salvation.

Seeking grace in time of need. And so it is for all of us who are seeking as we come here today to hear the Gospel. You're in the place of blessing.

[ 2 : 33 ] You're in the place where Christ is passing by in his Gospel. You're in the place especially where, under the preaching of God's Word, his salvation is made accessible to all those who would place themselves under that Word.

And hear what God the Lord has to say to them. Now the Lord very often uses the same phrases and the same words to communicate a particular point.

Twice in the Gospel of Matthew and another couple of times in the Gospel of Luke. He demonstrates to us a recipe of greatness.

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. The Lord himself is a prime example of one who is exalted because he humbled himself.

Paul tells us in Philippians that he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross. Wherefore God highly exalted him and gave him a name above every other name.

[ 3 : 50 ] That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now here, words very similar to those are used at the end of chapter 19 and here in chapter 20 at verse 16.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last. And these two verses are really a parenthesis.

They're really a bracket around the parable itself. The parable itself is fairly simple.

It has its difficulties but the parable itself is very simple. The vineyard owner needs men to go out and work in his vineyard. So he goes out at six o'clock in the morning. We told you he goes out early in the morning at six.

And he hires people for his vineyard. He hired them for a denarius a day. The fair wage for a day's work.

[ 5 : 05 ] And they agreed to that particular contract and so they went and worked in the vineyard. Three hours later at nine o'clock in the morning he goes out and finds others.

So he hires them. He does the same at midday and he does the same at five o'clock in the evening. And so at the end of the day he paid the workers beginning with the five o'clock group.

And he tells his servants begin with the last first and pay them exactly what I agreed to pay those who began the work at six o'clock in the morning.

He paid that group of denarius. He did the same with the three o'clock group with those who were hired at noon and those who were hired at nine o'clock. At last he came with those whom he hired first.

At six in the morning. And when they see all that they are getting is the denarius today they begin with just to complain. We can imagine their anticipation as they saw those who were hired after them getting a denarius.

[ 6 : 21 ] They say surely that we who have been here all day are going to get more than he's given to them. And yet the Lord says to them the Lord of the vineyard. He says friend I am not being unfair to you.

Didn't you contract at the beginning of the day to work for a denarius for the day? Take what is yours and go.

Or are you envious? Because I am generous. And there's a thread running through almost all of the Lord's parables about envy and jealousy.

And there's the envy and the jealousy of the scribes and Pharisees about those who like the publicans and sinners who were being received into the kingdom.

And they were finding themselves outside. And so the Lord of the vineyard says so the last shall be first and the first shall be last. As I said earlier on the parable itself is plain enough.

[ 7 : 28 ] But it does present us with quite a few difficulties. It seems that the man who is engaged in this business wouldn't be in business very long if he continued to deal with his workers on this particular basis.

He'd soon become bankrupt. Not only that, he would have quite a few problems with the labor unions. As they saw people getting different rates of pay for doing the same work.

And yet, it's the Lord who is distributing the money. It's the Lord who is giving out the fair day's wage for the fair day's work.

Now, some people try and overcome these difficulties in a rationalistic way. They say, really what's happening here?

And commentators do this. This is not just the person in the pew. And commentators try and rationalize it and say, well, the ones who were hired, first of all, they took long tea breaks.

[ 8 : 36 ] They talked on the job. They took a long two-hour lunch break. And their work wasn't really up to scratch. They idled most of the time. Those who were hired later worked hard all the day.

And they actually did the same amount of work as the others who had been hired early. But the parable says nothing about that. It says nothing about the amount of work that was done.

The parable simply states the goodness of the vineyard owner in giving each one who had come to labor the same amount of pay. And we'll see why later on.

Others try and say that there's no real rewards in heaven. And so what you get doesn't really matter. Well, the Bible in certain texts says exactly the opposite.

There will be rewards in heaven. And it does matter how you work and what you work. For one instance, there's the parable of the sheep and the goats. And you can see there of the rewards and the punishments for those who labor or do not labor.

[ 9 : 46 ] So how are we going to try and understand this in a spiritual way? In one sense, what the Lord is doing here, he's trying to deal with the problem the Jews had with the Gentiles who were coming into the kingdom and accepting the gospel.

It's seen in the parable of the prodigal son, where the prodigal has gone out and lived a very dissolute life, a life of wine, women, and song, and comes home and is forgiven.

And the elder brother, who's been there all the time, cannot see his way clear to understanding what's going on. It's seen in the parable or the actual instance of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The tax collector goes home justified and the Pharisee does not. Because he's proud and lifted up and self-willed. Well, the tax collector knows exactly what he is.

He knows he's in the wrong and so he pleads to God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And so again and again throughout the parables, we see the same scenario being played out. The seemingly unfairness of the Lord to the scribes and Pharisees and his overabundant liberalness to the sinners and the tax collectors, the publicans.

[ 11 : 17 ] Now from the earliest days of Old Testament history, God had dealt with the Jews in a very special way. From the calling of Abraham in Ur-The-Kaldis, God had provided for them.

He had given them a land when he brought the tribes of Israel back into Canaan. He had promoted their well-being. He had fought their battles for them.

And so they were very much protected and honored by God because they were his chosen people. They were his own peculiar people.

And for a time it seemed as though he was turning his back on the Gentile nations. And so everything was fine for a time. And then the Lord Jesus Christ comes to this world and suddenly things turn around.

Suddenly it's the Gentiles who are being invited to come into the kingdom. And so many of the Gentiles are coming in. The Jews are feeling that their traditions and their values are being overturned and overthrown.

[ 12 : 29 ] But instead of remembering that all that they received of God was because of God's goodness and grace toward them, they thought that they had earned it.

They thought they'd earned it by being who they were. They thought they'd earned it by working for God and keeping the temple and the tabernacle and the sacrifices. And they thought because of that God was somehow in their debt.

That's a danger for every one of us. We think that as we go through life, that working for God or giving money to God or somehow self-denying ourselves in the service of God, we are somehow putting God in our debt.

But having done all, we are of all men unprofitable servants. And so we see here the Jews, as far as they were concerned, there were no complaints.

Until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. When all the benefits the Jews thought were exclusively theirs, was suddenly being shared also with the Gentiles.

[ 13 : 41 ] And they had done absolutely nothing to deserve them. Like the prodigal who had squandered his father's inheritance.

Or the totally immoral tax collector. Or even the people who had been brought into the banquet, the wedding banquet.

Remember the ones who had been asked first and didn't go. And so he went out to the highways and byways and asked others to come in. And to share that banquet with him. And so in all these different areas, you see again and again the Jews discovering that the Lord was saying something totally different to the way they understood their relationship with their God.

The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The God of the Old Testament. What the Lord Jesus Christ was showing them. Was that God was not only the God of the Jews.

But he was the God of the whole creation. And in sending his son to this world. That he was displaying his love to the whole of his creation. And so many of the parables seem to have the same theme.

[ 15 : 10 ] The older brother's jealousy over his young son, his young brother. The vineyard workers' envy.

Those who received the same amount of pay. As the ones who arrived early. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Pride. And so in all these different aspects of jealousy and envy and pride. They're all part of what those of us who are in the church are liable to experience.

That's why in communion seasons it's so relevant. When the word tells us examine yourselves. To see whether you're walking according to your faith. Whether you are living up to the challenges that the gospel directs at us.

Whether we do live in harmony one with another. Whether we are kind to one another. Whether we are serving Christ and not one another.

[ 16 : 25 ] All these different aspects are brought out again and again in the parables of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord had seen that there was a huge problem of the Jews' jealousy towards Gentile blessings.

In fact, it's a more general problem than any one of us thinks. Because if we think because we've served God faithfully over many years.

We deserve something from him. We totally misunderstand the gospel. That it is all of grace. It is all of mercy.

It is all because of his love. There are three lessons, just briefly, that we can learn from this parable. Well, first of all, obviously, God is no man's debtor. It's the opposite of those who work the longest.

[ 17 : 30 ] Those who work the longest in the vineyard thought the man was their debtor. He'd arrange for the day's work. But because they'd worked longer than the others, the owner was in their debt and he should pay them more.

And the owner totally rejected that. It's also wrong to say, put God first and he will certainly bless you.

If you do everything that God tells you to do, if you live out your life in accordance with God's commandments, well, God is going to bless you and prosper you and make you wealthy in this world.

And he's going to encourage you in every aspect of your life. And again, that's a totally wrong way of thinking. Being in the way, the Lord blesses us.

Being in the way, the Lord thinks fit to communicate to us his grace and his mercy. Not because we are doing something, but because we are being obedient.

[ 18 : 45 ] Because we are in the way, because he knows our devotion to him, because he knows our relationship with him. He blesses us. The Bible does not teach that because there's some sort of way we can put God in our debt, as I said earlier on, by being honest in business, or by being philanthropic with money, or by self-denying ourselves in the various aspects of life, that we somehow put God in our debt.

We can never place God in our debt by doing something for him. Because as I said, we are of all men most unprofitable servants.

It's what's expected of us. We can do nothing for God more than what he expects us to do. And so God is no man's debt.

And then also God cares for people more than things. Why did the owner give the 11th hour the same as those who had worked all day?

Was it not because they needed the denarius? If you go back to the parable, you can see there, when he went at the 11th hour, they were still there waiting.

[ 20 : 17 ] You can assume that they'd been there all day. Each time he went, he hired some. And then he hired some more, and he hired some more. And then eventually he went at the 11th hour, and there were still some there.

So he hired all the rest who were there. Why have you been standing here idle all the day? And he says, because no one has hired us. They wanted work. On a spiritual sense, they wanted mercy.

There are those, perhaps, who have been coming to the means of grace over many decades, and you're coming because you want mercy. You're seeking grace. You're seeking salvation.

And so the Lord, in his mercy, very often brings those at the 11th hour into his kingdom. And what a great occasion for rejoicing there is in that, to know that the Lord has not forgotten us.

Think again of the thief on the cross at the 11th, at one minute to midnight. He says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he does remember him.

[ 21 : 19 ] Today you shall be with me in paradise. And so we find here this great principle that God cares for people more than things.

The owner here is not so much thinking of profit or the balance sheet.

He's thinking of people. He wanted to help them. He wanted to encourage them along life's journey. He wanted to show them mercy, as the Lord does to each one of us, as he brings us to know himself.

He shows us mercy. And grace. And pity. Not because of anything we are, or anything we deserve, but because of his love. And his grace towards us in Christ Jesus.

So unlike the rich fool. The man whom God blessed. And who thought, what will I do with all this excess crops that I have?

[ 22 : 31 ] I know, he says. I'll pull down the barns that I have, which was sufficient for his needs. More than sufficient, he was making a profit in his business. But the Lord blessed him overmuch.

He was making a profit in his business. He was making a profit in his business. Exceeding abundantly, more than he had deserved, or even had need of, or useful. And so what did he do? He pulls down the old barns, and he builds new barns.

For himself. So that he can take life easy, and store up goods for himself for the rest of his days. So unlike the elder brother, thinking only of himself, and not the son who had come home.

You know, he'd have been far happier if the money had come home, and the brother hadn't. That's not how the father was.

The father is just the opposite. He thinks much more of what we are, than what we can do for him.

[ 23 : 48 ] And then, the third lesson. God is no man's debtor. God cares for people more than things. And all we do, is for our love to Christ.

And that's the last point. Many are last, who will be first. And the important word there is many.

It's not an old and crucible phrase. Because the Bible doesn't say, everyone who begins early, and labours for him, will be first, or will be saved.

It's not how you begin, in a bright, starlit entrance. It's for those who finish the course, those who complete the race, that the prize is given.

And the prize is salvation. Last week, we looked at a parable, which was about, salvation.

[ 25 : 05 ] And here again, all the kingdom. The kingdom of God is like, throughout that, those verses in chapter 13, of the gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is like.

And so they were kingdom parables. But here, in this chapter, this is about salvation. The salvation of God, and the desire of God, to save his people, and to bring them, to a saving knowledge of himself.

Although, it will be true for many, who begin early, and labour for him, all their lives, that they will be first. All, will not know, that same, end of their lives.

It told in the first, epistle of John, they, were not of us, because they went out from us. They began well. They showed great promise.

They were, encouraging to those, who watched them. But, at the last, they did not complete the course. They went out from us, because, they were not of us.

[ 26 : 21 ] Others, beginning late, recognise, that their salvation, is due, entirely to God's grace, alone. And praise him, and, labour for him, and, recognise, that it's only because, of God's grace and mercy, that they're not consumed.

And so, many who are first, will be last, and the last first. It's not necessary, to, start last, to finish early, or to finish first, or to start early, and finish last, because neither is best.

The best is to, start early, to labour with all our heart, and mind, and, and, strength. And then, when we finish, to say, we're of all men, unprofitable servants.

For it's, not for the reward, surely, that we labour, but of love. Why do we worship? Why do we love?

Because God first loved us. Why we turn, from what we were, into what we are, because he had mercy, in our souls, and made us, of what we were not.

[ 27 : 37 ] Why do we now, run to what once, we didn't, even want to know? Because God, changed our mind, changed our desires, changed everything, in our experience, turning our world, upside down.

So it's, not for the reward, that we work, but for love. And, it's such, men and women, that God, delights, to honour.

May the Lord then, bless these thoughts to us. Let us then, conclude our worship, singing to God's praise, in Psalm, 145, second version of that Psalm, on page, 444, or 445 in fact, at verse 17.

Psalm 145, second version of that Psalm, the Lord is just in his ways all, and holy in his works each one, he is near to all that on him call, who call in truth on him alone.

To the end of the Psalm, to God's praise. the Lord is just in his ways all, and holy in his works each one, he is near to all that on him call, who call in truth on him alone.

[ 29 : 29 ] What will the judge desire, who will, of such a true in King and King, their pride regard, and fear he will, and save them in the time of need.

Our Lord preserves all more and less, that gives to him a loving heart, but worth as all the wickedness, his joy will be, and things of air.

Therefore, my love, the lips I'll pray, to sing the praises of the Lord, to magnify his holy name, forever laid, all flesh adored.

And now may grace, mercy, and peace, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, rest on you, and abide in you, now and always.  
Amen.