

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 27 2020

Matt 19:28-20:16 (NIV)

²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

²⁰ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ ⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ ⁹ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Sermon: Is God Fair?

What was your reaction when you heard the “Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”?¹ Did you immediately think, “There’s hope for me yet,” or, “That’s *not* fair!”? If you responded with the former, you identify with one of the “last,” if you responded with the latter, you’re likely one of the “first”! Regardless of our reactions, we are puzzled by the story and many wonder “Is God fair?” What is this parable all about?

Before discussing the story, let’s recognize the context. The chapter division between Matthew 19 and 20 was, of course, added much later – in the early 1200’s. At the very end of Matthew 19 we have the enigmatic words: “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”² And the verse at the *end* of the parable says, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”³ This parable is, therefore, the middle of that sandwich. But we need to go back a little further to where Jesus tells a rich young man to, “Sell all his possessions and give to the poor, then come and follow me”⁴ And we are told he went away sad *because* of his wealth.⁵ Jesus then tells his disciples: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God”⁶ and the disciples were *astonished* to hear that.⁷ Their amazement indicates that they shared the general Old Testament view that considered wealth as a *blessing* from God, a sign of divine favour.⁸ In other words, their understanding of having a relationship with God was *contractual*.⁹ Peter then says, “We have left everything and followed you. “What *reward* can we expect?”¹⁰ And Jesus reassures them that on Judgement Day, they will indeed be honoured, and those who have left their security and families for his sake will be rewarded and be part of God’s Kingdom.¹¹ But then he adds: “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”¹² *What* does saying mean and *how* does this parable fit in? Let’s now explore the story.

It begins, “For the kingdom of heaven is like. . .” and so a connection is being made with *God*.¹³ It’s another farming story and the context is well-known. In harvest season, additional day laborers are

¹ Matt 20:1-16. This story is unique to Matthew.

² Matt 19:30.

³ Matt 20:16.

⁴ Matt 19:21. See also Mark 10:17-27, Luke 18:18-30.

⁵ Matt 19:22. See: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>

⁶ Matt 19: 24 – “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom.”

⁷ Mark 10:23-24.

⁸ See Deut 28:1–14; Job 1:10; 42:10; Prov 10:22. Indeed, in the wider Greco-Roman world, material property was widely seen as a reward or a by-product of spiritual virtue, as well as in the Jewish faith.

⁹ This is also what Satan says to God at the beginning of the book of Job: “Does Job honour you for nothing?” (Job 1:9) The implication being, “No, he’s in it for the *reward*”! Satan continues, “If you remove your hedge of protection around him, he will curse you to your face!” (Job 1:10-11).

¹⁰ Matt 19:27.

¹¹ Matt 19:28-29; 25:46.

¹² Matt 19:30.

¹³ Matt 20:1. Unusually, it is the Landowner, not his estate manager, who hired the workers in this story! Note: this is a story that says something about *God*; it is not a social critique on labour practices.)

hired in the market square at 6am for the going daily wage of 1 denarius.¹⁴ Incidentally, this was barely enough to maintain a person at subsistence level, let alone a family – but let’s not get sidetracked here because the story isn’t a critique on such practices. The Landowner hires the men, making a verbal *contract* with the workers. But later, at 9am the man returns and hires more workers simply saying “I will pay you *whatever is right*.” There is no quantified verbal contract here, they can only trust in the master’s sense of *justice* as to what is “fair.” What is also odd about this picture is that, realistically, the Landowner would know at dawn how many day workers he needed, and that would be the end of the matter. This is a parable, and we are told he did the same at noon, 3pm, and at 5pm he went back to the marketplace and saw some men standing around. He asked them, “Why are you standing here all day without work?” And they replied, ‘Because no one hired us.’ So he said to them, “You go and work in the vineyard too.”¹⁵ This scenario reminds me of Phys Ed Class at school, where the teacher asks the two most popular, athletic kids in the class to pick the two teams. The captains then look at their classmates lined-up in front of them and alternately pick their friends and the strongest players to be part of their teams. Near the end are the dregs of the class, whom nobody wants. They *know* they are not wanted, and the teams don’t try to hide that fact. At the end, one captain says, “I’ll take that one and you can have the remaining two!” The last players are seen as worthless and there is no expectation that they can add anything of value to the team. The men still in the marketplace at 5pm are those who *everybody* knows no one would *ever* pick! Their humiliation is public and complete. However, in this story the Landowner picks them, even when there is only *one* hour left in the working day.

At 6pm, the Landowner said to his manager, “Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the *last* and then going to the *first*.”¹⁶ The story is really about those who were hired first, at 6am, and last, 5pm. And the *order* of payment is significant here; had those hired first received their day’s wage, they would be off home and would *not* have witnessed what happened next! You know the story: Those who are hired at 5pm receive a full-day’s pay! And those who hired first now *expect* that fairness demands they will receive much more, for they have worked in the heat of the day. They “grumble.”¹⁷ They want “justice.” A trade-union leader would have a thing or two to say about this situation! Yet the 6am group receive the agreed-upon amount! The Landowner then says to the grumblers, “Take what belongs to you and leave; I chose to give to the last the same as I gave you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? *Or are you envious because I am generous?*”¹⁸ That’s the climax; but what’s going on here? How would the *disciples* react to this? Or Jesus’ *critics*? Or Matthew’s *readers*? Or *us today*? Let’s consider each on in turn.

¹⁴ See Tobit 5:15 (A drachma is a Greek coin; a denarius is the equivalent Roman coin.) See also Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14–15.

¹⁵ Matt 20:6-7.

¹⁶ Matt 20:8. The Greek literal translation is the “lord (*kyrios*) of the vineyard,” and this is translated as “owner.”

¹⁷ The word “grumble” echoes the people grumbling to Moses in the wilderness, Exod 15:22-17:7; Num 11:1-6; 14:2.

¹⁸ Matt 20:14-15.

Recall that Jesus has just told Peter that the disciples will receive their reward on Judgement Day,¹⁹ and then added “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”²⁰ I suggest that Jesus is *warning* his disciples *not* to focus on rewards or to imagine God’s Kingdom functions in the contractual way that they assume. The disciples *may* think they are the *first* in God’s Kingdom because they have been with Jesus from the very beginning, but they must not expect to become rich and famous simply because of their close proximity to Jesus.²¹ And others can and will come in at the 11th hour and still get the same daily wage. The obvious biblical example is the last-minute conversion of the thief on the cross next to Jesus!²² And if we grumble about *that* not being fair, then we are like the resentful *older* brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son!²³

Second, Jesus’ critics did *not* like his friends. Even so, they thought that some disreputable members of Jewish society wouldn’t be *entirely* excluded from the mercy of a loving God. Even for them there was hope, but only if they showed practical repentance and demonstrated an amended life! Those critics thought God’s mercy for “sinners” was *conditional* on the recipient shaping-up their life a bit; in other words, they were on probation! Jesus, however, accepted them *immediately*; he did not wait to see the outcome before he committed himself to them. This parable can therefore be considered a response to his critics. They are ones are those who have worked hard all day and then complain of God’s unfair generosity.²⁴ But for those outcasts who were picked last, the God’s mercy is wonderfully good news. That’s the surprising upside-down effects of God’s grace.²⁵

Third, Matthew writes for a mixed congregation that includes both longtime Jewish Christians and non-Jewish converts. Some of those Jewish Christians may have felt more entitled to God’s grace by virtue of their race; the Jews were God’s chosen people *first*. Matthew makes it clear that non-Jews are just as welcome in God’s kingdom. “If you don’t like it, get used to it,” implies Matthew! God is generous and there are no grounds for envy in his kingdom. The “last in” will receive the same as the “first in”! To be fair, the old-time people don’t really object to the grace that others have received, but *expect* that they will receive *more*! When they receive the fulfillment of their contract, what they object to now is that others have been made *equal* to them. What they have by justice, others have received by grace. Grace that can be calculated and expected is no longer grace!

¹⁹ Matt 19:28: “In the age when all things are renewed, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne. . .”

²⁰ Matt 19:30. Theologian J. B. Bauer suggests that the parable teaches not a reversal of order but the *abandonment* of every form of ordering. All is based on mercy. That’s the surprising upside-down effects of God’s generosity!

²¹ See also Matt 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-47.

²² Luke 23:39-43. The story of actor John Wayne’s last-minute conversion can equally be irksome to many today, including me!

²³ Luke 15:11–32. See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf> .

²⁴ Those righteous people who don’t need a doctor will get the same gracious welcome as a social outcast in God’s kingdom! (See Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31. See also Matt 9:11; 11:19; 21:31; Luke 18:9-14; 19:5-7.)

²⁵ The point of the parable is about the meaning God’s generosity to the outsider and how this is offensive to some people. It’s not about the worthiness of laborers who serve the whole day. We therefore need to not push the parable too far.

Finally, what about us? Does this parable make us question whether God is God of justice? Are we grumbling too? This matter of God being “fair” has a very long history in religion. We humans have assumed we can *bargain* with the gods to obtain what we want. The Patriarch Jacob attempted to bargain with God for protection and sustenance, promising to reward God with a 10th of his income.²⁶ And commonly inscribed on ancient Roman shrines were words that meant, “I give in order that you may give.” With this declaration the donor made clear that his or her generosity was intended to inspire a like generosity on the part of the deity to whom the structure was dedicated. Just as benefactors today can give to political parties with the hope of some return, like a tax cut, down the line. Or to a medical institution with the hope of excellent, priority treatment when we need it. In a similar way, we too can try to bargain with God.²⁷ God’s grace is not the sort of thing that we can negotiate, or try and store-up. It isn’t the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. In the parable, no one gets less than what he was promised, and many get much more than they deserve.

This parable therefore poses the question, “*Why* do we honour God?” Is it for some hope of reward, in this life or the next? Or do we work for the Kingdom of God because we believe it’s the right thing to do? This parable also deals with our resentment towards others who have received God’s grace. And that then speaks to human *pride* and *entitlement*. No one will be in the coming kingdom of God on the basis of his or her own achievements, but only on the basis of God’s generosity. There is truth in the old saying that, “The entry fee to Christianity is completely free, but the annual subscription is everything we’ve got!” This story tells us that God extends the invitation *indiscriminately* and *repeatedly* in order to gather as *many* as possible into his kingdom.²⁸ Why then do we begrudge his generosity? This is a story about amazing grace.²⁹ Our response must surely be one of gratitude! Amen.

²⁶ Gen 28:20–22. (This follows his famous vision of a stairway to heaven with angels ascending and descending it.)

²⁷ For example. Some people give – say, 10%, a tithe - to the church as an insurance policy with the divine!

²⁸ God has no favourites; we are all equally deserving - or underserving! See Rom 2:11; Acts 10:34.

²⁹ There are other parables that one should also consider; e.g., The Parable of the Talents: Matt 25:14-30; The Parable of the Pounds: Luke 19:11-27.