

A Parable of Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

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Take your Bible and turn to Matthew 20:1-16.

Have you ever thought God was unfair? Have you ever thought God was biased toward one person and not another? Have you ever thought, "It's not fair that the drunk driver lives and the family dies?" Have you ever thought, "It's not fair that the nice old lady was mugged?" "God, it's not fair they get the promotion and I don't." Have you ever had thoughts like that toward God? Does God ever seem like He is unequal and imbalanced in His dealings with people? God has been accused of being unfair quite often.

One example of this is in **Ezekiel 18:25** where God is speaking to the people about one of their sins and God says to them, "You say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is My way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" Israel had accused God of being unfair, unequal. And Ezekiel said, "That's one of your sins. You've said that God is not fair." That sin has been committed many times by many people in various ways. When things in their life don't go the way they think they ought to go or the way they would like them to go, they accuse God of being unfair.

When people doubt the justice and fairness of God, it is always because of their own perverted views of justice and of God. God Himself is the standard for righteousness, and it is impossible for Him to be unjust or unfair in anyway. Confronting this view Paul declared in **Romans 2:11**, "God does not show favoritism." Then in **Colossians 3:24** we read "there is no favoritism" with the Lord.

God's impartiality is most wonderfully scene in salvation. No matter what men's circumstances might be when they come to Christ, and no matter how well or poorly they may serve Him after coming to Christ, they receive the same glorious salvation. That is the great truth Jesus teaches us in the parable of the landowner, which I like to call the parable of grace.

Let's look at it. Let's begin with **Matthew 19:30** [read 19:30-20:16].

The Proverb

I want you to notice this parable is bracketed or sandwiched between the same statements. **Matthew 19:30** says, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Then **Matthew 20:16** says the same thing, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Those two statements define what the parable in the middle is about. It's about being last and being first.

That statement is a proverb, it is a wise statement that was coined by our Lord Jesus. To understand the parable you have to understand the proverb. So what does it mean? What does "the last will be first, and the first will be last" mean? The proverb can easily be understood by looking at a **track meet**. Have you ever seen or been to a school track meet. There is this one race called the 800 meter race. You will have seven or eight runners at the line and the gun sounds and off they go. Their goal is to see who can run around the track the one time the fastest. When they cross the finish line you will have one who comes in first, then second and third and so on. When you read this proverb "the last will be first, and the first will be last" you may think that it means the runner in first place will be placed at the end of the line and the runner in last place will be moved up in the front of the line. That's NOT what that means. It does NOT mean that those who finish first will be moved back and those who finish last will be moved up.

Now listen carefully, the only way the first can be last and the last be first at the same time is if they all cross the finish line at the same time. If you are last, then you are last. If you are first, then you first. However, if the first is last and the last is first, that means you finish in a dead heat. So the proverb "the last will be first, and the first will be last" means everyone finishes the same. In God's kingdom everyone will finish equally. God is no respecter of persons. God treats all of His own equally.

The Parable

To help us understand what this means the Lord gives us a parable. A *parable* is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a physical illustration of a spiritual truth. To help us understand this parable let's make a few points of identification and observations.

Jesus begins this parable by saying, "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." When you are talking about the kingdom of heaven you are talking about the sphere of salvation. It is the realm where God's people operate. It is the sphere where God rules over the redeemed, where God rules through the grace of salvation. It is the supernatural domain of God's children.

So Jesus is illustrating how it is among the saved, among the believers in God's kingdom. He says it's like a "landowner" who went out early in the morning to hire some extra workers for his vineyards.

Now the work day started at 6:00 am and it ended at 6:00 pm. They had a 12-hour workday and they did it six days a week. So at the start of the day, the owner went to find "workers." Hired workers in ancient Israel were usually the lowest people on the social ladder, the lowest class of workers. They were basically unskilled. They were untrained and they were unemployed except for a day at a time. They were day laborers. Life for them was somewhat desperate and uncertain because they had to work in order to eat. If they didn't work, they didn't eat and neither did their families. In comparison slaves and servants had steady jobs. And even though they might have been poor, they could share in the family benefits and they knew they had a meal every day. Not so with the day workers.

God cares about everyone. He cares about the day workers. God was very concerned about the poor people in the land and how they were treated so that in the Old Testament God gave very specific laws for the care of day workers. In **Leviticus 19:13** the Bible says, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight." In other words, the day he worked, he had to be paid because that was the only way he could feed his family. **Deuteronomy 24:15** says, "Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin."

So the stage has been set. Day workers would gather at some point in the marketplace and they would wait for someone to come by and hire them. One day a landowner comes by early in the morning around 6:00 am and hires those there. He agreed to pay them a “denarius,” which is equal to a day’s wage. This is the same amount of what most Roman soldiers were paid. This is not a minimum wage offer. This was a good day’s salary. He comes back at 9:00 am and hires some more. He doesn’t agree to pay them a certain amount but only “whatever is right.” Then he comes back at noon and hires more. Then he comes back at 3:00 pm and hires some more. Now look at **verse 6**. He returns with one hour left in the work day and hires some more men.

Now **verse 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.” Remember the proverb of this parable is “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” So the foreman lines up the men beginning with the ones who worked an hour, then those who worked three hours, then six hours, then nine hours and finally those who had worked a full twelve hours.

When the twelve hour workers saw the one hour workers get paid a day’s wage for one hour they thought for sure they would get more for working twelve hours. So they were excited and expecting. I’m sure their imagination started running wild wondering what they were going to get paid. But look at **verse 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 men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us [that’s the meaning of “the last shall be first and the first shall be last] who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ (13) But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’” The answer to that question is yes because of verse 2. ““(14) Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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.”

The Point

The proverb is “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Jesus illustrates this proverb with the parable of the landowner and the workers. At the end of the day everyone finished the same. Everyone received the same pay. The first worker and the last worker received the same amount. **So what’s the point?** What’s the spiritual message here? What is Jesus teaching about the kingdom of heaven?

Let me make something clear. This is not a parable on economics. This is not a parable about how to pay your workers or about employee benefits. It’s a parable about the kingdom. It’s a parable about a heavenly principle. It is a simple illustration to make one very significant spiritual point.

What is that point? Well, stay with me and I’ll show you.

- The “landowner” represents God.
- The “vineyard” represents the kingdom.
- The “workers” represent the believers in the kingdom.
- The “hours” of work represent time.
- The “evening,” the end of the day, represents the moment we receive our reward.
- The wage or “denarius” represents eternal life.
- The “foreman” represents Jesus Christ who was given the task to reward the workers.

And all of that comes together to mean this. All who come into Christ’s kingdom to serve Him no matter how long, no matter how short, no matter how hard, no matter how easy the circumstance, will in the end equally receive the same full reward. What is that reward? Eternal life, eternal glory, eternal Christ likeness. Those who come first to God will receive no more than those who come last. Those who come last will receive no less than those who come first. “The last shall be first, and the first will be last.”

The same eternal life in Christ will be received by both the elderly man who accepts Jesus as Lord of his life on his death bed as the young boy who receives Christ at a Vacation Bible School. They will both receive the same eternal life.

The young lady who was saved early in life and became a missionary serving God all her life in a third world country, sacrificing family, friends, finances, and comfort will receive as much of heaven as the lady who sold her body to hundreds of men, used God's name in vain, and didn't give God a day of thought through her life until near her death from aids when she finally came to her senses and received Jesus Christ as the Lord of her life. They will both experience the same eternal life and the same heaven.

The thief on the cross will enjoy as much of the heavenly paradise as much as the apostle Paul will. "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." In God's kingdom of grace everyone no matter when you received Christ and no matter how long you worked for God will receive the same amount of eternal life. This is the parable of the landowner. It is the parable of grace.

The Principles

We have looked at the proverb of this parable which says, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." We have examined the parable itself and come to the main point of the parable being that everyone who receives eternal life will receive the same eternal life regardless of when they were saved or how much they served the Lord. When it comes to salvation and eternal life in heaven we get the same. So with that said, let's look at some practical principles from the parable.

Number one. God's grace initiates salvation. It was the landowner who "went" into the marketplace to find workers. None of those workers could have worked in the vineyard and received the denarius if the landowner had not taken the initiative to go get them. In the same way, God made the initiative to send His Son into the world to seek and to save those that were lost. God initiates salvation.

Number two. God's grace is continually calling people into His kingdom. Remember, the work "day" in the parable represents time. The landowner calls for workers at 6:00 am, 9:00 am, noon, 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm. All day long he is looking for workers to join Him in His work. In the same way, God is continually calling people to salvation and to join Him in His work of redemption. He may be calling you today.

Number three. God's grace gives everyone a place of work in His kingdom. Everyone of the workers who were hired by the landowner were given a job to do whether they worked 12 hours or 1 hour. They were given a responsibility of service in the vineyard. In the same way, God expects all who are saved into His kingdom to have a place of work and service. **Ephesians 2:10** says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." The good works does not earn us a place in the kingdom, we are assigned the good works after we are a part of the kingdom. God expects all who come into His kingdom to work.

Number four. God's grace gives us more than we deserve. The "denarius" for a day worker was a good wage. It was above "minimum wage." It was the same amount that Roman soldiers made in a day. This was a generous amount even for the 12 hour workers. No one deserved a denarius. In the same way, no one deserve heaven. If you were to serve God sacrificially and faithfully for 60 years, would you deserve eternal life? Would you deserve heaven? You wouldn't deserve it any more than the man that gave him 15 minutes of service. God's grace gives us more than we deserve.

Number five. God's grace gives according to need, not according to work. Remember, a "denarius" was generous, but it also met the need of a family for a day. Each worker, regardless of how long he had worked, received a day's pay. He received, not what he had earned, but what was needed to provide for his family. The landowner could have paid them only what they had earned, but he chose to pay them according to their need, not according to their work. He paid according to grace, not debt. In the same way, God's grace gives according to need, not according to work. Your greatest need is eternal life. No matter if you are the first to get saved or the last to get save in your family you will receive an equal amount of eternal life in heaven regardless.

Number six, God's grace is less enjoyed with a deserving attitude. Two groups of workers are highlighted in this parable. Those who worked 12 hours and those who worked 1 hour. The 12 hour workers were generously paid and the 1 hour workers were generously paid. However, instead of rejoicing over the day's wage they were promised and agreed upon the 12-hour workers grumbled and complained to the landowner, while those who worked 1 hour I'm sure were crazy with joy and amazement at the landowner's generosity. Whenever you think you deserve something from God and don't get it, you start thinking God is unfair and that thought will lead to a grumbling and critical attitude. It will rob you of the joy you already have.

When people read this parable they usually associate themselves with the 12 hour workers and feel as if the landowner has been unfair. We look at the world around us, instead of the gracious gift we have in Jesus Christ and we complain that we are treated unfairly by God. Statements like the following express this thought: “All that I have done for God and He allows my child to die” or “I have given to the Lord faithfully over the years and now I lose my job.” We think that our faithfulness over the years deserves special treatment by God in some way. When we think we deserve something special from God and don’t receive it, it robs us of the joy of God’s grace in blessings in our lives already.

Conclusion

From this parable who best represents you today?

- Do see yourself like the 1 hour worker who came to know Christ late in life and haven’t been able to work in God’s kingdom very long?
- Do you see yourself as the 12 hour worker who came to know Christ early in life and over the years have “borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day” by sacrificing for Christ in various ways throughout your life?
- Maybe you see yourself as those still in the marketplace waiting to be “hired”? Waiting for God to call your name? Is He calling you today? Is He calling you to be a part of His kingdom? His family? Do you want to become a child of God today?