
KINGDOM ORDER

Matthew 20:1-16
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INTRODUCTION

We can carry many burdens. Some are warranted others are not. Warranted burdens are the responsibilities we have in caring for others. Keeping a roof over their head, food on the table, and everyone clothed among others. But some of the heaviest burdens involve no one else but ourselves. They are self-imposed. And if I may be so bold, I propose this often times is the heaviest burden we carry. Self. Allow me to explain what I mean.

Have you ever looked at others, maybe it's a sibling, friend, or colleague, and thought, they are better than me? God has blessed them in their looks, or their talents and skills? Lord, how come they can eat donuts every day and not gain a pound? I eat one and I gain twenty pounds. We look at others every day and compare ourselves. Social media has only exacerbated the situation exponentially. Everyone's life looks so much better than yours.

When we are so focused on ourselves, and what we don't have, we begin to look at the lives of others and compare. This generates envy and jealousy. Envy is desiring what others own, have, or are. It is the same as coveting. Have you ever desired someone else's beauty, brains, or brawn? You want what they have.

Jealousy on the other hand, having a distaste, or even hatred towards others who have more than you. You may realize you will never be or have what they have, therefore, the only response left is distaste and even hatred. This is the way of the world. Life isn't fair and I deserve more. And if I can't get what they have, then I will hate them for having what God has granted to them. We all want to fit in. To feel accepted and even elevated. We want to be a part of the in-crowd. We want to be first. This innate desire can and will tear you apart from the inside out. But the kingdom of God operates on a completely opposite premise. Jesus teaches, those who are first will be last and those who are last will be first.

PARABLES: A BRIEF NOTE

This morning we will covering one single parable consisting of sixteen verses. But before we dive into this parable, I would like to take a moment to review parables. First, what is a parable? The challenge is no single definition can cover all forms of parables. Parables can take the form of a proverb (Luke 4:23), a riddle (Mark 3:23), a comparison (Matthew 13:33), a contrast (Luke 18:1-8), and both simple (Luke 13:6-9) and complex stories (Matt. 22:1-14)¹.

¹ Snodgrass, K. (2018). *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* [Kindle DX version] Retrieved from Amazon.com

PARABLES DEFINED

Dr. Klyne Snodgrass, author of *Stories with Intent*, was very helpful in understanding the function of parables. He says this, “Rabbis spoke of parables as handles for understanding the Torah. They have said before parables no one understood the Torah. But when Solomon and others created parables, then people understood. Therefore, we may say that Jesus’ parables are handles for understanding his teaching on the kingdom (of God).” They are not necessarily earthly stories with heavenly meanings.

PARABLES FUNCTION

Rather they function as a lens that allows us to see truth and to correct distorted vision. They are stories with intent, analogies through which one is enabled to see truth. The parable’s aim is to engage listeners, create reflection, and promote action. They are used by those who are trying to get God’s people to stop, reconsider their ways, and change their behavior.²

INTERPRETATIVE PRINCIPALS

With that being said, I want to layout a few interpretative principals.

1. Cultural context. Understanding the culture of the ancient near east will help us understand some of parables. We will see this in our parable this morning.
2. Scriptural context. What is surrounding the parable gives context to the parable.
3. Interpret what is given, not what is omitted. Any attempt to interpret a parable based on what is not there is almost certainly wrong.
4. Pay particular attention to the end of the parable. It stresses the emphasis of the parable. It’s called the rule of end stress.
5. Note where the teaching of the parables intersects with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere. This will help us balance their meanings. It will help keep them in line with the rest of the storyline of the Bible.

We will apply these principals to our parable this morning. Keep these principals near as we read and understand the parable of the laborers in Matthew 20. Before we continue, let’s pray.

CONTRASTING KINGDOMS

The disciples were called to follow Jesus. They thought He was the long-awaited Messiah. They thought he would come and free them from Roman rule. They thought they would finally be vindicated. They thought He would establish the new kingdom here on earth. And Jesus was doing exactly this but not in the way they expected. Their questions to Jesus revealed their perplexities of His new kingdom. They were to give up their friends, their families, their livelihoods, and even more their personal identities.

They were to give it all up for Jesus because in the end, there would be a great reward. However, they had a lot of questions and concerns because what they expected would happen was not lining up with

² Ibid.

what they were seeing and experiencing. Let me recall, just a few that reveal their perceptual problems regarding their understanding of the kingdom.

They had concerns about people's opinion:

In chapter 15 (15:12), when Jesus was teaching on what defiles a person, the disciples asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" Later Jesus tells them to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees.

They had concerns about the plan:

In chapter 16 (16:21-23), Peter rebukes Jesus after he foretells of his impending death and resurrection. Jesus replies with a stern rebuke. He then follows up with, "For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man."

They had concerns about their power:

In chapter 17 (17:19), when they were unable to cast out the demon from the boy, they asked, "Why could we not cast it out?" Their faith was small, trusting in themselves rather than relying on God.

They had concerns about their position:

In chapter 18 (18:1), they asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus replies, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

They had concerns about pardons:

Later in chapter 18 (18:21), they asked, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" Jesus says as many times as he repents. Restoring relationship supersedes personal vindication.

They were concerned about their pleasure:

In chapter 19 (19:10), after the teaching on divorce, they concluded it was better not to marry. If marriage was not about personal satisfaction then why enter into such commitment.

They were concerned about their self-preservation:

In the same chapter (19:25), they asked, "Who then can be saved?" How can we secure our salvation? This is a legitimate concern based on an earthly perspective.

They are concerned about earthly rewards:

And finally, at the end of chapter 19 (19:27), we see they are concerned about earthly possessions and rewards. "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Do you see how Jesus is continually turning their gaze away from themselves and the things of this world, and turning it toward the Father and His kingdom? They needed continual teaching and reorientation. And as Matthew records for us Jesus spoke in parables so that those who see and hear are blessed.

THE INTRODUCTION (v.1A)

Follow along with me as I pick in chapter 19, verse 27.

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"
²⁸ Jesus said to them, "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. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first. ¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like..."

This is the scriptural context of this parable. Notice it how it follows on the heels Peter's question from last week, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" This was in response to the rich young ruler's realization that his possessions meant more to him than following Jesus. I want you to take note that Jesus DID NOT say the rich ruler could NOT have eternal life. He said "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Now, as the disciples stand before Jesus, having left all to follow Him, they are wondering what their reward will be, because their "what's it in for us" mindset exposes their heart orientation of an earthly kingdom. Jesus does answer Peter's question then precedes into this morning's parable to give "handles", if you will, to help correct their distorted view.

THE SEQUENCE OF HIRING (V. 1B-7)

"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. ³ 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. ⁶ 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.'

CULTURAL CONTEXT

PRACTICE

Cultural context will help us here. This practice was not at all strange in the ancient near east at the time. It was common for day laborers to hang in the marketplace, waiting to be hired for the day or week. They were probably more indigent than those who belonged to a household, such as slaves and hired servants. Slaves and servants had the security of membership in a household unit. But agricultural workers were dependent on being hired from day to day.

PERSPECTIVE

Get the picture here. A day's labor was 12 hours. They worked from approximately 6am to 6pm. So, very early in the morning, the master drives to the marketplace and picks up some workers. They agree to a denarius. To give you perspective, it was estimated an average adult in ancient Palestine could live off a ½ denarius a day. The poverty line then, was approximately 200 denarii a year. This income would barely keep a small family from going under. Since they were so dependent upon their daily income, the Torah had provisions within it to protect such workers. In Deuteronomy 24 it says, ¹⁴ "You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. ¹⁵ You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he

is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin.” It was sinful to withhold pay from these workers for the day’s work.

PECULIAR PERSISTENCE

What’s unusual in this situation is the master continues to return to the marketplace to find the unemployed still standing there. He continues to hire them throughout the day at 9am, 12pm, 3pm, and finally 5pm. He promised to pay those hired first a day’s wage, while those hired throughout the middle of the day were promised “what’ is right”. Note that the owner promised nothing to those he hired in the eleventh hour.

Why does the master continue to hire more workers throughout the day? Is he driven by a deadline? What is his motivation? Was he motivated by mercy to those who needed work? But don’t get caught up in those details. Remember to interpret what is given not what is omitted.

But we are to see is that laborers were still waiting to be hired at the eleventh hour. Who stays there all day hoping to be hired for only one hour? The only conversation the master has is with those hired last. We are to see and hear this. Jesus is driving a point home here. He hired many workers. Not all worked the same number of hours. The most scandalous point, some only worked one hour.

THE PAYMENT (V.8-10)

Now comes the paycheck. Let’s pick up in verse 8-10:

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.’⁹ 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.

If you are like me, I picture a line of laborers waiting to receive their payment. Those hired in the eleventh have now received a full day’s wage. Can you imagine the excitement of being a laborer who has been there all day when you see this? They have witnessed the denarius passing into the hands of the eleventh-hour workers. Suddenly, they are filled with excitement as they anticipate their expected payment. “If those who worked only one hour received a denarius, that means, we will receive 12 denarii! We won’t have to work for two weeks!” Notice, there is no mention of the other hired workers, only the first and last. These are the ones Jesus wants to emphasize to the disciples. The time has come for those who were hired first to receive their payment. They, too, receive a full day’s wage. What is our heart’s reaction right now to this story? What do you think Matthew’s point is in sharing this parable here to the 1st century church?

THE COMPLAINT OF INJUSTICE (V.11-12)

Let’s read on.

¹¹ 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.’

Those who were hired first were probably dirty, sweaty, and tired. In their words, “they had borne the burden of the day”. They carried the weight. How could those who had only worked one hour receive the same as those who had worked 12 hours? So, as one would expect, they complain against the owner of the vineyard, murmuring under their breath, “unfair.” How does he respond to their complaint?

THE DEFENSE OF GOODNESS (v.13-15)

Let’s pick up in verse 13 with the corrective response of the master.

¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

First all, note the word “friend” here. This is not a term of endearment as we understand it. This term is used three times in Matthew. Here is the first. The next time it is used is in the parable of the wedding feast where king asks the man who had no wedding garment on, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?”. He was the one who was cast out. Finally, it is used when Judas comes with the chief priests and elders to betray Jesus. Jesus says to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” This is not a term of endearment.

Secondly notice the master asks these laborers three questions.

First, did you not agree to work for a denarius? The master upheld his end of the deal. He promised and he delivered. Take your money and go. This displays the master’s reliable character.

He follows this up with his second question in verse 15. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” The laborer would not have a job if it weren’t for the master. He can give whatever he wants to whomever he wants. He is sovereign over all his possessions, property, and even his payments.

Now his final question, again in verse 15. “Or do you begrudge my generosity?” To begrudge here means to look with an eye full of evil. It means to be stingy.³ Here the workers are staring at the master, the one who is generous, with an eye toward stinginess. How ironic.

THE CONCLUDING PROVERB (v.16)

Now we end with a concluding proverb.

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

First, note the bookend statement. It appeared first at the end of chapter 19 and now concludes the parable. Also, remember to pay particular attention to the end of the parable be that it stresses emphasis.

³ The meaning *stinginess, love for one’s own possessions* is upheld for all the NT passive with ὀφ. πον. by CCadoux, ET 53, ’41/42, 354f, esp. for **Mt 20:15**. See Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. 00). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 744). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

So I ask you, where are you in this kingdom order? Decide for yourselves as we look back and make a few observations. Those hired first agree on their wage for their labor. Their expectations changed based on what others received. When they receive their wages, they grumble against the master. Those hired in the 11th hour go when they are called. There is no promise of payment. When they are paid, they received a full day's pay. The only time they spoke was to tell the master that no one hired them.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Let's wrap this up. Remember where we are contextually in Matthew. The disciples are struggling with the paradigm shift that needs to take place to truly understand what it means to be a citizen in the kingdom of heaven. Recall the purpose of parables. They are to engage listeners, create reflection, and promote action. Hopefully, you were engaged in this parable because they are meant for God's people to correct distorted vision so that they can see truth. There is so much to reflect upon. But for the sake of time, I will use the master's three questions as our guide for reflection.

What did you agree to? A disciple is called to deny oneself, take up their cross and follow Christ. Is this what you signed up for? Or is your vision distorted and you believe the Christian life isn't living up to your expectations?

Is God not allowed to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him? Do you see this truth if you are a disciple of Christ? The life you live is no longer yours but belongs to Christ. Or is your vision distorted? Do you want to tell the master what He is allowed or not allowed to do with your life?

Finally, do you begrudge the master's generosity? Do you believe others are less deserving of the same salvation that you have receive by faith through grace? Or is your vision is distorted and you believe this grace is limited to people like you? Only those who deserve grace ought to receive it.

How do you respond to brothers and sisters who are gifted with talents you admire? Do you find it difficult to rejoice over the good that God has ordained for others? The point isn't that all have the same reward – though all God's people do go to the same heaven where they will have reward in different measure. The point is that God rewards on the principle of grace, and we should therefore expect surprises. He will never be less than fair but reserves the right to be more than fair as pleases Him. God's grace always operates righteously.

May God grant us the grace to let go of our own kingdoms and earthly expectations. May our eyes not be focused on ourselves or stinginess toward others. But rather may our eyes be on the Master. He is the faithful promise keeper, he will do what he has promised, and they are enough. This master, whom we serve, is generous, gracious, and good. Let us learn from the faithful witnesses who have gone before us and look to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Remember the example of our King and the true Kingdom to which you belong. Because in God's economy, it doesn't matter! We all receive the same gift of grace, goodness, and generosity from God.