

Matthew 20:1-16 (read 19:27-30) “The Sovereign Grace of God”

Intro. I want to do something a little unusual for me. Instead of continuing to read our main text, I want to just start off by telling you the same story that Jesus told.¹ He said that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner. Let’s suppose its harvest time, so he needs extra workers. So he went out early in the morning to the marketplace to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now he found some workers who agreed to work 12 hours for a denarius, which was a silver coin, the standard pay for a common laborer.² So he sent them into his vineyard. Well he needed more workers, so he went out about 9 o’clock in the morning and saw others standing in the marketplace, waiting for an opportunity to work, and said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” Well, they agreed to such terms and went off to work. Again, he went out about noon and then again at 3 PM, and did likewise. And even as late as 5 PM he went out and found others standing around, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.” So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.” [vv.1-8].³

Now suppose you had worked 12 long hours in the heat, carrying loads of grapes. And as you stand in line to receive your pay, you are already wondering why the guys who came *last* to work are getting paid *first*. And then you are really shocked to discover that the guys who worked just one hour receive the same pay that you were promised [v.9]. So you would probably assume that when it’s your turn to be paid, you would receive a lot more pay than the ones who worked just 1 hour [v.10a]. But instead, to your surprise you receive the exact same amount! [v.10b]. Now how would you feel? What would you say about that? Well, if you are like most people, you would grumble and complain about how unfair the vineyard owner is being [v.11]. You would say something like, “It’s just not fair that you pay these guys the same thing as you paid us. We worked 12 long hours in the heat, and they worked only 1 hour in the cooler part of the day, and yet you pay them the same!” [v.12].

So who’s right in this situation, the landowner or the complaining workers? Well if you side with the grumbling workers, then you especially need to listen this morning. Keep in mind, this is not a lesson on economics or political theory, but a lesson about the Kingdom of God (v.1). God said in the book of Isaiah, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (55:8). Do you want to go through life complaining, always upset that you aren’t being treated fairly, even by God? I don’t think that’s a recipe for happiness. I want you to see life and kingdom service from God’s perspective. We have to change our minds to be saved, and we have to have a transformed mind in order to grow as a Christian. So I hope as a result of this message you gain a new perspective that will lead to greater happiness and contentment, and a right attitude about serving God.

So let’s look into the text, and try to resolve the dilemma that we see in the first 12 verses. The key is to learn about the attributes of God, as illustrated by the landowner. What does this parable teach us about God, and how does each attribute apply to us? First of all:

¹ This story is only found in the gospel of Matthew.

² MacArthur believes that it was actually more than standard for a day laborer (as opposed to a regular worker).

³ Getting paid at the end of the day was commanded by God’s law (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15).

I. GOD IS JUST

You can count on God to do what is right, for He is just. This truth is illustrated by the landowner. Now beginning in v.13 he explains his actions to the grumbling workers. First, he says, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong." Then he explains why his actions were just, "Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way." If these men were honest, they would admit that the denarius was the fair, prevailing wage. And if they really thought about it, they would have to admit that the landowner was just, giving exactly what he had promised.

Even so, God is always just in His dealings with man. In Gen. 18:25 Abraham said, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Of course He will! Zeph. 3:5 says, "The LORD is righteous ..., He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light...."

This means that you can count on God to do what is right. And be careful about charging God with being unjust. It's just not true. If He gave you what you deserve, you would be in hell right now, for we have all sinned.

The second attribute of God that we see in the parable is this:

II. GOD IS GOOD AND GRACIOUS

In the last of v.14, the landowner gives further explanation of His actions, "I wish to give to this last man the same as to you." Why is that? If he gave the last worker only what he *deserved*, he would only get 1/12th of a denarius. That would hardly be enough to buy one meal, much less provide for his family. And such workers had little or no resources to fall back on. If they didn't work, they often had little or nothing to eat. Furthermore, that man was not lazy. He was willing to work. He made himself available in the marketplace. It's just that no one hired him. Perhaps he was older, or weaker, and passed over for a younger, stronger worker. Ah, but the good landowner offered him work. It is clear that he is interested not only in his vineyard but also in the needs of the unemployed. He may not have even needed these additional workers. And so the landowner did *not give him what he deserved, but what he needed*. What a gracious man! Thus the landowner is right in the last of v.15 when he says he is good. In other words, he was acting out of the goodness of his heart. In fact, when the men who worked just one hour received their wages, they must have rejoiced over the goodness of the landowner.

Isn't it good to know that God is willing to deal with you, not according to what you deserve, but according to your need? Rom. 5:20 says, "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more." As the song says, "He looked beyond my fault and saw my need."

Now I want to ask you a question. Do you want to deal with God based on His justice or His goodness and grace? Too many people try to relate to God on the basis of justice. They bargain with God with a mercenary spirit. They say, "God, I will try to keep your commandments. I will go to church and do good deeds. Now what's in it for me?" Then we tell God what we expect from Him in exchange: "I expect you to provide for me, protect me, heal me when I get sick, and take me to heaven when I die." Well, I hate to disappoint you, but the Bible says in Gal. 2:16, "by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." You are far better off trusting in God's goodness and grace.

Now the third attribute of God illustrated by this parable is this:

III. GOD IS SOVEREIGN

That attribute of God is expressed well in v.15, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things⁴?” The HCSB translates it, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my business?” Sadly, the political left says no. They believe the government should control many aspects of *your* business. Yet in Israel and under Roman law, the landowner was sovereign over his business. The landowner owned the land and the grapes. He worked hard and invested in his vineyard. He was absolute, undisputed sovereign over all that was his. It was his money to do with as he wished. If he wanted to be especially good to those who worked only part of the day by giving them a full day’s wage, then who has a right to complain about that?

Even so, God owns everything. As the Psalmist said, “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” That means that He is sovereign. And keep in mind that this parable, according to v.1, was intended to illustrate “the kingdom of heaven.” Well God rules over the kingdom of heaven. He is the sovereign Lord.

That is why God said in Jer. 18:6, “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!” Have you ever seen a potter make a clay pot or vessel of some kind? If he owns the clay and the potter’s wheel, he can do with it as he pleases. He can make whatever vessel he wants. He can even destroy it if he doesn’t like the way it turned out. God is sovereign, just as the potter.

Now the sovereignty of God has many implications for us. But the main one in our text is the fact that God is sovereign in the bestowal of His grace. In Rom. 9:15 God says, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy....” And so I want to share with you two applications of God’s sovereign grace:

A. God Equally Bestows *Saving* Grace to His People – In v.12 the first workers complained, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.” They were equal in benefit, but not equal in work. And they didn’t like that!

Well guess what? All who come to the Lord Jesus Christ receive the same salvation—no one receives any more or any less. The thief on the cross obtained eternal life the same as Billy Graham. They both have gone to heaven, and they both enjoy the blessings of heaven. That’s because eternal life is a gift of grace, and not based on merit. Someone said, “No one is so good that he can save himself; no one’s so bad that God can’t save him.”⁵ So great sinners can receive the gift of eternal life just like sinners who are far more righteous. Also, Gentiles share in this gift just the same as Jews. The Jews were first, but God saved us Gentiles who came last.

So we shouldn’t begrudge those who turn to God in the last moments of life, because no one deserves eternal life. Don’t say in your heart, “Well this vile sinner has lived in sin and rebellion all his life, and here he is on his death bed. Why should I witness to him? Why should he get into heaven the same as I, who have lived for God all my life?” What kind of attitude is that?

B. God Does Not Equally Bestow Gifts, Talents, Resources and Opportunities – That’s because God is absolutely sovereign in the bestowal of His grace. I went to high school with a friend who hardly studied but always made A’s. I had to work much harder for the same grade. We might agree that doesn’t seem quite fair but God is sovereign in the bestowal of intellect. Why is it that some are born into wealth while others are born into poverty? Such differences are also true in the bestowal of spiritual gifts and abilities. Rom. 12:6 says, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us...” and then he names different spiritual gifts. Even among preachers

⁴ That is the literal translation of τοῖς ἐμοῖς.

⁵ Croft M. Pentz.

there is a great difference in gifts and opportunities. Consider one preacher who has great ability and gifts, and is given the opportunity to preach to thousands each week. But out in some rural area you can find a faithful man of God preaching to 30 each week.

Now because of this truth, v.16 certainly applies, “So the last will be first, and the first last.”⁶ Those who feel superior because of their God-given abilities, or heritage, or position may assume that they will be first in the coming kingdom. But beware of overconfidence when it comes to the rewards God will give, for those who are first in their own eyes may end up last! In other words, just because God has endowed someone with great talent, gifts, and other advantages doesn’t mean that they will automatically be first when God passes out His rewards. So do not get discouraged if you feel you have few talents, gifts, and other advantages, for if you are faithful in serving God with what you have, you may end up first in the Kingdom, rather than last. Remember, Jesus said in Lk. 12:48, “... to whom much is given, from him much will be required...” That explains why some who are first may end up last. It may be that the faithful Sunday School teacher who teaches 10 each week will receive a greater reward than the preacher who preaches to thousands. When it comes to kingdom rewards, the quality Jesus is looking for the most is faithfulness, for He will say to some, “Well done, good and faithful servant...” (Mt. 25:21; cf. Luke 19:17). I hope this truth will be an encouragement to many today.

Now once we realize that God is sovereign in the bestowal of His goodness and grace, then:

IV. WE SHOULD RESPOND IN THE RIGHT WAY

There are four appropriate responses that I see in our text:

A. We Should Examine Our Motivation for Service – I believe the immediate context is important. Peter said in v.27 of the previous chapter, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” In other words, Peter says, “What’s in it for us?” His request for preferential treatment and reward is obvious. Is that why you serve God? Well, Christ assured him that no sacrifice for Him will go unrewarded, both in this life, and in the life to come. But Jesus detected in Peter’s question the possibility of a wrong motive for service. Peter would have been in that 12-hour group of workers. This was why He added the warning that some who were first in their own eyes would be last in the judgment, and some who were last would end up first.

This is illustrated in the parable by the first group of workers.⁷ That is the only group that negotiated up front what they would get for their labor. They insisted on a contract. The others were willing to work for whatever the landowner thought was right. They were just thankful to find work, and they trusted in the goodness of the landowner. Nor did they have Peter’s spirit, for they did not say, “What will we get?” But the first group was only motivated by reward. They were doing it for the money. And they would only work if the landowner agreed to their terms. Had they trusted the goodness of the owner, they *could* have received more. But they insisted on a contract. And guess what? The workers who had a contract were carefully dealt with according to the terms of the contract.

The lesson for Christ’s disciples is obvious. Avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to Christian service. We should not serve Christ because we want to receive an expected reward, whether it be personal prominence in the kingdom or some other reward. When you are called upon to serve God, don’t ask, “What’s in it for me?” God is infinitely generous and

⁶ The additional words, “For many are called, but few chosen” are not in our best Greek texts.

⁷ Notice the word “for” ties both texts together.

gracious and will always give us better than we deserve. Instead, we should serve God out of gratitude, and just trust Him to generously reward us in due time.

Something else that I see here is that length of service is no guarantee of great reward. Those who worked 12 long hours thought for sure they would get much more reward than those who worked just one. But there are many other factors that will determine our reward than just length of service, one of which we have already discussed. The amount of time we spend in the Lord's service is not nearly so important as the spirit in which our service is rendered.

So right now, examine your motivation for service? Do you have mixed motives for serving God? Do you only serve if you are paid, or if you are recognized for your service or if you are elected to a prominent position? If so, that is likely the only reward you will receive.

B. We Should Not Envy – In the last of v.15 the landowner said, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?” He recognized the problem with these men. The evil eye resents what someone else has (cf. Mt. 6:19, 23).⁸ They were envious of those who received the good graces of the landowner. They weren't upset over their wage because they knew it was what he promised. What they couldn't stand was someone else getting the same thing without working as hard as they had. They should have rejoiced that others were so blessed and their families' fed. Instead, they were jealous. Such is the sinful, selfish heart of man!

Once a year we give a “Faithful Servant Award.” Less than 1% of our members will ever receive this recognition for faithful service. Now when someone else receives it, you can respond in 1 of 2 ways. You can do what the Bible says and “rejoice with those who rejoice.” Or you can respond with envy. You can start getting upset thinking, “I've done more for this church than that person. I've worked longer, etc.” And you can even get upset at both the church and the recipient of the award. But such envy is sinful, and not pleasing to God. Furthermore, envy and jealousy will only add to your unhappiness.

Now because of envy and jealousy, we are too often guilty of the next problem:

C. We Should Not Grumble and Complain – Notice in v.11 that the first group of workers “complained against the landowner.” Actually, they murmured and grumbled to anyone who would listen to their complaint. And the tense of the verb may indicate that they kept on complaining.

But they had no basis for a complaint because they had agreed to work for a denarius. They received just what they asked for, and it was a very fair wage.

Even so, we are not to murmur against God when He gives more grace to others than to us. Have you ever complained? Well, we need to be careful about complaining, grumbling, and murmuring in general. Paul said in Php. 2:14, “Do all things without complaining and disputing.” We have an entire grievance industry in our country. Those folks need to heed God's Word also. Paul also warned in 1 Cor. 10:10, “nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.” Someone said, “The squeaky wheel may get the most oil, but it's also the first to be replaced.”⁹ Be careful that God does not replace you for complaining too much.

By the way, the next time you are tempted to complain about having to work so much, you should thank God that you do not live in the ancient world. Here we see that most people work 12 hours per day six days a week! So instead of complaining:

⁸ In Mark 7:22 an “evil eye” is listed among sins including “thefts, covetousness,....” Prov. 28:22 says, “A man with an evil eye hastens after riches....” (cf. Deut. 15:9).

⁹ Marilyn Vos Savant, *Of Course I'm for Monogamy* (St. Martin's).

D. We Should Be Thankful – You can be sure the ones who received the most grace responded with the most thanksgiving, especially the ones that worked only one hour! This is the right response to God’s grace. Gratitude for the grace and goodness of God should be your primary motivation for service, not rewards. Romans 12:1 says, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice..., which is your reasonable service.” And when we are rewarded for service someday, we should be like the saints of Revelation 4 who cast their victor crowns before the throne of God saying, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor....” (vv.10-11).

So be thankful for what God has given you, and be faithful to serve God with what He has given you. Leave it to God to determine who will be first in the kingdom of God.

Conclusion: Have you come to the place in your life where you have decided to trust in the grace of God to save you from your sins? Or are you one of those who is bargaining with God, that if you live mostly right, attend church, give offerings, and serve God, you will earn a spot in heaven and be rewarded? Friend, you can’t enter the kingdom by bargaining with God.

Most of us here have already entered God’s kingdom by faith in the saving grace of God. In light of this message, examine your motivation for serving God. Do you serve out of gratitude for His goodness, or for some other reason? Serving from gratitude is a far better motive for service.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Last Will Be First: Matthew 19:16-20:28* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1989); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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