

# 2.3

## THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS

### TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's grace is His to give.

### TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will accept God's sovereign grace.



### FOCUS VERSES: Matthew 20:15-16

<sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

<sup>16</sup> So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

### LESSON TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16



## BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

**Lesson Text:** Matthew 20:1-16

The chapter divisions in our English Bibles are not original to the Hebrew and Greek texts in which the Bible was written. Consequently, it is easy to miss the connection of Matthew 20:1-16 to the last verse of the previous chapter: “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30). In this light we can see that Matthew 20:1-16 is further explanation on Matthew 19:30, and by extension a continued answer to Peter’s question in Matthew 19:27 about what the disciples would receive since they had “forsaken all” to follow Christ.

In Matthew 20, verses 8 and 16 contain key phrases that directly link this parable to Matthew 19:30 and reveal the true purpose of the story. Jesus’ intention was to demonstrate the fundamental differences between how worldly kingdoms and the kingdom of Heaven work. In earthly economies, it is perfectly reasonable for those who work longer hours to receive greater pay; not to do so would be considered unfair. However, in the kingdom of Heaven, our compensation is eternal life with Christ. No differing tiers or wages will be appointed in Heaven based on merit, hierarchy, or seniority.

Notably, only the workers hired first murmured and complained (Matthew 20:11). Even those who were hired at the third hour made no remarks about the pay differences. Presumably no one else complained because everyone else besides the workers hired at 6:00 AM knew they received more than they deserved. Those with a proper understanding of their own lack of merit knew they had no place to complain about the householder’s generosity. Only those who with a sense of superiority or pride—and also a lack of compassion for their fellow workers—had the gall to complain to the householder.

A brief story after this parable demonstrates many of the disciples still didn’t understand Jesus’ message. The mother of James and John approached Jesus and asked for her sons to be appointed to senior positions in God’s kingdom, much to the anger of the other ten disciples. Despite Jesus’ clear story that they all would receive the same wage, pride still caused them to compete for a place of honor. Jesus had to remind them once again that the world fights over seniority and dominion, but God’s children are simply called to humbly serve.

**JESUS’ INTENTION WAS TO DEMONSTRATE THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW WORLDLY KINGDOMS AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN WORK.**

# DAY 1

## Matthew 20:1-2

<sup>1</sup> For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.

<sup>2</sup> And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

## Biblical Insight

The word translated “penny” in the KJV is more typically rendered “denarius” (ESV, NASB, NIV, NKJV) and often refers to a standard wage. A denarius was a Roman silver coin considered to be a standard daily wage in Jesus’ day. In this parable, the negotiation between the householder and the workers was quickly glossed over because the workers recognized the offer as a reasonable wage. Therefore, they immediately went to work in the beginning of the Jewish day, which would have been around 6:00 AM.

## Daily Devotion

There are morning people, and there is everyone else. “Everyone else” is vehemently opposed to the persistent assault from alarm clocks, and they should not be spoken to until they have had copious cups of coffee. Do you know someone like that? Morning people seem to awaken with a smile and have the energy to do extra activities, such as work out and run a brush through their hair, before they walk out the door.

The early risers in this parable believed their wages were fair for the number of hours they were prepared to work. Perhaps they believed 6:00 AM was the expected clock-in time. Once the others started to rouse and arrive at all hours of the day, suspicions started. Word spread that the newbies were offered the same amount of pay. Group one’s pride arose as quickly as they had during the morning hours. To them the perceived unfairness did not add up, but grace rarely does.

Christ extends the same graciousness toward all of us. Whatever hour—time in life—we choose to follow Jesus to a new life of service, Jesus bids an open-armed welcome. Until His kingdom comes, there is always more room for laborers in His vineyard and a promise of the same eternal reward for all who enter in.

## Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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## DAY 2

### Matthew 20:3-7

<sup>3</sup> And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

<sup>4</sup> and said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way.

<sup>5</sup> Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise.

<sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?

<sup>7</sup> They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.

### Biblical Insight

The householder went out to hire workers five times: around 6:00 AM, the third hour (around 9:00 AM), the sixth hour (noon), the ninth hour (3:00 PM), and the eleventh hour (5:00 PM). The last group only worked one hour as opposed to the first group who worked twelve hours. After the initial hire, the householder did not promise the next four groups a denarius. Rather, he only promised “whatsoever is right.” The workers’ collective surprise in subsequent verses, especially verse 10, indicated none of the workers expected equal pay for those who started later.

### Daily Devotion

We generally do not discuss our salaries in passing while at the grocery store or while making small talk during our morning coffee order. People tend to shy away from the subject for one reason or another. In today’s society, there are various levels of pay depending on the job description. Fresh-out-of-high-school teens likely will not make six figures at their first full-time job. It takes dedication, persistence, and a strong work ethic to rise to higher levels on the pay scale.

To paint this parable in a different way, picture being a lawyer or doctor putting in long hours, working in intense conditions to earn a paycheck. Now imagine toward the end of your drawn-out trial or taxing surgery, a teen who has never worked a day in his life comes on the scene. He works for an hour doing some paperwork and is given payment for the exact amount as you. It does not seem fair, right? You did the tougher job, so in theory, you deserve greater compensation.

The householder offered that which is right as payment. No matter when we start living for Jesus, our Savior offers us the same. We are called to strive for what is right. The Kingdom is right. Heaven is right. When we live for God with our whole hearts, our reward will be right.

### Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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## DAY 3

### Matthew 20:8-10

<sup>8</sup> So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.

<sup>9</sup> And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny.

<sup>10</sup> But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny.

### Biblical Insight

The order in which the laborers were paid is very important to the narrative. If the workers who began at 6:00 AM had been compensated first and sent on their way, they might not have been present to see what those who were hired later received for payment. However, the householder in this parable was intentional in his word choice, instructing the steward to begin with those who were hired last and work backward. However, regardless of the order, the workers hired later expected to receive less and were pleasantly surprised to receive a full day's wages, much to the frustration of the ones hired first.

### Daily Devotion

It does not matter how you start the race as much as it matters how you finish it. These words are accurate when it comes to the economy of God. You may begin your work at a very young age and serve Him all your life. On the contrary, you may not have darkened the door of a church building until your grandchildren were part of a Christmas play.

It does not matter how you get there as long as you do. Our kind, patient Savior is waiting with open arms. Your journey is not the same as your neighbor's, but we will all rejoice together at the same table in Heaven. We will break bread and skip down streets of gold. Maybe we can have coffee and swap stories about the path we walked to get home. There will be no haughtiness or vindictiveness. There is no place for that in His kingdom.

Wherever you find yourself is a great place to start. If you have fallen, get back up. You will not have to do it alone. You have a place in God's kingdom, now and for eternity.

### Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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# DAY 4

## Matthew 20:11-13

<sup>11</sup> And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house,

<sup>12</sup> saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.

<sup>13</sup> But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?

### Biblical Insight

The workers who were frustrated in this narrative were not being unreasonable. Those hired at 5:00 PM got to lounge in the shade for most of the day and only work for one hour during the cooler part of the afternoon. Imagine how frustrated you might be if someone at your 9-to-5 job worked one day a week and got paid the same amount. By human standards, equal pay for unequal work seems criminal and unfair. However, the householder was correct when he pointed out that no one received less than he should have; no one was cheated. Some received more than they deserved, but no one received less.

### Daily Devotion

This parable may be hard to accept for those who are in favor of “fairness.” Jesus does not operate according to the world’s economy of compensation. Businesses may have levels, but the same does not apply for eternity. Heaven will have no tears or tiers (pun intended). Aside from those gorgeous gates of pearl, there are no gated communities or restricted-access areas in Heaven for those who gave the most money to missions.

The eternal reward—life with Jesus—is the same for the forgiven criminal as it is for the one who never missed a Sunday service. God is a gracious giver, and this truth should cause us great rejoicing. If your testimony is that you lived for God all your life, thank God often for your testimony. You are richly blessed. But you must be ready to stand right beside the man and woman who came to Jesus just before the Rapture. We all are serving the same Master, and the reward is the same no matter when we begin.

### Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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## DAY 5

### Matthew 20:14-16

<sup>14</sup> Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

<sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

<sup>16</sup> So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

### Biblical Insight

The householder chose to give each worker an equal amount, and no one received less than a full day's pay. Verse 15 is a clear depiction of how God's economy works, which is strictly according to His sovereignty, favor, grace, mercy, and benevolence. Most workers received more than they deserved. However, the householder's generosity extended to all whom he received.

The phrase "many are called, but few are chosen" is also found in Matthew 22:14. This instance is at the conclusion of the Parable of the Wedding Feast. That parable shares similar truths about God's benevolence toward all of us who are undeserving.

### Daily Devotion

The workday was drawing to a close when a man stumbled toward the field. He had walked many miles and taken many wrong turns along the way. Finally, he saw it. He ran with whatever strength he had left and fell before the master.

"Please, let me do something—anything to help. I know I didn't get here the same time as everyone else. I know I took the long way here and got lost on the journey, but I am ready now. I will work hard and receive whatever wages you choose to give for my work, however little they may be."

The overseer bent down to where the man knelt and smiled with compassion. His response brought the drifter to tears.

"You have a place here, and your pay will not be less than what the others will earn."

The man began working immediately and never looked back. He knew he had been given grace, and he worked to bring in a greater harvest.

Perhaps you have taken the long way here or made some wrong turns along the way. The Master's grace is sufficient for you. There is a place for you and a beautiful, grace-filled reward in store.

### Reflection and Prayer

» *What can you do to apply this principle to your life today?*

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