

Matthew Chapter 19-20 – Jesus’ Judean Ministry – Part 6
Matthew 20:1-16 – Parable of the Laborers
Reward for Service to the Kingdom of Heaven

Introduction

Matthew 19-23 is an account of Jesus’ final Judean ministry; He is in this region for 6-9 months, which will end with Jesus being arrested and crucified. During this time, Jesus, with the disciples, is going in and out of Jerusalem, healing the crowds and increasing the faith of the disciples while refuting challenges from the leadership sects in Jerusalem.

In this section, Jesus focuses on the preparation of the Remnant of Israel to survive the Time of Jacob’s Trouble in order to enter the kingdom of heaven when He comes back to reign.

Matthew 19:27-30 – Review

The disciples were struck with amazement at the conversation Jesus had with the rich, young ruler. At the end of the conversation, Jesus told the young man to “sell his possessions and follow Me, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

In response to this, Peter asks Jesus, “We have left everything and followed you; what will be there for us?” Jesus answers them with assurance, not rebuke. The Twelve will reign with Jesus on twelve thrones in the restoration of Israel, the kingdom of heaven.

In addition to this reassurance, Jesus then tells them that anyone who leaves all behind to follow Him for the gospel of the kingdom will receive many times as much and will inherit eternal life. Jesus concludes this statement with a caveat not to be consumed with being first. But the first will be last, and the last will be first.

The next parable illustrates this point; we know this for certain because of verse 16, which repeats verse 19:30.

Matthew 20:1-16 – The Parable of the Laborers

Parables are recognizable stories thrown alongside a doctrine to bring out a point. The story and the contents are not the point; the point does not need the story; the story helps the point to be clear, understood, and remembered.

Textual criticism – At the end of verse 16 the TR has “For many are called, but few chosen.” This is stated in Matthew 22:14. The evidence from the manuscripts indicates that this is not original to the text. Some tie the parable of the labors and the parable of the marriage feast together; it is suspected that copyists added this last sentence to tie in the two parables.

Observations –

1. The landowner hires laborers for his vineyard early in the morning for a denarius (day’s wage)
2. Three hours later, six hours later, nine hours later, and eleven hours later, the landlord goes and hires more laborers to work his vineyard.
3. Five groups worked: those who worked for twelve hours, nine hours, six hours, three hours, and one hour.

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4. The landowner paid them all a day’s wage; equal pay, although the hours of work were not equal.
5. Those who worked the full day complained that they received the same amount as those who worked the least.
6. The landowner responds:
 - a. I did you no wrong
 - b. You got paid what you agreed to
 - c. The laborers are envious of the landowner's generosity.

Various Interpretations:

1. Those who are converted late in life earn equal rewards along with those converted early, and also that people who convert early in life need not feel jealous of those later converts.
2. The different groups represent different groups in history: pre-flood, Abraham to Moses, Israel, apostles, and Christians (we are the 11th-hour workers).
3. This is a parable on socialism. Regardless of work, everyone should receive a living wage.

Let's review the rules for interpreting parables using the Literal (Normative), Grammatical, Historical (Cultural) Method

Interpretation Guidelines:

1. Singular referent
2. Simplest is best.
3. The interpretation given in Scripture is final.
4. A parable explains doctrine. It never reveals a previously unknown doctrine.

Based on the rules of interpretation as set forth by Scripture, the previously mentioned interpretations have no merit. This is not about salvation; salvation is not about labor or service. There is no indication that this deals with various dispensations. This is not about socialism or the right to a day’s wage regardless of work; the landowner was generous, not fair, to the 11th-hour workers. The only group that the landowner was fair to is the original workers. They got what they agreed on; that is fair. The landowner was generous to all the other workers.

What, then, is the interpretation of this parable? The first thing we need to recognize is that it begins with “The kingdom of heaven is like.” This is a kingdom principle that applies to Israel, and there is no church, church age, or Gentile concept in this text.

The first to be called would represent, if anybody in particular, the twelve apostles. The last group would represent those who begin work for the kingdom in the last moments before its inauguration. The point of the parable does not need anybody to be represented.

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But this parable is given to the disciples and is in response to their persistent questions about what they will receive and their desire to be first in the kingdom (18:1, 20:20-23, 23:11-12). Jesus does not tell them that their desire is unwarranted; rather, if they want to be great, they need to humble themselves, be a servant to all, and be willing to die for the ministry Jesus gave them.

What is the point of this parable?

1. Laborers will be recompensed. This is not really about rewards in regard to what we think. This is about the call and the response to the kingdom ministry.
2. This parable is a chastisement of the apostles for having an envious eye.
3. This is about the question in the apostles’ minds concerning the character of the landowner. The apostles gave up all, and they want to know if they will be appropriately recompensed. They are calling into question the judgment and rightness of Jesus.
4. Don’t worry about what others receive (for the last will be first and the first will be last). Do not be envious of what others receive.
5. The point of both this parable and the warning of “the last will be first and the first will be last” is humility in both deed and attitude.
6. Going back to the rich, young ruler (Matthew 19:20-21, 27-28), it is as if Peter and the other apostles want an agreed-upon payment. Jesus then tells them not be surprised if others get a recompense of equal value, even if they work only for a small time.

Timeless Truth

Applying this passage to us in this age or to the Church is improper and untenable. We do not leave our families for the ministry of the kingdom; we are not “called into service.” There is a difference between being called and volunteering for service. We all have responsibilities, and we know what good works we can do in this life.

The only principles I can teach from this passage:

- God is a rewarder of those who seek and serve Him (Hebrews 11:6)
- God is equally concerned with mental attitude (humility) as He is with the service (1 Corinthians 3:8-15, 4:1-5)
- God rewards those who faithfully hold fast to the faith until the end (2 Timothy 4:6-8; 2 John 7-8).