

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message The Parable of the Good Employer

Scripture Matthew 20:1-16

Toward the end of the first year of His itinerant ministry, Jesus identified and called the twelve men He named as Apostles. In response to His call, the Apostles abandoned their occupations and left their home communities in order to be with Jesus. They were with Him almost constantly up until His ascension to heaven.

After their selection, Jesus immediately began to give the Apostles special training to prepare them to be future leaders of His kingdom on earth. He provided foundational teaching about the kingdom of heaven in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is also our basic source of information about the qualities of the kingdom and the characteristics of people who are members of the kingdom.

The parables of the kingdom of heaven describe how the kingdom functions in this present age here on earth. Jesus' goal was to reshape the way the disciples thought about the ways of God. I am hoping that we will be as influenced by Jesus' example and lifestyle and teachings as were the Apostles.

The parable in Matthew chapter 20 is commonly called The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. However, I want us to think about it as the Parable of the Good Employer. The most important character in the parable is the landowner. In order to understand this parable, we need to know the context, so we are going to start with verses in chapter 19.

Read Matthew 19:27 – 20:16

The chapter division in these verses is unfortunate because the parable is connected with Peter's question. The word "for" at the beginning of chapter 20 is a conjunction which ties the two chapters together. Also, notice that the last verse of chapter 19 has almost the same words as verse 16 of chapter 20, another indication that the verses we read are linked together.

It is also helpful to know what led up to Peter's question. In the middle of chapter 19, there is the story about the rich young man who approached Jesus with the question, "What do I need to do to gain eternal life." In His response, Jesus said that the young man had to do something about his covetous attitude. He said, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The young man was unwilling to do this. The story ends with the statement: He "went away sad, because he had great wealth" (*Matthew 19:16-22*).

Jesus' instructions to the young man triggered the question in Peter's mind. He and the other disciples had left everything they had in order to follow Jesus. Treasure in heaven? "O. K.," Peter asked, "What does that mean for us? We did things differently than that young rich man. We gave up everything, so what about us?"

In response to Peter's question, Jesus promised two kinds of reward. First, He said, "When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne at the end of the age, you (referring to the Twelve) will also sit on twelve thrones as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel." Secondly, Jesus said, "Everyone who has left houses or family members or fields for my sake" will receive blessing in this life — a hundred times more than what has been abandoned, and, in addition, you "will inherit eternal life." One would be a future reward to be given at the end of the age, and the other would be benefits for the present age.

Those statements by Jesus were a straight-forward answer to a direct question. The Apostles had indeed made sacrifices to be with Jesus and, compared to the material resources of the young man, they had virtually nothing. They had their relationship with Jesus and He was unconcerned about material things. So, were there practical benefits to being a follower of Jesus? The disciples wanted to know.

Jesus' answer assured the disciples that they would gain much more than they had given up. By following Him, Jesus said that they would benefit in three ways: they would receive abundant blessings to replace the earthly resources they had left behind, they would have eternal life, and they would have the future opportunity to serve in a prestigious position as judges over the tribes of Israel.

I am sure the Apostles were delighted to learn about these benefits, but I suspect that the answer changed the way they thought about their relationship to Jesus. Up until this point in time, their interest was focused on Jesus alone. The subject of benefits and blessings had not been part of their thinking. Jesus' answer to Peter's question would have introduced some new thoughts to their minds; thoughts about the personal benefits and advantages which would come to them as a result of their association with Jesus. Hopes and dreams about long-term personal circumstances are good, but not if they distract from immediate priorities. Jesus did not want that to happen. He did not want the interests of His disciples to be diverted from a fixed focus on Himself.

This was a unique educable moment. Jesus knew that the disciples had been greatly influenced by their culture. He knew that His answer would be filtered through their Jewish materialistic mindset. The Jews believed that they could accumulate credit with God through their good deeds. They believed that material wealth was an indication of God's blessings. The Pharisees, for example, expected God to reward them for their zeal and efforts in upholding the law. As a result, the mindset of most Jews was not so much on God as a person as on how God would bless and reward them for their efforts to keep the law.

Jesus knew that the disciples had not yet replaced their deeply-engrained cultural ideas about meritorious works with the heavenly principles of grace. He did not want them to begin to calculate their heavenly benefits and thereby miss the deeper kingdom truths He was trying to teach them. He wanted the disciples to be committed to Him for who He was, and not just for the benefits which would accrue to them because they were His followers. By the way, this imbalanced focus on blessings is not an unusual problem among many believers today.

The last verse of chapter 19 is both a summary statement to Peter's question and the opening statement of the parable. Yes, the apostles had left everything in order to be with Jesus. From an earthly standpoint, their resources could not compare to those of the rich young ruler. However, the Apostles would, assuming their continued faithfulness to Jesus, have rewards and benefits that that young man could never have, in spite of his wealth. The rich young man, like many others who were successful and prosperous on earth, would be last among the people honored by God, and those who, like the apostles, had given up their careers and families and material possessions for the sake of Jesus, would someday find themselves highly exalted and rewarded by God.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.” With those words Jesus began the parable to illustrate the truth of verses 28 through 30. This opening statement immediately focused the attention of the disciples on the landowner. He’s the One we also need to stay focused on. The fact that Jesus linked the concept of the kingdom of heaven to the landowner signals to us that Jesus was referring to the God of the kingdom and that the parable is a description of how God functions in His relation with people.

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard had the authority and right to control all the activities which took place on his property. Notice what he did. He went into the marketplace to select and hire the workers. He did this several times throughout the day. At the end of the day he provided the resources to pay the workers and instructed the foreman about how to do this. When the dispute arose over the amount of pay, the owner was the one who engaged in dialogue. The parable emphasizes the total control of the owner over all activities.

Also notice the qualities of the owner. He was honest. He was not unfair to any of the workers. He paid all of them promptly and as agreed. None of the workers had any legitimate grounds for complaint. The owner was extraordinarily generous to many of the workers, for no other reason than that he wanted to be generous to them. In fact, his generosity was quite costly. By paying many of the workers more than the amount to which they were entitled, it greatly diminished his profits — it affected his “bottom line,” so to speak.

The owner was gracious to those who were not employed. When he went to the marketplace at the eleventh hour (5:00 PM), and found other men standing about, he asked, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” After the men replied “Because no one has hired us,” the owner gave them opportunity to work. It is doubtful that this last group of hired men made much of a contribution to the work on that day. It seems that the owner took pity on them and hired them only because no one else considered them worthy of employment.

There is a danger when analyzing parables of reading too much into them. This parable is one of the most susceptible to speculation. We will properly understand the truth that Jesus was teaching on this occasion only if we keep in mind the context from chapter 19. This means that our interpretation must be linked to Jesus’ encounter with rich young man, to Peter’s question, and Jesus’ desire to keep the disciples’ attention focused on Him rather than on their rewards for following Him.

The high point of the parable occurs “when evening came.” In view of the statement by Jesus in chapter 19 verse 28, it seems logical that the “evening” refers to the end of the age, the time of “renewal of all things, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne.” It was at the end of the work day that the owner settled accounts with the workers who had been in his vineyard. There were several surprises — first, the order in which the reimbursements were given out. Those who began their work last, the 5 o’clock P. M. crew, were the first to be paid. The ones who had worked the longest had to wait and watch until all the shorter term workers were paid. This was, of course, in keeping with the principle that “many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” The owner followed this principle.

Even more surprising than the order of payment was the fact that all the short term workers were given wages for a full day’s work. This meant that, for a brief time, the hopes of those who had worked throughout the day rose in anticipation that they would receive more money than the others because they had worked longer. What a shocking disappointment was theirs when they were given the same amount as all the others. Everyone, regardless of the time he started to work, was given the same wage.

Thus the payments made many of the workers extremely happy. The owner had been extremely generous to them. On the other hand, the workers who had been hired at the break of day became upset and gave vent to their grievances. They thought the whole matter was very unfair, and they grumbled against the landowner. They had three main complaints. They reasoned that they had worked the hardest and endured the most discomfort, yet the owner had, in essence, put the later arrivals on an equal par with them. They found fault with the generosity of the owner and failed to recognize his right as the owner to do what he wanted with his money. Although they received exactly the amount that they had agreed to, they were envious of the other workers. They assumed that their efforts entitled them to greater benefits.

In his response to the dissatisfied workers, the owner addressed these three issues. The owner stated that he had not been unfair because they had agreed, ahead of time, on the wage for a full day’s work. The owner then stated his intentions: it was his desire to give more money to the men who were hired last, and, as the owner of the vineyard, he stated that he had the sovereign right to do what he wanted. Thirdly, the owner pointed out to the disgruntled worker that his problem was envy that someone had received more money.

What did the Apostles learn from this parable? How did this parable help them to understand truth from a heavenly rather than an earthly perspective? The main lesson concerns the grace of God. God distributes His grace freely and generously, but sovereignly. God's grace cannot be earned. People who "strike a deal" with God will never receive as much reward as those who are the objects of God's grace. The workers who went into the fields at the beginning of the day had negotiated their wages, and there was a legal agreement between them and the owner, but none of the other workers had bargained with the owner. The owner had only promised to "pay them whatever is right" (*see 20:4*). Most of the workers accepted the unspecified conditions by faith, trusting the owner to honor his word, and they were abundantly rewarded for their trust.

Jesus did not want His disciples, nor does He want us, to follow Him only in anticipation of rewards. We must not try to negotiate the terms of our association with Him; no bargaining about what we are, or are not, to do for Him. Instead, we must be willing to give up everything and to obediently follow Him without preconditions. We must trust Him to "do what is right for us." If we have the correct motive when we come to Jesus, God will liberally grant to us His forgiveness, peace, joy, confidence, and many other benefits. We will, like the short-term workers, be surprised and happy about what God does for us.

The parable made clear that God rewards and blesses people according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what they deserve. We must not forget that God deals with us according to who He is, not according to who we are. None of us is worthy of God's grace. We must not go to God complaining, "Hey, don't I deserve better than this?" because God will reply, "So, do you really want Me to give you what you deserve?" It is better for us to trust God to do the right thing.

The conclusion of the parable is like the beginning, with a restatement of the principle that "many who are first will be last and the last first." This means that God may not reward people in ways that they anticipate. He will never be less than fair in His treatment of people, and very often He surprises by His generosity. Those who end up first in God's eyes are those who trust in His grace.