

## Matthew 20:1 – 28

<sup>20:1</sup> For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; <sup>4</sup> and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. <sup>5</sup> Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' <sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' <sup>9</sup> When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' <sup>13</sup> But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. <sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup> So the last shall be first, and the first last.' <sup>17</sup> As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way he said to them, <sup>18</sup> 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, <sup>19</sup> and will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify him, and on the third day he will be raised up.' <sup>20</sup> Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of him. <sup>21</sup> And he said to her, 'What do you wish?' She said to him, 'Command that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on your right and one on your left.' <sup>22</sup> But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' <sup>23</sup> He said to them, 'My cup you shall drink; but to sit on my right and on my left, this is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.' <sup>24</sup> And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. <sup>25</sup> But Jesus called them to himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; <sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

### Historical and Cultural Background

- Notice that 'early morning' probably means 6am, the 'third hour' is 9am, the 'sixth hour' is 12noon, the 'ninth hour' is 3pm, and the 'eleventh hour' is 5pm, and the close of the workday is sundown at 6pm.
- A denarius was one day's wage for a Roman soldier.
- The sons of Zebedee are James and John, who followed Jesus after Simon Peter and Andrew (Mt.4:12 – 25). Perhaps they were 'employee numbers 3 and 4.'
- 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first': Jesus said this for the first time to the disciples after the encounter with the rich young man, in Mt.19:30. Notice he repeats it verbatim in Mt.20:16 and then again, using different wording, in Mt.20:26 – 28. This has bearing on the statement, 'And Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, that you who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' (Mt.19:28)

## Questions

1. State: Notice that this section follows directly after the disciples said to Jesus that they had given up everything to follow him.
2. Parable of the vineyard workers: How do the workers think about compensation?
  - a. Is the owner being 'fair'?
    - i. No, in the sense that he rewards different amount of work with the same reward: one denarius. Notice that 'early morning' 6am people worked a full day, the 'third hour' 9am people worked 75% of a day, the 'sixth hour' 12noon people worked half a day, the 'ninth hour' 3pm people worked 25% of a day, and the 'eleventh hour' 5pm people worked 1/12<sup>th</sup> of a day. The close of the workday is presumably around 6pm, sunset.
      1. What does the scorching heat of the day represent? Persecution, hard labor, just the amount of time people have been serving Jesus in ministry to the world.
    - ii. Yes, in the sense that he rewards work for the agreed upon price, and everyone was willing to work for the price they agreed to.
      1. In economics, this is called 'pareto efficiency' – a humorous point.
      2. He didn't deceive anyone. He's being true to his word.
      3. And He enjoys being 'generous' (v.15)!! We need to enjoy seeing God express generosity!!
  - b. Could this be an explanation of Jesus choosing Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) and having him be one of the apostles?
  - c. Is there a reason why the owner of the vineyard pays people in reverse order?
    - i. The people who worked the longest feel slighted and disgruntled.
    - ii. But could they have felt joy?
      1. If they enjoyed seeing the master be generous
      2. If they enjoyed seeing the vineyard get worked on
      3. If they enjoyed seeing others receive a reward
      4. These are important qualities for followers of Jesus to have!
  - d. Application: Why is it kind of natural to think that people who have been Christians longer should be considered 'greater'?
    - i. E.g. In cultures where age and seniority really matter...
    - ii. Notice that this is the same issue Jesus spoke against in Mt.18:1 – 18.
    - iii. How does our culture define 'greatness'? Who is 'great'?
    - iv. Compensation is one of the ways that we measure greatness. CEO's, doctors, etc. are compensated very highly. But in 'non-profit' organizations like the church, compensation is awarded through position, status, etc. What is Jesus saying about that?
3. James and John: What do they think about compensation?
  - a. How might they have thought of themselves as 'the early shift workers' from the parable?
    - i. James and John became Jesus' disciples back in 4:21 – 22. Just after Simon Peter and Andrew. Perhaps they were employees number 3 and 4.
    - ii. Maybe they wanted compensation for all their sacrifice? After the disciples have given up wealth so radically as they pointed out back in 19:27, wouldn't another form of 'greatness' be alluring?
    - iii. Although their mother approaches Jesus, it is clear from the other disciples' reaction that they really put her up to it. The other ten were indignant with James and John.
  - b. Why do they not seem to hear Jesus when Jesus tells them that he is going to be crucified, killed, and raised from the dead?
    - i. They're too busy thinking about being great.
    - ii. They might think he's speaking in parables.
  - c. Jesus corrects them by saying that his kingdom is not the same as other kingdoms. What kind of authority do the Gentiles use?
    - i. Military, power-based authority
    - ii. Legal, punitive authority
    - iii. Economic, money-based
    - iv. Familial, age-hierarchy
    - v. Aristocratic, class-based
  - d. What does Jesus mean about being a ransom? Did he pay something God required?

- i. Big question! It is a ransom, but not a 'debt payment' to God's wrath. And it's not just about his death. It's about his whole life and death and resurrection, paid as a debt payment to God's *love*.
  - ii. Total love from God to the human being requires and calls forth total devotion from the human being to God. Jesus paid the price to free us in the sense that he gave his life to the Father, completely, to set his human nature free from sin.
  - iii. Notice that Jesus says that he will drink a 'cup', but the disciples will also drink the same 'cup' (20:22 – 23). This is definitely referring to his death (20:18 – 19). But will the disciples be killed in the same way? Jesus seems to think so. So the explanation for this leans towards the idea that the disciples give their lives out of a sense of payment towards the love of God, too, but not as a debt-payment to the wrath of God.
  - iv. Notice also this makes a stronger connection with the parable of the workers in 20:1 – 16. God gives one reward. But everyone owes Him everything they have, everything they can give, to serve Him. The reward is Christ-likeness!
4. Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivations
- a. Illus: A couple of years after I became a Christian, I realized that there was a Christian music industry, a Christian book publishing world, and a Christian subculture in which some people were famous. I felt like if I was not going to be rich and powerful in the secular world, I wanted to be famous in the Christian world. It's a struggle I still have. Why is it so easy for me (and you, too, if you're like me) to seek external rewards for something that is intrinsically valuable: having a life and heart of service, to express the life of Jesus?
  - b. The disciples seem like they could accept Jesus' teaching on sex and marriage (19:3 – 12) and even money and generosity (19:13 – 30). But they seem to have trouble with accepting Jesus' teaching on status, compensation, and greatness. Why?
  - c. STATE: Actually, the reward for service is our transformed character. We are made more like Jesus. He was a servant, as in v.28. 'Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' We are selfish, and need to be transformed. So the reward for service is that we are made less selfish, and are filled more with Jesus. We need to accept that.
  - d. Illus: As an example of this, let me tell you about my friend and mentor Derek. When Derek was an undergrad, he wanted to learn, because that was intrinsically valuable, but he never checked his grades until he was applying for graduate school, because he thought that grades were for him extrinsic rewards. He wanted to be motivated by intrinsic motivations of learning. He wanted to take classes from professors who would really teach him, even if they were tough graders.
  - e. Ultimately, the first is last because Jesus is first among the Jews, and among human beings, but is last in terms of status and honor when he is crucified. But he who was last at his death is first to be raised to new life, to share in the life of God (Col.1:15 – 20). Thus, it is only appropriate that he calls us to share in his own posture.
  - f. Illus: One of my favorite poems comes from an unknown Confederate soldier, which describes God giving into the secrecy of his heart, in spite of the painful circumstances this soldier faced:

*I Asked God*

I asked God for strength that I might achieve  
 I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey  
 I asked God for health that I might do great things  
 I was given infirmity that I might do better things  
 I asked for riches that I might be happy  
 I was given poverty that I might be wise  
 I asked for power that I might have the praise of men  
 I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God  
 I asked for all things that I might enjoy life  
 I was given life that I might enjoy all things  
 I got nothing I asked for  
 but everything I had hoped for  
 Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered  
 I am among all men most richly blessed

5. Application: *Serving God*: Do we need to become 'great' by the world's standards in order to more effectively serve God? NO!!!
  - a. Illus, evangelism: My sister staying at home in high school, struggling with my parents' relationship and impending divorce, but trying to be a witness to them. Meanwhile, I was in college, being a leader in my fellowship; I helped lead 5 friends to Christ and was a Bible study leader for 2 years. I was publicly thanked; my sister was not. I think God valued my sister's service more than mine.
  - b. STATE: A lot of the time, we think that we need to become great in the world in order to be great in God's kingdom. So we try to become doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, etc. Or we try to be more and more influential in an organization, in government, etc. In essence, we want to be compensated well by the world. And we think that by doing so, we can do greater things in God's kingdom.
  - c. STATE: There is a sense in which 'the first shall be last' in the sense that position and length of service (being first) doesn't necessarily mean anything. And 'the last shall be first' in the sense that the posture of service to others (being last) means everything.
  - d. Application: Over the next few weeks, think of something that you want to do just for the Lord. Back in Matthew 6:1 – 18, Jesus called us to do things in secrecy, just for the Father. We are people who have probably gotten a lot of extrinsic rewards for things. We have to allow Jesus to retrain our hearts to do things for intrinsic rewards – mostly, because he is the source of love, service, sacrifice.
6. Application: *Serving other people*: With certain people, we would rather exercise some kind of power – we keep them at a distance; we want to tell them what to do; we want to control them in some way. Who is a person that you find difficult to have a posture of service towards?
  - a. What is your part of the vineyard like?
  - b. Illus: At my small little house church, there is an older African-American woman named Miss Shirley. She isn't highly educated but she writes very kind letters of encouragement to people. I need to be careful to honor her for her service.
  - c. Application generally: What if Jesus said that the greatest people at your particular church were not the wealthy businesspeople who gave a lot of money, not the City Councillor, nor the pastors, nor anyone else with seniority or position or ability, but the man whose day job was a custodian at Central Middle School and who disciplined some younger men weekly; the woman who loved being a full-time mom and as a friend met with other struggling mothers; etc. How would you react to that?
  - d. Illus, discipleship: me talking to Pastor Carl Omaye at Anaheim Japanese Free Methodist Church about honoring graduating seniors by identifying what college they were going to. It was me trying to honor everyone. And by listening to me, he honored one of the youngest Christians in his congregation.
  - e. Illus, social justice: 'A' who graduated from Harvard, served on IVCF staff, then went to work for Chai Ling in her non-profit All Girls Allowed trying to prevent the gendercide of Chinese girls due to the one child policy in China. Didn't make a lot of money, and difficult to know what exactly the impact is.