

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Kingdom's Common Reward

Scripture: Matthew 19:30-20:16

Code: 80-198

Of course this is one of those very wonderful Lord's days when we gather at the Lord's Table to remember the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. It is when we do that that we are brought to the focus of our salvation. And I always think about the Lord's Table as a place of commonality. It's not a common place but it's a place of commonality. It's a place where we all stand on equal ground. It is a place where we all come recognizing we are sinners. Recognizing that our sin is a serious offense to Holy God. Recognizing that that offense has brought us under a condemnation, which is eternal and that we face an eternal Hell. We have a common experience as depraved, lost sinners.

We are called then to repent of our sin and all of us have that in common. To look at our sin, see it for what it is, as revealed by God in Scripture and to recognize our sinful condition and have a desire to turn from that sin. We're called to a commonality of repentance. We're also called to a faith, to trust in Christ, who is the sacrifice for sin. Trust in him alone for our salvation. We have that in common.

And we come to the foot of that same cross. We stand as sinner together on common ground. And while it is true that there is so much that is unique about us as individuals, there are so many different ways that God works in our lives to bring us to the foot of the cross. So many different ways and circumstances that he uses to bring us to understand our sinful condition and to repent and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is yet so much that is common. We must believe in the faith, which once were all delivered to the Saints. It's the same great gospel truth. It's the same recognition of the same condition.

The table is one table and we come here together to celebrate the one great sacrifice for sin, which is applied to all of us. So that when we think about the Lord's Table we really do think about our commonality. We think about the like precious faith, which we shared, to borrow the words of Peter.

But there was another element of the commonality of the salvation experience that I want to address this morning. It's one of my favorite passages. It focuses on the greatness of God, the goodness of God, the mercy of God as John sung about it a moment ago. I want you to open your Bible to the 20th chapter of Matthew. One of my favorite stories that Jesus ever told is given here in the opening part of the 20th chapter of Matthew. I want to address this because I feel that it celebrates another feature of our common life together.

One of the great prophets of the Old Testament was a prophet named Ezekiel. Ezekiel spoke to the people of Judah when they were already in exile. There were several different deportations by the Babylonians and Ezekiel was in the land of Babylon by the river of Kebar and he was instructing some of the Jews who had been deported into Babylon. He was telling them that the rest of the people still in Judah would be devastated in a great invasion by the Babylonians yet to come, which would end in the destruction of Jerusalem, which did occur. But Ezekiel always told the exiles that their condition was the result of their sin. So through the Prophet Ezekiel you read about the various sins, which brought about their punishment.

One of the sins that he reminds them about is stated several times in chapter 18. And this is what it says: "You say the way of the Lord is not equal." One of the things that the people of Israel did was accuse God of inequities. They accused God of being unjust. They accused God of being unfair. And so Ezekiel said, "Here now O House of Israel. Is not my way equal? Are not your ways unequal?" God is, through the Prophet, defending his equity, defending his justice. It certainly wasn't the first time that God was accused of being unfair, nor was it, by any means, the last time. Constantly God is accused of being unfair. And the Bible defends God against that a number of times with a familiar line, "God is no respecter of persons." Repeated several places in Scripture. God is not unfair. God is not inequitable in the way he deals with us.

There is a commonality of truth in the gospel. There's a commonality of repentance, a commonality of faith. There's a commonality of the application of the great benefit of justification and sanctification of the believer in salvation. There's also a commonality in the way God treats us. I don't think there's any better parable to see that than the one before us. It starts in verse 1, runs down to verse 15. But it's bracketed by a proverb, which appears at the end of chapter 19 and also at the end of the parable in verse 16. You'll notice there basically the same.

So let's begin reading in chapter 19 verse 30, which, if I had organized the Gospel of Matthew I would have included this at the beginning of chapter 20, where it really belongs. Verse 30 says, chapter 19: "Many who are first will be last and the last first. For the kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for denarius for the day he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place. And to those he said, "You too go into the vineyard and whatever is right I will give you," so they went. Then he went out about the 6th and the 9th hour and did the same. And about the 11th hour he went out and found others standing and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You too go into the vineyard."

"And when evening had come 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." And when those hired about the 11th

hour came each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came they thought that they would receive more. They also received, each one, a denarius, and when they received it they grumbled at the landowner 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." But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 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? Thus, the last shall be first and the first last.""

I wanna divide this up into just four simple ideas. First is the proverb. As we prepare for the Lord's Table I think there's a wonderful reality here that I want us to understand. The proverb is given in verse 30, "The first will be last and the last first." Repeated in verse 16, "The last shall be first, the first last." Very clearly it brackets the parable, which indicates to us that the parable is an illustration of this proverb. Now, this is a rather simple proverb. Somebody might be confused by it. It's kind of amazing to read all the convoluted things that have been said through the years about. But it's really basically a very, very simple proverb. The Lord used it, apparently, repeatedly. He used it in another context in Luke 13:30. So it was something familiar that he used to express a spiritual point. Now, I suppose you could say that it is a riddle to some degree because if the story weren't here we might struggle to understand it. But if it were to be considered a riddle it would be a pretty simple one. There's only one way to understand this proverb, it is this; if the first are last and the last are first, then everybody's the same.

And that is the proverb. It really isn't that difficult. It's simply Jesus saying, "Everyone is the same." There is no inequality. There are no first place finishers, second place finishers on down the line. The intent of the parable is to explain the proverb and the proverb is very simple and very straightforward, "Everyone will be treated the same, the same." Then graphically and practically and powerfully, and, frankly, unforgettably Jesus illustrates it with the parable. We go from the proverb to the parable.

I'll just tell you this story very quickly. You can recall what I read a moment ago. It's a simple one to understand. Let's just make a few points of identification. "The Kingdom of Heaven is the spirit of salvation." All right, we're talking about the spirit of salvation. This is the realm over which Heaven rules. Heaven is just a synonym for God. So this is God's kingdom. The kingdom over which God rules, which would be the believer; those who have been saved, those who have received the imputed righteousness of God by faith, talking about the Saints; those who are in the family of God.

The spirit of Salvation then can be likened to a landowner. This is an *Orca des petes*; somebody who rules over a house, who manages a house. He owns it in this case, as verse 15 indicates. He says that he will do whatever he wants with what is my own. So he owns this estate. And he was, obviously, a vineyard on his estate. Went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

This is not an imaginary scene, by the way, to the people to whom Jesus told the story. It would be very vivid living in an agrarian society. It's a little bit different for us who live in the city to get a grip on this, but this is pretty practical stuff, for these people a matter of daily routine.

The land of Palestine is a fascinating land and one of its great resources is its agricultural richness. There are basically two areas topographically that produce in the land of Israel. They have throughout all of the millennia and they continue to do so in our day, and that is the planes and the hills. The planes are basically the place where grain is grown, which has always been a major enterprise in Israel. You have the plane of Ezrolonin the north. You have the sweeping Jordan valley that goes all the way from the north all the way down to the south, which is as fertile as any place in the world. Then over the coastal mountains you have the valley that's near the coastline, which is known as the Sharon Valley, also a major area for growing green.

Around and at certain points in the land inside the coastal valley and, of course, then on the Eastern part of the country and the Northern part you have the mountains. There on the mountains, on the hillsides, and the slopes are where the vineyards were grown. They basically terraced off the mountains and the fertile soil of the hillside would produce wonderful crops of grapes. The steepness required the terracing. It was a very great amount of effort to do that. And there was sort of a sequence that they followed.

In spring they prepared the soil to be productive. In summer they pruned and tied the branches for maximum effect and in September the harvest came. It typically would rain coming later in the fall so they had to get the harvest in or the grapes could be ruined by the rain. So close on the hills of the harvest came the rain, which squeezed the harvest time down and required that they hire day laborers to do the harvest. This would even be true today.

And, so, this is a landowner who was going out looking for day laborers, beyond his normal staff of servants who cared for everything. He had to have a very large crew to handle this time of harvest so he went out to the city square, the market place of the city where day laborers would loiter around waiting to be hired. You see that typically today. Many, for example, of the illegal aliens in Southern California have spots where they stand, sort of collecting, waiting for somebody to come along, pick them up, and take them to do some labor so they can earn some money to feed themselves and their families. It's a similar situation in ancient times.

So he went into the market place where the day laborers would be waiting to be hired. Anybody who was available would show up because they wanted to work. And this was a prime time for work. The day was from 6 AM to 6 PM. It was 12-hour workday and it was a 6-day workweek. A little different than we have today. So the landowner went into town to hire laborers. He met some in verse 2. It says, "Agreed with them." It would have been about 5:00 in the morning when he left and went into town to get them time to be hired and get back out there at 6 so they could do a full day's work. He

agreed with them for a denarius for the day and sent them into _____. That was a very good wage, by the way. That was what a Roman soldier made in a day. That was what an employed person made. These were hired laborers. They were the lowest class of workers, in the sense, they were unskilled and they were only employed a day at a time. Life for them was a bit precarious. They lived at a certain level of desperation. If they didn't work, they didn't eat, neither did their families.

Slaves and servants typically had steady jobs, even if they weren't poor to some degree. They knew where they were gonna sleep and they knew they were gonna have enough food. They shared the benefits of the family. But day laborers were never certain as to whether they were gonna have enough for the day. Their pay tended to be low - much lower than this offering by this generous landowner.

God was concerned about these kinds of people and every society has them and that's the way it is. Jesus said, "The poor you will have with you." But God wanted them to be cared for appropriately. So way back in the law in the Old Testament in Leviticus, chapter 19 verse 13 it says, "The wages of the hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. If a man worked during the day you paid him at the end of the day because he had to have the pay in order to subsist and care for his family." Deuteronomy 24:15 says, "You shall give him his hire on the day he earns it before the sun goes down, for he's poor and sets his heart on it. Lest he cry against you to the Lord and it be sin in you. God may punish you for the sin of holding back wages for someone who works for you and depends upon being paid at the end of the day he worked." So this parable is a vivid story, fits into the Jewish context. These were guys who would go out and work the day in order to get the pay they needed to subsist. And he agreed for a denarius. As I said, that's a very good wage, a standard wage for a respected employee. And they agreed, of course, on its fairness.

He went out about the 3rd hour realizing he needed a greater crew. He went back at 9 am in the morning; saw others standing idle in the marketplace. To those he said, "You too go into the vineyard and whatever is right I'll give you." They didn't debate. They didn't have a negotiating position. The day was fast going by. They were losing money every hour and so they didn't say anything about wages. They probably knew him to be a fair man and were aware of what he had offered the others and were glad to get any part of that and went out to work.

And he went out again in verse 5; the 6th hour, that's noon. The 9th hour, that's 3 in the afternoon, repeated the same thing. And this flow is going on through the day. About the 11th hour, this is 5:00 or nearly 5:00, he went out found others standing. He said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" And their response was, "It's not because we're lazy, it's because no one hired us." He says, "You go into the vineyards." So they went out to work for just a portion of that final hour. All through the day he's been sending people into this vineyard with only the pledge that he would do what was right.

At the end of the day, verse 8 says, "Evening came." And that would be at the 6:00 time. 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." This was a dutiful Jew in the story who did exactly what the Old Testament law required; he paid them at the end of the day of their work. And so he said to his foreman, "You take charge of paying them their wages. And start with the last group." This is to illustrate a point.

When those hired about - the 11th hour came. Each one received a denarius. This must have been a shock to them. What mercy, what graciousness, what kindness, what generosity to receive a denarius. Now, just a little note here, that's exactly what they needed. They didn't need any less than that; they needed that amount because a denarius would be enough to support your family for a day. That's what they needed and that's what they received. A whole day's wage, why, because they had earned it? No, because they needed it.

Verse 10 says, "When those hired first came (these are the ones who had worked all day) they thought that they would receive more. And they also received, each one, a denarius, because that's also what they needed and that's what had been promised." And when they received it; verse 11, they grumbled at the landowner." Now, you know, obviously their imagination was elevated when they saw these people who worked one hour get a denarius. They might've assumed they were gonna get 12 days wages. They got pretty excited about it and they couldn't hide their disappointment when they got to the head of the line and they received exactly what everybody else got. All along the way they had been cherishing secretly, if not in their little group, the silent expectation that they were gonna get more than everybody else because they worked harder.

And so it says in verse 11, "They grumbled." That's another *ana mada pay etic* Greek word, _____, complaining. And they get pretty melancholy about it. "We have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." The burden is the burner. "We've been here with our parched lips and our sun beaten bodies and we've been going 12 hours." The evenings cool down like they do in California in Israel. These people come; they work 1 hour and the cooler twilight. It seems absolutely insignificant compared to 12 hot, sweaty hours in the scorching, blazing September sun of Israel.

How can they get what we get? The reply is marvelous. He answered and said to one of them, "Friend." Now the word *friend etarusis* usually a rebuking term. Probably if we were gonna use an English equivalent it would be like this. "Fella or buddy, I'm doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Was I faithful to what I pledged? Did I give you what you needed?" "Yes." The only issue was an evil heart of competition here. The only issue was jealousy. Verse 15, "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?" Was this illegal, was it unjust, was it unfair, was it without mercy? No. They all had the same need. A denarius would provide what they needed for themselves and their families

generously. They all had the same need and he met the need they had. Whether they worked a brief time or a long time or anything in-between they all had the same need and he met it with generosity. And he had every right to do it because what he gave them belonged to him. Are we to assume that his compassion and kindness to others somehow is wrong toward you? That's the question. No, it's just that you're jealous, you're jealous.

That's the parable but what's the point? You saw the proverb, the parable and the point. What is the point here? Well the point is that in the end everybody got the same. That's right that's just what the proverb said. In the end everybody got the same. This is not an allegory with all kinds of convoluted and secret meanings. This is just an illustration. It's an illustration of the fact that people coming in to a vineyard working different hours, putting out different effort, in the end, all receive the same result. It's a simple illustration. Makes one point; everybody received the same. The question is, "What is the same? What are we talking about here?" Well, the householder is God; obviously he's the one who is the landowner. The vineyard is his kingdom. It says, "The Kingdom of Heaven, in the sphere of salvation ruled by God, the laborers are those who are in his kingdom. The day of work is time. And some have been in his kingdom a long time. And some have been in his kingdom a very brief time. The evening is eternity when we receive our reward. The steward or the foreman responds to Jesus Christ who gives out those rewards." But what is the wage? What is the denarius in a word, eternal life? It's eternal life. It's life in the kingdom of God. It's heavenly immortality. It's the glory of heaven.

And what Jesus is saying is this, "Not only do we come as common sinners, commonly depraved, commonly headed for Hell, commonly condemned by the law of God, which we have violated. Not only do we come as sinners recognizing our sin, coming to a common attitude of repentance and putting our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and standing at the foot of the cross and that kind of commonality, but we receive the common eternal life. We receive the same eternal life that everybody else receives." Some people are gonna spend decades of their life; some people will spend a half century of their life in the service of the King.

Some people have spent their lives in very difficult, challenging, sacrificial kinds of service to Christ. Some people have trekked through jungles and swamps and fought against beasts in the history of the church. Some have been martyred. Some today are being martyred for their faith in Christ. Some pay a great price. Some work diligently to the point of sweat and exhaustion in the service of the King. Others seem to come into the Kingdom at the very last hour, the last moment, the last few minutes, get saved on their deathbed like the thief on the cross and enter into the Kingdom. And the question is, "Do they all receive the same eternal life?" And the answer is, "yes, yes." No matter how long the service, no matter how short the service, no matter how hard the effort was, no matter how easy the effort might have been, we will all receive the same reward because we all need eternal life.

Jesus is saying, "The ultimate eternal benefits of the Kingdom are the same for everybody who comes into the service to the King. Everybody who comes into the Kingdom, who comes into the vineyard, whatever, whenever, and however may be their place and time of service. The same glorious eternal life belongs to us all, whether you are the thief on the cross or the martyr to Apostle Paul you'll receive the same eternal life."

When you read that story, it's a great story and you understand the point but you ever ask the question - I always ask the question, "Why here, why then, why in this place does Jesus tell this?" And all you have to do is go back into chapter 19 and it becomes clear. He is still trying to educate his hardheaded disciples.

There was a man who came to Jesus in chapter 19 verse 16; we call him the rich, young ruler, because that's what he was. He says to Jesus, "What do I do to obtain eternal life?" He comes and he wants to know the way to eternal life. "How do I get eternal life? How do I get it? How do I get into the eternal Kingdom?" Well Jesus leads him through a thinking process, in which he asks him about sin. And the young man won't admit any sin so he's got a problem right there that keeps him out of the Kingdom because he won't acknowledge his sin. And then Jesus wants to test and see if he'll, not only repent of his sin, but if he'll submit to him. And so he says, "I want you to take everything you have and sell it. Take the proceeds from the sale and give it to the poor and then follow me." "No thanks." One, he wouldn't admit his sin, two, he wasn't about to obey Christ. Well if you won't admit your sin and submit to Christ you can't get in the Kingdom. Coming to the Kingdom is confessing your sin and embracing Christ as Lord of the Savior. He wouldn't do either. Bottom line, he said, "I'm not giving up anything. I'm not giving up anything."

After that, verse 27, Peter, who is obviously aware of this and - by the way Peter didn't always articulate just what he was thinking. He articulated things that they were all thinking. So don't be too hard on Peter. He was kind of the spokesman for everybody. Peter answered and said to Jesus - you can just feel the sense of elevation and pride, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?" Peter said, "We're not like that guy. We left everything. We had a business. We had a fishing business operated out of Capernaum: Peter, James, John, Andrew."

And Matthew could have said, "Well, I had a very lucrative tax business." Tax collectors made a lot of money, and we left it all to follow you. We dumped our whole career. We set our business aside. We put everything on whole and we have followed you and, you know, it hasn't been easy; lots of persecution, lots of hostility, lot of animosity, lots of hatred. We don't make any wages. We subsist on whatever food people give us or whatever we can buy out of the meager treasury, which our friend Judas holds. This is not exactly high living. We've made some immense sacrifices. So what is in it for us?" And the assumption is this; these are the complaining 12-hour guys, these disciples. We got in at the start of this deal and we've been banging our heads against the wall. Through all of this difficulty we've been trekking around with you all over everywhere and feeling all this hostility and

barely able to subsist, and sometimes you've even had to create food so we could eat. We've been trekking all over everywhere. We've said goodbye to everything that shaped and formed our lives in the past. We've given up everything. What we gonna get out of this?" And Jesus' response is, "You're gonna get exactly what everybody else gets. No more and no less. No more and no less."

To show you how deeply engrained this idea of superiority was in their minds, they thought that when they got into the Kingdom there were gonna be two levels. There are people who think that today. It's a bad theology. They thought when they got into Heaven there was gonna be some superior level of elevation for them, so, later on in chapter 20, you know, they have the gall, James and John, to send their mother to Jesus and ask if they could sit in his right and left hand in the Kingdom. I mean their pride was all caught up in this. I mean you could just hear them having their little discussion, you know? "We're going through an awful lot. We've made all these sacrifices and, you know, we're suffering all this and I don't know how this deal's gonna end. And Jesus has already been talking about stuff that really we don't wanna hear about, like, dying and all. We've put up with a lot, we've suffered a lot, we've endured a lot, we've sacrificed a lot. And there ought to be some special thing for us. We're the ones who've borne the burden in the heat of the day. We've been in the scorching sun through the whole deal." And Jesus' response is, "Well - later on he tells them, "You know, there's gonna be a time in the millennial Kingdom when they'll be 12 thrones over the 12 tribes of Israel and you'll sit in a place of authority. Yes, there will be a special opportunity of service for you. But the bottom line is, gentleman, you are going to receive the same thing that everybody else in my Kingdom gets, and that is eternal life."

That's the whole point here. That is the whole point. What an incredible, wonderful promise. Selfish, confused, envious, jealous perceptions on the heart of the apostles were intolerable to our Lord. And he says, "Believe me, you're gonna have the wonderful opportunity to have a leadership in the Kingdom." Verses 28 and 29. But in the end it's just gonna be a dead heat. First or last, last or first. Bottom line, eternal life is the same for all of us. We all live in the father's house, won't we? In my father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. We will all be part of the bride for the bridegroom. We will all inherit the whole inheritance." There is, laid up for us, an inheritance; undefiled, incorruptible, it never fades. We will all be made like Jesus Christ. We will all be conformed to the image of God's son. We will all be a part of that hallelujah chorus, forever praising God and saying, "Worthy is the land." That's the issue. That's the issue.

We all come to the foot of the cross. All as condemned sinners. We all come needing to repent of sin and embrace the gospel by faith and we all receive the same eternal life, whether you came to Christ just hours before you died or whether you knew him for 80 years. You say, "Well, isn't there inequity?" No, because we all have the same need and God's generosity will give us the same great blessing. And in the end, anyway, it's all grace, isn't it? And that's the principle. That's the principle that I wanna close with.

The principle is this; all eternal reward is by Grace. It's all by Grace. Works, length of service, tasks, duties done, they will show up in some measure of eternal blessing. The epistles talk about rewards. But they are not what distinguishes or determines eternal life. All eternal reward, in the sense of eternal life, is by Grace. So length and difficulty of service is not a factor. Sovereign Grace, God's incredible mercy, is not to be measured by our understanding of human equity. God graciously gives to all, all undeserving sinners, the same eternal life.

So instead of exalting yourself and imagining that you're some great person, like the disciples did, who is gonna get some great place in the glory to come, humble yourself, be thankful that God, in his magnanimity, has chosen to give us all the same eternal life. And, by the way, you don't need any more than that anyway. There's no such thing as upper level Heaven. You hear this foolish teaching today about people who are going to be in the Kingdom but not inherit it. That's not what the Bible teaches. We'll all receive the same eternal life, for which we'll spend forever praising and thanking God. Different as we are, as diverse as our background and our paths to the truth have been, we come here and we share this income.

Join me in prayer as we prepare to take the Lord's Table. Father we do thank you for the fact that none of us deserve eternal life and all of us are given the privilege of receiving it. How could we so foolishly quibble over some ranking like the disciples did when we don't deserve anything to begin with? We're so thankful, Lord, that you are merciful to sinners. Humanely speaking, the best of men and the worst of men, receive the same glorious eternal life. What Grace is this? And we praise you for it.

Father, we also know that you have called us to the same table. There's just one table and we all stand at the foot of the same cross. Sinners saved by the same great Grace to remember this mighty work of Christ, which provides our eternal life. You have told us not to come to this table lightly. Not to come with sin in our lives, but to confess and repent. And we do that now.

Lead us, Lord, in thinking, to examine our own hearts and see if there's anything that displeases or dishonors you. We confess it and we ask that you would remove it from us so that we can truly express our gratitude for that eternal life, which you've given to us. Amen.

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