

Matthew 20:1–16

¹ “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard....



Image credit: *Laborers in the Vineyard*, icon | Public Domain | found on Flickr Fr. Ted

Context

In St. Matthew’s narrative we are firmly ensconced in the midst of Jesus’ instructions, not of the crowds, but of the disciples, preparing them for not only his death and resurrection, but also for their mission to the world. In other words Jesus is preparing them to be apostles, the ones sent – and preparing them to serve the new People of God being formed.

We again encounter a “gap” in the Sunday gospels, just as we did not read from Mt 17, the Lectionary assigns no Sunday reading from Matthew 19. Chapter 19 begins with the formula that signifies the end of one of Matthew’s five sections: “*When Jesus had finished saying these things*” (see also 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; and 26:1). Jesus’ Galilean ministry is finished. Nonetheless, many commentators (e.g., Jensen, Carter, and Boring) hold that chapters 19-20 should be read together. So, what is in Mt 19? And why is it important to our reading of Mt 20?

Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*) titles his section on these two chapters: “The Alternative Households of God’s Empire.” He writes:

The coherence of these two chapters resides in pervasive cultural understandings of households. ... They [Aristotelean tradition, Neo-pythagoreans, and Hellenistic Judaism] understood the household to consist of four dimensions, namely, three relationships (husband-wife; father-children; master-slave) and the male’s task of earning wealth. A power dynamic controlled the relationships in which the husband/father/master *ruled over* the wife/children/slaves. The household was hierarchical and patriarchal in that the male held power over women and children. It was marked by strict gender differentiation. ...

The sections of chapters 19-20 reflect this household pattern: the husband-wife relationship (including divorce, 19:3-12), children (19:13-15), procuring wealth (19:16-30), being slaves (20:17-28). In addition, 20:1-16 is a parable about a householder administering his estate and hiring workers.

But while the chapters utilize this household structure, they do not endorse the then-existing cultural norm. Rather, the two chapters subvert this hierarchical and patriarchal structure by instructing disciples in a more equal pattern (cf. 20:12). Husbands are not to rule over wives but to participate in a “one-flesh” relationship (19:3-12); all disciples are children, there are no parents (19:13-15); following Jesus, not procuring wealth and status, defines discipleship (19:16-30); all disciples are slaves like Jesus, there are no masters (20:17-28). The parable of the householder in 20:1-16 exemplifies God’s distinctive and different ways of ordering life. The concluding story of Jesus healing the blind men who beg for mercy offers disciples hope that they too will be enabled by Jesus’ power to live this alternative and against-the-grain existence (20:29-34). That is, as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem to die, the chapters provide disciples with instruction on an alternative household that befits the empire or reign of God. [pp. 376-7]

Between the two chapters, Jesus begins to address the assumptions about what constitutes God’s blessings. Where “wealth” was seen as an external sign of God’s blessings, Jesus now holds up something different in the telling of the encounter with the rich man (Mt 19:16-26). Long (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*) writes concerning the rich man story, which also applies to our text: “... we must realize that, when the young man encounters Jesus, two very different worlds collide: this world, with all its prevailing customs and values, and the radical new way of life called for in the kingdom of heaven.” [p. 220]

This radical life comes at a price. Peter understands that and so he asks, “*what about us who have already given up everything,*” Jesus points to the life within the kingdom and then concludes that the called-for reversal will also be evident in the order of blessing on entering the kingdom: “*But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*” (Mt 19:30)

While the context for the kingdom in Mt 19 is seen “*when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory,*” But it is not just at the end of days. Matthew also grounds the radical reversal of all cultural understandings in the here-and-now. In a time (then and now) when wealth is seen as a measure of blessing, most commentators note the importance of Mt 19:16-30 – the encounter with the Rich Man. In short, when Jesus tells him “*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” The rich man goes away sad.

As that encounter ends, Mt 20:1 begins with the word “for” (*gar*) which implies a connection to what goes on before. It denotes a reason. Perhaps we could even say that it introduces an answer to the question: Why will many who are first be last and the last first (see 19:30; 20:16)? It may be as simple as the idea of being “paid,” not by what one does – either by doing good deeds or keeping the commandments or working in the vineyard – but by the graciousness of God/landowner.

Both the story of the young man and the parable of the employer picture the triumph of grace. The young man is a fine specimen who “has it all”: youth, money, morality, a sense that there is still something more, an interest in eternal things. Matthew resists the temptation to make the disciples (and his own church) look the better by painting the man in dark colors. He was a good, sincere, wealthy young man, and every church would be glad to “get” him. What did he lack? He anticipated being given one more commandment, one final achievement, and then his quest would be fulfilled. Not just the young man, but also the reader is surprised when he is told that he lacks all, that his salvation is impossible. At one level, the story communicates that salvation is not any kind of achievement, that on human terms entering the kingdom is not merely hard, but impossible. It is only when this “no” to all

human claims is heard that the “yes” of God can be heard: But for God all things are possible. Binding this pronouncement to the call to discipleship keeps it from being cheap grace.

The rich young man is a picture of the rejection of grace by one who prefers to justify himself. The parable of the landowner and the laborers is a picture of the resentment of grace toward others by those who have worked long and hard themselves.

Commentary

¹ “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ ⁵ So they went off. (And) he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. ⁶ Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ ⁸ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ ⁹ When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ ¹³ He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’ ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? ¹⁵ (Or) am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The parable begins in the familiar world in which day laborers are hired at sunup and are paid at the end of the day, in accordance with Torah regulation and Jewish practice (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14–15). A denarius was a normal day’s pay for manual laborers hired by the day (cf. Tob 5:15; Ber. Rab. 61), but was barely enough to maintain a family at the subsistence level.

The first-century listener of the parable would begin to immediately notice there are things askew in the telling. Instead of sending his manager, the wealthy landowner himself goes to the market to hire laborers (cf. v. 8). The landowner goes repeatedly, even at “five o’clock” (lit. the “eleventh hour”). We are not told why the landowner is in need of so many workers. No explanation is given as to why those standing idle had not been hired on earlier recruitment visits. We are not told why the last hired workers were idle or why they were not seen standing in the market place earlier in the day. While we may try and fill in the gaps: it was harvest time; they were lazy; they were “hiding,” (note that in v. 6 he “finds” these last workers rather than “sees” them as in v. 3); such embellishments can be fun and fanciful, but they are saying more than the text indicates.

The first group of workers is hired on the basis of an oral contract for the “usual daily wage”; the later groups are promised “what is just,” thus raising, but not answering, the question of what is “just” (*dikaios*). Although the first group has a “contract” and the second can only trust in the master’s sense of justice, in reality both groups depend on the trustworthiness of the landowner. In the closing scene in which all are paid the same, the middle groups are ignored in order to focus on “first” and “last”

The Laborers. The landowner has “hired” (*misthoomai*) the workers (*ergates*), which implies an offer to pay (*misthos*) them for their work. In contrast, Mt 21:28 has a father telling his son, “Go and work (*ergazomai*) in the vineyard today,” which may not involve payment for work done.

An agreement (*symphoneo*) is reached between the landowner and the first workers. (*Symphoneo* was used in 18:19: "if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father")

A denarius for one day's work does not indicate a generous landowner. It was the minimum wage a family in poverty could exist on. This agreement speaks against interpreting this parable primarily as an illustration of God's generosity. The wages aren't that great. The workers have barely enough to live on. They remain in poverty, but their needs for this day will be met. Thus it may be better to translate *agathos* in v. 15 as "good" than as "generous". It was good for the landowner to give the workers a minimum wage that was enough to live on for the day. It was not a generous wage.

In contrast to the first hired workers where an agreement was made about their wages. The other hired workers are told (v. 4): "I will give you what is just (*dikaio*s which can also be translated, "right," "fair," or "proper"). This parable raises questions like: "What is right?" "What is just?" "What is fair?" God's answers are not always the same as ours – and we may not always like God's answers.

Caught in the Midst of Assumptions. It is interesting that it is the "manager" or "steward" (*epitropos*), not the owner, who calls the workers and "gives them their pay/reward" (*misthos*). They are the ones who dispense what the owner considers right and just. They are also the ones who take the flak from those who disagree. I think we can all relate to being the one thrust into the middle of something not necessarily of our own making.

The whole problem at the end of the parable is the landowner's doing. Not because he paid them all the same, but because he paid the last first. This all could have been avoided by paying the first at the beginning so they are not around to see what the last ones are paid. But then this is a parable and Jesus' intent is likely to let the disciples see what happens when Mt 19:30 is acted out: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." What happens is the first hired witness the last one's getting paid, which resulted in the first hires to think that they would get more (v. 10).

The word for "think" (*nomizo*) does not refer so much to a rational process (as *logizomai*), but "to assume," "to presume," "to suppose," based on what one expects to happen or what is "customary" or the "rule" (which are meanings for the root *nomos*). Usually such assumptions are wrong as in its other uses in Mt: 5:17; 10:34.

The Complaints. Brian Stoffregen describes the three complaints of the first hired:

- (1) They assumed they would receive more. The desire for more is usually considered greed, which undoubtedly led them to desire more than they had been promised, but I don't think their real complaint was as much about the money as the other two listed below.
- (2) You have made them equal to us. They assumed a hierarchy based on time worked, which should have been indicated by a difference in wages paid. They make a distinction between "us" and "them" and that "we" are better than "they." "We" deserve more than "they." Such a distinction is usually unhealthy for communities of faith.
- (3) We have borne the burden of the day and the heat. They do not see their invitation to work (and wages earned) as a sign of grace, but as a burden to be borne. When living the Christian life is seen as a burden, the right perspective is elusive.

Robert Smith (*Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary) has this wonderful summary: "It is simply a fact that people regularly understand and appreciate God's strange calculus of grace as applied to themselves but fear and resent seeing it applied to others." [p. 236] In a similar way, the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35) suggested a great appreciation for God forgiving all of my sins; but a desire that God (and I) should punish all those who had sinned against me.

R.T. France (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [748-50]) writes:

“The story is as clear as it is unexpected. Whereas we take it for granted that harder work deserves a greater payment, this employer operates on a less conventional basis. The reader instinctively sympathizes with the aggrieved workers in vv. 11–12: it doesn’t seem fair. The retort of the landowner is of course technically correct: no one has been cheated; the agreement has been scrupulously observed. Why then do we still feel that there is something wrong? Because we cannot detach ourselves from the ruling convention that rewards should be commensurate with the services rendered. When one man is “rewarded” far in excess of what has been earned while another receives only the bare sum agreed, we detect unfair discrimination.”

“But the kingdom of heaven does not operate on the basis of commercial convention. God rules by grace, not by desert. The “rewards” which this gospel has so persistently spoken of (see on 5:3–10, 11–12; 6:1–6, 16–18, 19–21; 10:41–42; 19:27–29) are not earned, nor are they proportionate to human effort. The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds (6:26–29) delights to give his servants far more than they could ever deserve from him. It is that principle, rather than the disappointment of the whole-day laborers, which is the main focus of the parable, but their very natural disappointment and sense of unfairness helps the readers to re-examine how far their reactions are still governed by human ideals of deserving rather than by the uncalculating generosity of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom in which the first are last and the last first there is no room for envious comparisons.”

What Can We Say. Patricia Datchuck Sánchez writes:

“Like most scriptural texts, this parable also should be evaluated and appreciated with regard for its various levels of development. At its initial or basic level, the parable defended Jesus’ missionary methodology of reaching out to extend the blessings of the kingdom to tax collectors and sinners. Whereas his contemporaries believed these to be pariah with no claim to salvation, Jesus’ words and works indicated that sinners were not only on equal footing with the righteous but were in fact the ones to whom God manifested special love and mercies.”

“At its second level of development, the parable, as remembered and preserved by the Matthean community, put forth the message that even gentiles who came “late” to the good news of salvation would enjoy the same benefits and those who were first to hear it viz., the Jews.”

“The third level of development, attributed to the evangelist, can be discerned from the context assigned to the parable by Matthew. Framed by a doublet saying of Jesus concerning the reversal of fortunes (19:30: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first;” 20:16: “Thus the last will be first and the first will be last”), the parable offered a lesson in discipleship. Christians are not to concern themselves with recompense for their service in the cause of the kingdom; nor are believers to presume to mete out what others deserve for the services they have rendered. Human standards of fairness have no place in the reign of God. Each, and all are abundantly rewarded by God whose only standard is a generous, merciful, forgiving love. If God were fair, in a strictly human sense, precious few, in any, would live to enjoy the fullness of the kingdom.”

“Karl Rahner (*The Great Church Year*, Crossroad Publishing Co. New York: 1994) suggested that the daily wage or denarius which the owner of the vineyard gave to each hired worker is actually the gift from God of our very selves. “Our own selves, just as we are: with our life, with our temperament, with our destiny, with our surroundings, with our time, with our heredity, with our family”... These things cannot be negotiated or calculated. Whenever “we complain about others with whom God has dealt differently, we are really refusing to accept our own selves from the hands of God.” This then becomes our life’s work, to accept the denarius whom we are as God’s generous gift, mysteriously and

gradually revealed. This gift is made more precious by the knowledge that when we accept it, God gives himself with his gift.”

Notes

Matthew 20:2 usual daily wage: literally, “the usual denarius.” Although a Roman coin, the equivalent shekels would truly be a minimum wage able to just feed a family for a day.

Matthew 20:3 idle: the word *argos* has two senses. A pejorative meaning includes “idle, lazy, useless.” Another meaning is “with no work to do” and “not working. This lead some scholars to note that there is some possibility these men, in fact, desired work but had no work offered. For example, if they had their own modest fields or plots to attend, they arrived in the market place for day labor after the first wave had been hired. Such an idea has merit based on the “market structure” in first century Palestine. **About nine o’clock:** literally, “the third hour.” Similarly in vv.5 and 6.

Matthew 20:13 I am not cheating you: literally, “I am not treating you unjustly.”

Matthew 20:15 Are you envious because I am generous?: Literally, “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

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