

Matthew 20:1-16

Peter had asked Jesus what he would receive for following Him. After three years with the Lord, the disciples had sacrificed a great deal.

What would they get in return?

With a sense of entitlement, the disciples failed to see God's grace in calling them to do anything or the generosity of all God would give to them. Jesus explained with His parable of the laborers in a vineyard.

“See, we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” (Matt 19:27). *What's in it for us, Jesus?* The disciples had served and sacrificed daily for more than three years. Families had been left along with homes and careers. They had even said they were ready to die for Christ (John 11:16, 13:37). So much dedication and devotion, and yet, all they had received in return was poverty and persecution.

At least, that's all they'd received so far, but hope can be a powerful motivator. The disciples had always viewed Jesus as Israel's messiah. They didn't understand what this meant or what He would do, and they often misunderstood His teachings. In fact, the idea of messiah meant the same to these men as any common Jew of their day. It meant power, triumph, greatness, and glory. Messiah had come to shatter the Romans, establish a kingdom, and exalt Israel... or so they thought (John 6:15, 12:13). With these ideas, one can only imagine what visions of grandeur grew within Jesus' disciples.

Peter asked on behalf of all the men: “What then will we have?” Judas wanted riches (John 12:4-6); James and John wanted position or prominence (Matt 20:21). In some ways the disciples followed as soldiers of fortune, mercenaries who served with the hope of great gain. As we come to Matthew 20, only a few weeks before Christ's crucifixion: *What's in it for us?* That's how these men still thought.

Matthew 19:29—“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”

Jesus comforted Peter and the others—He knows all they've left behind. He knows how much they've sacrificed for Him, so He said they “will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” What's in it for these men? Life and blessing more rich than the mind could know or the tongue could tell. And even as Jesus promised this to them, so He's promised the same to us who believe.

There's great reward for following Christ... but not quite as Peter or the disciples had thought. As they jockeyed for positions, the Lord leveled their playing field: “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:30). They had been all wrong about who would receive what and how much when the time came. Why? Because no matter how long or how hard a believer serves, no matter how rich or influential he becomes the reward of enjoying Christ and the fellowship of one another forever in heaven is all the same.

The disciples didn't understand God's gracious calling nor His lavish generosity. When Christ called these men to follow, it wasn't as one man calling another. The same voice that had created the angels and called galaxies into being was teaching them daily and called each of them. Little did they understand their need of Jesus or the exceeding richness of all He would one day provide.

WORKERS IN A VINEYARD (MATTHEW 20:1-7)

Matthew 20:1—“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

Bordeaux, Tuscany, Sicily, Napa Valley—these are some of the most famous regions in the world for their wineries. Some have tended vines for millennia, and long ago the land of Israel was on that list. Rome actually imported vintage wine from the hills of Galilee and parts of Judea. Israel was once a land dotted with vineyards. In fact, the first-century Jews held a knowledge of winemaking twice as old as the empire itself.

Viticulture was once common in Israel. Jesus borrowed from it that His disciples might better understand the kingdom of God here. He told of a manager who needed day laborers, laborers who needed work, and work with an unexpected wage.

Skilled workers could earn a living by fishing, masonry, carpentry, weaving, or farming. Some were self-employed; others worked for a landowner or businessman. As for the unskilled, many would gather in the village marketplace awaiting someone to offer them a job.

The manager in Jesus' parable needed workers, and those who stood at the marketplace without skills were desperate for work. It wasn't hard to exploit them—they had no leverage, and they needed to eat. They would work for anything.

The Unjustly Generous Manager

The going wage for a day's work was a denarius. Roman soldiers and skilled workers could expect this. Unskilled workers? Not so much. Yet, here's a manager who offered each of his laborers a denarius. It may have been more than they had ever seen. So, of course, they eagerly went to work.

The first group of laborers was hired at 6am. Three hours later the manager returned to the marketplace and "saw others standing idle" (Matt 20:3). He had plenty of work, and they needed a job, so he hired them, too. At noon, 3pm, and 5pm he did the same. Going back to the marketplace, he saw more men willing to work, and hired all of them (Matt 20:3-7).

Five groups of unskilled laborers hired at five different times in the course of a single day. Any well-managed vineyard had many of its own permanent laborers. The manager didn't need any of the men in the marketplace; they desperately needed him. Their need drove him to the marketplace where he graciously called each to work for him.

A LABOR DISPUTE

(MATTHEW 20:8-16)

Matthew 20:8—"And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'"

Here's the twist. The day was over. It was time to pay the workers. The men lined up beginning with the last ones hired, and to their surprise, the foreman started handing out denarii—an entire day's wage to the men who started working at 5pm! They probably hadn't even broken a sweat.

What do you think the other men were thinking? *One denarius for one hour's work!* For those who worked 12 hours—*that means we'll get 12 denarii!!* They envisioned a small fortune, but as the line grew shorter, they saw something very different. The foreman paid everyone the same wage—one lousy denarius.

It's so unfair, isn't it? Some of those men worked only an hour while others were dripping with sweat after 6, 9, or even 12 hours. Feeling cheated, they became discontent and grumbled against the manager saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matt 20:11-12).

Though some had worked 12 times longer, all received the same wage, and some felt cheated. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong,"

said the manager (Lk 20:13). Everyone received a job and a wage greater than market value. The manager had been gracious to hire any of these men and exceedingly generous to each.

The problem? Unequal generosity. Some of the men begrudged the manager, believing they deserved better from him. They failed to see their real plight. They weren't highly skilled, valuable workers whom he needed—they were beggars who desperately needed him.

Had the manager been fair and thought only of his business, no one would've received a denarius. Needing none of these men, no one would've been hired. Fairness could've left all of these men in the marketplace. Grace and generosity did otherwise.

THE POINT OF THE PARABLE

Christ had called each of His disciples to follow Him. It had thus far proven to be a life of poverty and suffering. Peter, and the others, expected their sacrifices to gain them something in the Kingdom. It was merit-based thinking—the more we sacrifice for Jesus, the higher our position in the Kingdom, and the greater our treasure.

The Kingdom of Heaven isn't like this. Consider Enoch who walked with God some 300 years—three centuries of faithful service in a hostile world (Gen 5:22-24). What about Noah who endured 120 years of scorn and ridicule to build an ark? Think of the prophets and apostles who were tortured and even martyred.

Contrast these saints with the thief who hung next to our Lord (Lk 23:39-43). He saw himself as a sinner whose wretched life deserved death. One who had done nothing good and had nothing to offer asked Christ to save him, and what did Jesus say? "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." Absolutely astonishing, isn't it?

It's not fair that some of God's people should suffer ridicule and die unjustly while others enjoy peace and prosperity. It isn't fair that some of the most faithful saints should eke out a living, while some less faithful are flush with riches and material blessings.

Like unskilled laborers in the Father's vineyard, no one deserves a denarius or even a job. We're sinners who deserve to die, but God... He graciously reaches down to call some to serve Him, and He's supremely generous to each. What did the thief on the cross receive for his one hour of faith? The same as Enoch's 300 years of faith. Both men entered into the same joy in the presence of God and all His saints at home and at rest forever. No, salvation isn't fair—it's grace. May it leave you overwhelmed with gratitude.