

God Meets the Need but Not the Greed ~ Matthew 20v1-16

by William MacDonald

William MacDonald explores the parable of the laborers in the vineyard to reveal God's grace and the importance of trusting His goodness over human notions of fairness.

Duration: 39:46

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:16, Matthew 19:27, Matthew 20:1-16, Matthew 20:30

Topics: "Greed"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by referencing a previous interaction between Jesus and a rich man who asked about inheriting eternal life. Jesus tells the man to keep the commandments, but the man proudly claims to have already done so. The speaker then introduces the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew 20:1-16. The parable tells the story of a householder who hires laborers at different times of the day and pays them all the same wage. The speaker emphasizes the compassion of the householder towards the unemployed men and relates it to God's love for humanity.

Transcript

For our Bible study, could we turn please to Matthew chapter 20. And I'd like to read with you the first 16 verses. Matthew chapter 20, verses 1 through 16.

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard and he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace and said unto them, go ye also into the vineyard and whatsoever is right, I will give you. And they went their way.

Again, he went out about the sixth and ninth hour and did likewise. And about the 11th hour, he went out and found others standing idle and sat on to them. Why stand ye here all the day idle? They stand to him because no man has hired him.

He says unto them, go ye also into the vineyard and whatsoever is right that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the Lord, the vineyard set unto his steward, call the laborers and give them their hire beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the 11th hour, they

received every man a penny.

But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more. They likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the good man of the house saying, these last have brought but one hour and thou has made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.

But he answered one of them and said, friend, I do thee no wrong. It's not thou agree with me for a penny. Take that thine is and go thy way.

I will give unto this last, even as unto thee, is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own is thine eye evil because I am good. So the last shall be first and the first last. The final words for many be called, but few chosen should probably be left out of the text at this point.

Many of your Bibles probably indicate that. The verse really closes, so the last shall be first and the first last. Have you ever wondered about this seemingly strange portion of the word of God? As you study this and read it, has the thought flashed across your mind? Well, it does seem a trifle unfair, doesn't it? This man has a vineyard and he needs men to work in the vineyard and he goes out at six o'clock in the morning.

Let's say six o'clock in the morning and he finds some men there. And those men enter into what we might call a labor contract with him. There's a definite agreement between the laborers and the master.

Days work, a penny, a definite agreement. And incidentally, when you read about that penny, don't think that it's just a trifling amount. It was a normal day's wage at that time.

Then the good man goes out at nine o'clock in the morning, let's say three hours later, and he finds some men there and they're unemployed. He says to them, go work in my vineyard and whatever is right, I will give you. Now, there's a big difference between these men that were hired at nine o'clock and those that were hired earlier.

The ones who were hired earlier negotiated the terms of their employment. The ones that were hired at nine o'clock, they didn't do any such a thing. They just went to work and they trusted in the goodness of the owner of the vineyard to give them what was right.

The same thing happened at twelve o'clock and three o'clock and five o'clock. And then at six o'clock, after the five o'clockers had worked a single hour, the owner calls his steward and he says, all right, I want you to pay the men off now. And I want you to begin with the five o'clockers and work back to the three o'clockers, the twelve o'clockers and the nine o'clockers and the six AMers.

And he says, pay the men off and give them all a penny a day. And the men who were hired early in the morning said, what is this? They said, that's the most unfair. Is there any unrighteousness to that? They said, we've borne the burden in heat of the day.

We've been out here toiling all day and these latecomers come one hour and they get the same as us. And sometimes I think that a passage of scripture like this makes some Christians embarrassed over their Bibles. They're perhaps just a bit embarrassed by it and they think maybe if I don't look at that passage too much, it won't bother me.

But actually, this is the inspired word of God and it's beautiful. And the more we study difficult portions of the word of God, the more we extract the sweetest honey from them. And that's the case with a portion of scripture like this.

I have to confess that the human reaction, my human reaction, naturally speaking, is that it really does seem unfair. Those poor fellows hired too early in the morning, long days work, and here people just hired for an hour get the same wage. So let us look at it more closely and see what spiritual lessons the Lord might have for us in it.

In order to do so, you have to go back to the previous chapter. One of the thrills in studying the Bible is to see passages in their setting and to discover the spiritual flow of a passage. It's very important to do this here because in chapter 20, the first verse begins, for, for,

Well, that means that it's connected with what has gone before, doesn't it? The Lord Jesus is going to give an illustration of something that he has already set for the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man. Now, actually, it goes back to verse 16, when a rich man came to the Lord and said, good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life? The Lord said, well, he said, why do you call me good? There's none good, but one that's God. And that was this rich man's great opportunity to say, I know, I know, and you are God.

And that's why I'm calling you good. But he missed his great opportunity. And Jesus said to him, if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.

Well, he just bristled with pride. And he says, thank you very much. He says, that's exactly what I've been doing all my life.

As Jesus recited the commandments to him, he says, all these things have I kept for my youth up. And Jesus said, really, really have you really realized what the law is saying? The law is not only saying, love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, but it's saying, love your neighbor as yourself. And he says, if you feel that you've kept the law blameless, just go tell all that you have and give to the poor.

And the man went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. Now, down to verse 27, right after that, Peter comes to the Lord. And he says, Lord, unlike the rich man, we have forsaken all to follow you.

What are we going to have for it? And that question that Peter asked is the crux of the whole subject that follows. What are we going to have there for? And the Lord Jesus said to him, look, Peter, I don't deny you've forsaken all to follow me. I don't deny that.

I'm not going to quarrel with you over that. But I can guarantee you this. Anybody who's forsaken all to follow me, he's going to be rewarded in this life.

He's going to be rewarded in the life to come. But I want to say something to you, Peter. Watch out for that bargaining spirit that you just manifested.

That question you just asked, what shall we have there for? Watch out for that bargaining spirit, he said, because many that are first shall be last. And the last shall be first. And what Jesus says in chapter 20 verses 1 through 15 is in elaboration and illustration of Jesus' statement, many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first.

You'll notice it at verse 30 of chapter 19 and verse 16 of chapter 20. Verses 1 through 15 of chapter 20 elaborate and illustrate verse 30. Verse 30 of chapter 19.

Let's just read Peter's words and Jesus' answer. Verse 27 of chapter 19, then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all and follow thee. What shall we have? Therefore, Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me in the regeneration, that's the millennium, when Jesus comes back to reign upon the earth, that whole time is spoken of in the scripture as being the regeneration.

In the regeneration, when the son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, he also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses of brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my namesake, shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Then in the verses to follow, the Lord Jesus gives an illustration of some men that bargained with their master at six o'clock in the morning, of other men who made no such a bargain with their master, and the other men came out much better. They were first and the first were last. The last were paid off first purposely so that those who had been first would see them being paid off and would see exactly what they were getting.

Now, let's turn to verse 13 and see how the Lord Jesus handles the complaints of the men that were hired at six o'clock in the morning. He says, Friend, I do thee no wrong, didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Now, one of the first lessons that emerges from this passage of Scripture to my mind is that when we come to the kingdom of heaven, we have to adopt an entirely new method of thinking. When we come to spiritual things, the things of the Lord, we have to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

When we become Christians, we have to adopt completely new thought patterns. And really, what the Lord Jesus is saying is, if you come to this passage of Scripture and it seems unfair and unjust and unrighteous to you, that's because you're not thinking right. Because this is the way God thinks.

And if you want to think right, and if I want to think right, we better start thinking the passage of Scripture. How can that be? Well, that's exactly what we shall see. Exactly what we shall see.

When you come to the kingdom of heaven, we have to start thinking differently from the world. The world has its way of thinking. It has a mold that it wants to pour us into mentally.

And God has another mold, and it's completely opposite. And he wants to pour us into this mold mentally. And the sooner we learn the lesson, the better it's going to be for us.

And naturally speaking, none of us would ever think this way. It's the way God thinks. This is the word of God, just as inspired as John 3, 16 or Romans 10 and 9. That's the first lesson I learned from the passage.

A different way of thinking in the kingdom of heaven. The second lesson I learned is this. If you make a bargain with the Lord, you get exactly what you bargained for.

But if you cast yourself upon the grace of God, you make out a lot better. Those men at six o'clock in the morning made a bargain with the Lord. They got exactly what they bargained for.

And that's what he says to them here in verse 13. Friend, I do thee no wrong. Didst not thou agree with me? They said, we'll work for you all day for a day's wage.

Well, they got a day's wage. What were they complaining about? If you bargain with the Lord, you get exactly what you bargained for. If you cast yourself upon the love, mercy, and grace of the Lord, you'll do far better.

We tell this to the sinner in the preaching of the gospel. People say, all I want is my rights. We say, God forbid.

If you get your rights, you'll be in hell forever. You don't want your rights. You want the grace of God.

Isn't that right? But it's true in Christian service, and that's what this passage has to do with. It has to do with the whole subject of Christian service and the attitude that we adopt in our service for the Lord Jesus Christ. Leave it to him, you'll do much better.

Grace is better than justice, isn't it? You've heard the story of the little girl who went into the candy store with her father, and she was always plaguing him for candy. And this day, he was in an especially good mood, and he yielded to her entreaty, told her she could have a handful of candy. And so she looked over all the bowls, the jars with the candy there, and she finally decided on the jar that she wanted, the candy that she wanted.

And he said, well, just put your hand in, get a handful. And she said, you put your hand in, Daddy. He said, why do you want me to put my hand in? She said, because your hand is bigger than mine.

But she was thinking right. She had her thinking apparatus going well. And that's what these other people during the day thought here.

That's what the nine o'clockers thought. They said, we can trust this master. His hand is bigger than ours.

And we'll just leave it with him. That's what he said. He said, whatsoever is right, I will do it for you.

Take that thine is, and go thy way. I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? The next lesson I learned in this, from the words of the Lord Jesus, is a passage that teaches the sovereignty of the Lord.

The sovereignty of the Lord. The Lord has the right to do whatever he wants with his own. And what he wants will always be honest, always be just, and always be fair.

Can't I do what I will with mine own? God is sovereign. That means that God can do as he pleases. But it also means that what God pleases is always good.

As for God, his way is perfect. People have a lot of trouble with this, with God's sovereignty in salvation. And everywhere we go, and everywhere we travel, the whole subject of election comes up, the subject of predestination comes up, and people just love to bring these subjects up, almost as if they feel that at last they've discovered a chink in God's armor.

And as a result, a lot of people turn away from the teaching of the sovereignty of God. Don't turn away from it. The sovereignty of God is a biblical doctrine.

It's right here in this verse. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? The sovereignty of God is the doctrine that allows God to be God. It's the doctrine that gives God his proper place, and gives man his proper place, too.

And God's proper place is on the throne, and man's proper place is in the dust. God's sovereignty is never manifested in condemning men who ought to be saved, but it is manifested in saving men who ought to be condemned. God's sovereignty is never manifested in condemning men who ought to be saved.

There aren't any such men. But it is manifested in saving men who ought to be condemned. The potter comes into his house, and there's a big lump of clay on the floor, and that lump represents sinful lost humanity.

And the potter could just leave it alone, and it would all perish eternally. Does the potter have the right to come into his own house and stoop down and take a handful of clay and lift it up and fashion a vessel of beauty out of it? Does he have that right? He hasn't condemned any clay. The clay is condemned by itself.

But the potter just comes in and scoops up a handful of clay, and makes a beautiful vessel of it. Does he have that right? He has that right. God fits vessels of mercy, but men fit themselves as vessels to destruction.

God saves men by his matchless grace, but if men are lost, they're lost by their own unbelief and their refusal to trust the sinner's saving. And so this passage teaches us the sovereignty of God. He can do as he wills, but what he wills is always wonderful.

But there's another wonderful thing, and I think we're getting close to the key here. And what insight it gives you into the heart of the Lord here. The lesson is this.

God goes by need and not by greed. God goes by need and not by greed. Let me explain it this way.

The master in the story, he hired those men at six o'clock, and he said, I'll give you a decent day's wage. He went out during the day, and he saw unemployed men. And it doesn't say so, but his heart was moved with compassion toward these men.

Why? Well, because he knew they had wives, a wife and family, children at home. He knew that those families liked to eat three meals a day, let us say. He knew that they liked to go down to the supermarket and buy some groceries and have something in the house.

He knew that. And he knew they didn't have any. Why? Because it says that.

He said to them, why do you stand here idle in the marketplace all day long? What was the answer? They said, we want to work, but nobody has offered us work. Ah, that helps. In other words, these men weren't lazy.

These men wanted employment, but nobody had offered them employment. And he said, I understand. And so when the end of the day came, he gave them what they deserved to get, but he gave them a lot more too.

He gave them enough to go to the supermarket and get some groceries too. Does he have a right to do that? Who can deny him the right to do that? He gave them whatever their wages were, let's say for that last hour that they worked. But he also gave them enough to feed their wife and children.

The lesson? God goes by need and not by greed. And you know, that's a tremendous lesson for us because we become so enmeshed in life as it's lived about us today, that we go by greed and not by need. And we become so brainwashed with the world's way of thinking that we think, well, this is unfair.

It isn't unfair. It's wonderful. It's wonderful to think of a master who so cares for his employees that he's willing to treat them this way.

Let's get more masters like that. It goes by need and not by greed. But we live in a competitive society where really the law of the jungle prevails in many cases.

Modern business is a jungle today. Dog eat dog. And push for the top.

And if somebody gets in your way, so much the worse for them. Is that right? This master wasn't that kind of a man at all. He was motivated by other considerations than the so-called profit motive.

You know, we really think that nothing would ever keep the wheels of industry turning around except the profit motive. But it isn't true. We were in Israel not so long ago.

Do you know there are Jews that go back to Israel all the time? And they go and work on these communal settlements called the kibbutzim, called kibbutzim. And they get their food and clothing and two weeks vacation and work the rest of their lives without a cent of salary. No caring about the profit motive.

All they care is bringing in money for the state of Israel. That's all they care. They're no longer moved by what moves other men.

They found the expulsive power of a new affection. The Lord is telling us, look, think my thoughts after me. This is the way I think.

And I look upon these men and I realize they want to work and they want to feed their families and they haven't had the opportunity. So I'll go beyond what they deserve. And give them what they need.

It's beautiful, isn't it? Beautiful. You say, yes, but what about those men that were, what about those men that were hired at six o'clock? Didn't they have a legitimate complaint? Oh, really, they didn't. Really, they didn't.

They got what they deserved. And not alone that. They should have been glad for the privilege of serving such a wonderful master all day long.

They served him. They had the privilege of serving him a lot longer than the five o'clockers. They should have been proud and glad for such a privilege, because there aren't many masters like that around.

But that's true in the service of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Do you know, there's a question that the Lord asks here in verse 15. It's a wonderful question.

And I think we read the passage quickly and we skip over it and we miss what he said. He says, is thine eye evil because I'm good? He said this to the six AMers. He said, is your eye evil because I'm good? Are you finding fault with me because I want to fill the pantries of these people, these hungry people? Is that what you're doing? And you know, that comes home to me with convicting power.

The very fact that I even admit that this passage of scripture seems unfair and unjust shows that my eye is evil because the master is good. That's what it shows. Isn't that right? It shows that my eye is evil for finding fault with him for being good to people.

Well, there's a tremendous lesson there. Do you know the natural heart hates grace? Really does. That's a strange thing.

If you tell people to work for their salvation and earn their salvation, they'll love you forever. But if you tell them that salvation is a free gift received by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in no other way, they'll think, well, it must be some other way and I'll look for it. They don't want to be shown grace.

The natural heart does not want to be shown grace by God, and it doesn't want to see God showing grace to anybody else either. And Jesus said that to the Pharisees. He said, not only won't you enter yourself, but you don't want to see anybody else entering either.

Is thine eye evil because I'm good? There's no book in all the world that exposes the human heart like the Bible. And this passage of scripture and our reaction to this passage of scripture exposes our hearts to ourselves. One of the reasons I know the Bible is the word of God.

I read a passage of scripture like this, and I say, no man ever wrote this. No man ever wrote this. I see the hand of God in a portion of the word of God like this.

Then you start off to criticize it and look down your theological nose at it, and you end up on your knees worshiping such a Lord. And so when I hear the Lord Jesus saying here, is thine eye evil because I'm good, I have to say, yes, Lord, that's just it. You've caught me.

You've trapped me. I thought it was done just and unfair. And I didn't realize you were just showing grace and kindness to people who didn't deserve it.

It's true, isn't it? Wonderfully true. And it shows the mercenary spirit in us. It shows the mercenary spirit in us.

But we want to get as much as possible for ourselves. Don't worry about anybody else. Isn't that right? I like to tell the story of a little boy named Ernest.

Maybe some of you have heard the story. But Ernest was especially good at the game of marbles. I suppose the boys play marbles here in Australia the way they do in the States.

And this little boy, Ernest, he had a Christian profession. He was a believer. And he had unusual aptitude in winning in marbles.

He could beat all the boys in his neighborhood and take all their marbles away from him. And the other boys didn't like it too much. And they avoided him very studiously because he won all the time.

And one day, a servant of the Lord met Ernest and talked to him about this. And he said to Ernest, he said, He said, well, Ernest, you do win a good many marbles, don't you? And Ernest said, oh, yes, sir, I do. He said, Ernest, do you ever ask the Lord Jesus about this marble playing? He said, yes, I do.

He said, I pray about it all the time. And the servant of the Lord said to him, what do you pray, Ernest? Oh, Ernest, he said, I pray that I may win. The servant of the Lord said to him, Ernest, do you ever pray that

any of the other boys might win? Oh, he said, oh, no, sir.

He said, why not? He said, because I want to win. He said, I want to get all the marbles that I can. And the servant of the Lord said to him, it seems as if some of the other boys might like to win sometimes.

Ernest, are you trying to show Christ to these boys? Ah, yes, sir. He said, I am. He said, I try to witness to these boys.

And the servant of the Lord said to him, what do they say, Ernest? Ernest said, they're not interested at all. The man said to him, why aren't they interested, Ernest? He said, because I've got all their marbles. What is it? Spirit of emulation.

I want all I can get. I don't want anybody else to get it. And the servant of the Lord said to him, well, Ernest, I don't know that I blame the boys too much.

He said, the God you're trying to show them wants you to win all the time, and he doesn't want them ever to win. He said, Ernest, why don't you pray that the other boys might win once at a while? He said, because that's the spirit of Christianity, sharing with others instead of trying to get as much as you can for yourself. Well, you know, I was telling that little story as recently as last Easter time that a man came up to me after the meeting.

His name was Phillips. He said to me, you know that story you told about Ernest? I said, yes. Well, he said, I had a young brother.

He said, when I was a boy, I had a younger brother, age 10, who was just like Ernest. And he said he played marbles and he could beat all the boys in the neighborhood. And he said one day after he had taken all their marbles away from them, he said, my brother said to the boys, do you want your marbles back? And they all agreed that they did.

He said, all right, sit down for just a moment. I have something to tell you. And that little boy, 10 years of age, told them the story of Calvary's love, of someone who loved them so much that he gave himself for them.

And when that little boy had finished, he gave them all back their marbles. And Mr. Phillips said to me, three months later, the Lord called my little brother home to be with himself. And I said, I can't say I much blame him.

I think if I were the Lord, I'd like to have the little fellow with me too. What a practical demonstration of Christianity, winning all the marbles and then using it as an opportunity to show Christ to them in a practical way. And every day in our lives, we have opportunities of doing this too.

In a competitive dog-eat-dog society, we have the privilege of swimming against the tide and showing a Christ who is moved by need and not by greed. Then the Lord Jesus says, so the last shall be first, and the first last. As you know, there's wonderful encouragement and comfort for us in this too.

And I'll tell you why. The apostles, now they came in kind of early in the day, didn't they? They were right there when the foundations were laid, the apostles. And there might be people here in the meeting tonight and they say, what's the use? The apostles, who could ever come up to them? They'll get all the rewards.

Little me, there's nothing left for me. Jesus said, that isn't the way it's going to work. One of those apostles, Peter, showed a bargaining spirit.

What shall we have there for? Jesus said to him, watch out, Peter. You show that bargaining spirit in Christian service and you might find yourself lost in the matter of rewards. And the last first.

You remember, there was a mother who came to the Lord Jesus one day and she said, I have a favor to ask for you. And it was really kind of what we might call a political favor. And he said, what is it? And she said, my two boys, she said.

She said, I would like that one of them should sit on your right hand and one in your left hand when you come in your kingdom. And Jesus turned to those young men and he said, can you drink of the cup that I'm going to drink of? And they said, we're able. And he said, can you be baptized with a baptism that I'm going to be baptized with? They said, we're able.

He said, you shall indeed drink of the cup. And you shall be baptized with a baptism. But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand in the kingdom, that's not for me to give.

It's going to be given to the Father. You see, she thought, because she and her boys were close to Jesus when he was here on earth as a man, that she had a political in with him and that she could come to him and beg this favor and get it, just as people do with politicians today. And Jesus said, it isn't going to be that way in my kingdom.

These places aren't going to be given out as a matter of political preferment. The Father is going to give them out and he has his own basis. For giving them out.

What does that mean? It means somebody in the room tonight could win one of those places. You believe that? That's what it means. You say, oh no, Peter will have one.

No, it doesn't say that. The whole passage was directed against Peter. It means that someone in the meeting tonight, and incidentally, we have arrived kind of late in the day, heaven's way.

If what we see happening in Israel is truly significant, if what we see happening in the European common market is truly significant, if all these things we see happening throughout the world indicate that the coming of the Lord is near, we're really five PMers, aren't we? Never mind. Never mind. Jesus said, the first shall be last, the last first.

It's possible that someone living on the earth today, by a life of dedication to the Lord Jesus, by a life of suffering for him, by a life poured out for him, and a life in which there has been none of the bargaining spirit, but that person could be preferred above even Peter in the coming kingdom. Message of great encouragement for all Christians down through the history of the years. Here we've started with a passage of scripture that on the face of it seems at least difficult, and at times unfair, and yet as we study it carefully, we see an insight into the mind of God and the heartbeat of the Lord Jesus Christ that it makes us bound in worship.

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