

# Ministry of Grace

## Matthew 20

### Preface:

At the end of the previous chapter of Matthew's gospel account we saw that the rich young ruler was unwilling to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. As a result, he went away sorrowful and unfulfilled. If he had done as Jesus told him, it would have required him to trust that God would take care of him. But he was not willing to do that. Jesus' instruction to the young man was his final test to see where his heart really was. Unfortunately, he was more interested in "stuff" than he was in following Jesus. The lesson here is not that we should sell all of our possessions. The lesson is that we should not put our trust in possessions, but in God's provision.

As an object lesson from the rich young ruler's failure, Jesus taught that it is very difficult for rich people to get saved (enter the kingdom of heaven). Then Peter, seeing that the rich young ruler was unable to let go of his "stuff," asked a very pointed question. In effect, he said,

"We were willing to give up creature comforts, our jobs, our families, in fact everything that we had previously relied on. We did so willingly and we have followed you ever since. What are we going to get in return for this?"

In response, Jesus told the disciples that anyone who has forsaken possessions and family for His sake will receive far more in return. The parable that opens this chapter is further teaching about trusting in the goodness of God. Jesus' final comment in chapter 19 was:

But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

In the opening portion of chapter 20, Jesus now elaborates on His comment and shows how important it is to believe in, and trust in God's goodness.

### Laborers in the Vineyard

#### **Matthew 20:1-16**

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup>and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' <sup>5</sup>So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup>They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' <sup>8</sup>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.' <sup>9</sup>And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. <sup>10</sup>Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup>And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of

the house, saying, <sup>12</sup>'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.' <sup>13</sup>But he replied 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 belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first last."

### Notes:

What we often fail to see in this parable is that the first workers the master hired did not go out and work in the field until after they had made a contractual agreement with him. The workday was a twelve hour day beginning at 6:00 in the morning and ending at 6:00 in the evening. These first workers agreed to work twelve hours for a denarius. At 9:00 AM, Noon, and 3:00 PM the master hired additional workers. Finally, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour (5:00 PM) he went out and hired more workers. None of these later workers negotiated for their pay. They were willing to work for "whatever is right." In other words, they believed that the master would do what is right.

The denarius, a day's wage in that time, does not represent salvation. That's not what this parable is all about. We don't work for salvation, it is a free gift. Neither is this parable talking about rewards. Christians will not all receive the same reward. That's what Paul taught the Corinthians:

... and each will receive his wages according to his labor (1Corinthians 3:8).

So, what is this parable about? Let's find out. At the end of the day, the master paid the last ones first, and paid them a denarius. He didn't have to pay them that much, he was being generous. They had only worked for one hour and it was in the late afternoon, after the heat of the day had passed. It is likely that those who worked for twelve hours saw how much the late afternoon workers received and expected to get much more (perhaps twelve times as much), since they had worked twelve times as long.

The next group to get paid, the ones who worked for 3 hours, also each got a denarius. They may have been expecting to get more than the late afternoon workers, but they had agreed to get paid "whatever is right" and they accepted it, trusting that the master would do what is right. The "all day" workers, however, surely noticed that those who worked for three hours got paid a denarius. It's entirely possible that they then re-calculated how much they would get and assumed they would get four times as much, since they had worked four times as long.

Then, the half-day workers got paid and they each received a denarius as well, but they didn't complain because they had agreed to work for "whatever is right." The "all day" workers may have once again recalculated their pay and assumed that it would now only be twice as much. In the end, they "who were first" and "are now last" were expecting to get more than they had agreed for. When they got what their "contract" had called for, they complained and accused the master of being unfair because they had worked through the heat of the day and the "eleventh hour" workers did a lot less and did so in the late afternoon.

His response was that he had paid them exactly what they had agreed to receive. That was perfectly fair. The fact that he had been extremely generous with the "eleventh hour" workers, as well as the others, was none of their business.

So, what does this mean for the disciples (and for us)? This all started when Peter compared himself and the other disciples with the rich young ruler who had refused to give up his riches to follow

Jesus, but the disciples had given up much. Jesus said that they would get their reward and it would be great. The problem is that Peter was comparing his sacrifice and his work to someone else's sacrifice and their work, just like the "all day" workers had done. God is a good and generous master. If we believe this, then we know that He will do, "whatever is right." Hasn't He given us eternal life, which we don't deserve? Hasn't He promised to never leave us nor forsake us? We need to be thankful for what we have received and not compare ourselves with others. Our God is a good master and he will do "whatever is right."

If we believe this and focus on the blessings that God has given us, we will be happy in this life as well as the next. If we focus on what others get and what we expect to get, we will never be happy. This parable is not about wages! It is about our attitude in serving our Master. Some of us, like the rich young ruler, are not willing to make the sacrifice or put in the work to serve our Lord. Though we may be saved, if it is all for us, we won't receive any reward. Others of us want to be the most important and get the biggest paycheck. We will likewise be disappointed at the Bema Seat when Christian rewards are handed out. Still others of us, who are committed to working our hardest to do the will of our Father will receive more than we deserve because we are doing it for His glory and not our own.

### **Jesus 3<sup>rd</sup> Prediction of Death & Resurrection**

#### **Matthew 20:17-19**

**<sup>17</sup>And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, <sup>18</sup>"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death <sup>19</sup>and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."**

**Mark 10:32-34 – <sup>32</sup>And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup>saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. <sup>34</sup>And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."**

#### **Notes:**

This is now the third time that Jesus has told His disciples that he is about to be killed. The first two times were in chapters 16 and 17. He also hinted about it in His response to the Pharisees when they asked Him to give them a sign to prove He was the Messiah (**Matthew 12:40** and again in **Matthew 16:4**). Each of these times, Jesus referred to the sign of Jonah. This time, when he talked about his upcoming death, He shared additional details that He had not previously given. He said,

- the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes
- they will condemn him to death
- they will deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, spit on, and flogged
- He will be crucified,
- and – He will be raised on the third day.

The first time He told them that He was going to Jerusalem to be killed and raised again, Peter rebuked Him. The second time He told them that He would be killed and raised again on the third

day, they were greatly distressed. This time there is no mention of their response. It obviously still did not really sink in, though, because it was right after this that James and John, through their mother, asked to be seated on His right and left in the kingdom.

## **A Mother's Request**

### **Matthew 20:20-28**

<sup>20</sup>Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. <sup>21</sup>And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." <sup>22</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." <sup>23</sup>He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." <sup>24</sup>And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. <sup>25</sup>But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup>even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

**Mark 10:35-45** – <sup>35</sup>And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup>Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" <sup>39</sup>And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." <sup>41</sup>And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. <sup>42</sup>And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup>But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

### **Notes:**

Here's a Bible trivia question for you. What was the name of the mother of James and John? We can deduce this from two parallel passages:

There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (**Matthew 27:55-56**)

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. (**Mark 15:40-41**)

Although this is not conclusive evidence, since there were “many” women according to both Matthew and Luke, it appears that her name was Salome.

Why do you suppose she made this request at this time? In the closing verses of the previous chapter we were told:

Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28)

It appears that James, John, and their mother, Salome all believed what Jesus had said about the thrones. The problem is that they all wanted her boys to have the best seats of the twelve. In reply, Jesus directed his response to James and John, not to Salome. This is indicated by the fact that he used the second person plural form of the verbs “know” and “asking.” If He was simply responding to Salome, He would have used the second person singular form of these verbs. It’s possible that this response was directed at all three of them, but his follow-up question and the conversation that ensued was only between Jesus and the two disciples, so we have to assume that all of His comments were directed only to James and John. He asked them:

Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?

What is the “cup” that Jesus was referring to? The cup is an Old Testament image of a person’s lot in life. But, in the book of Revelation the “cup” is a reference to that which is filled with the wrath of God. Although this may have been a valid metaphor for Jesus, it wasn’t for the two brothers, because Jesus endured the wrath of God to save us from having to endure it. Therefore, it appears that what Jesus was saying is “Are you able to endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel as I will for your sakes? That’s why, when they said that they were able to drink the cup, Jesus said,

...You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father. (Matthew 20:23)

As a result of this discussion, the 10 other disciples were angry at the two brothers. On first glance, it might appear that the other disciples had good reason to be angry. After all, these two had tried to get the best seats in the kingdom. But – what is the real reason they were angry? They were angry because *they* wanted the best seat in the kingdom. This may be why Jesus followed up with his lesson on the importance of being a servant rather than a master.

Jesus told them that the Gentile leaders like to exercise dominion and authority over others. It appears to be a common characteristic of our sin nature (I think John would refer to it as “the pride of life.”) However, the rules of the game in the kingdom will be different. Pay close attention to the lesson Jesus taught. Was He saying that if you want the greatest position in the kingdom (that is, the one with the most power and authority), then you need to take the lowest position now? Perhaps. Or, was He saying that the greatest position in the kingdom IS the servant (the lowest position) and we should be auditioning for that position now? Either way, his message is clear. We need to go against our sin nature tendency to be the richest and most powerful. Instead, we need to seek out opportunities to serve others

There are two words here that we should take note of. The first one, which occurs in **Matthew 20:26**, is “servant.” This is from the Greek word *diakonos* (from which we get our English word Deacon). It refers to “someone who waits on tables,” a “waiter.” An example of this is in Acts chapter 6, when the disciples choose 7 men to “serve tables.” (**Acts 6:2**)

The other word, which occurs in **Matthew 20:27**, is “slave.” This is the Greek word *doulos*, which means, “A slave, one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another, his will being altogether consumed by the will of his master.” This is sometimes translated as a “bond servant.”

We need to learn to be waiters and bond servants. We need to audition for the lowest position.



## Two Blind Men Healed

### **Matthew 20:29-34**

<sup>29</sup>And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. <sup>30</sup>And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" <sup>31</sup>The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" <sup>32</sup>And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" <sup>33</sup>They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." <sup>34</sup>And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

**Mark 10:46-52** – <sup>46</sup>And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup>And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>49</sup>And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." <sup>50</sup>And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." <sup>52</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

**Luke 18:35-43** – <sup>35</sup>As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. <sup>36</sup>And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. <sup>37</sup>They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." <sup>38</sup>And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>39</sup>And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>40</sup>And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, <sup>41</sup>"What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." <sup>42</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." <sup>43</sup>And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

### Notes:

The first thing we have to address here are some apparent discrepancies between what Matthew and Mark say and what Luke says. Matthew says, "as they went out of Jericho" and Mark says, "And as he was leaving Jericho." But Luke says, "As he drew near to Jericho." So, were they just approaching Jericho, or were they leaving Jericho? The answer is ... both! You see, in Jesus day there were actually two different Jerichos. The original Jericho, spoken of in the Old Testament, was a strictly Jewish city which had been rebuilt after Joshua had defeated it. This city was located near the Jordan River. Herod the Great, however, had built a new Jericho, which was a Roman administrative town built west of the original city up against the Judean foothills. Matthew and Mark were apparently referring to the Jewish Jericho and Luke was referring to the Roman Jericho.

A second apparent discrepancy is that Mark and Luke both say that there was one beggar (Mark calls him Bartimaeus), whereas Matthew says that there were two blind men who got healed. This is not a unique occurrence. When we studied Matthew chapter 8, you may recall that we were told that Jesus encountered two demoniacs in the country of the Gadarenes. Mark and Luke only mentioned a single demon possessed man. If we look other places, we will see that it was not uncommon for Matthew to provide additional details beyond what Mark or Luke provide. Therefore, we can assume that there were actually two blind men that Jesus healed near Jericho and one of them was named Bartimaeus. Here Jesus put into practice what He had just taught the disciples. He became a servant to two rejected blind beggars. The crowds around Jesus tried to silence the two men. After all, what claim did they have on the great Teacher? But Jesus had compassion on them and healed them. He was the servant even of beggars.

### So What?

What we get out of a situation or series of events is entirely dependent on what we expect going into that situation. The shrewd businessman in today's world would not think of entering into a business deal without some kind of a contract. That's his guarantee that he will get what he wants out of the

deal. A contract is basically a document that says, “I don’t trust you and I assume that you will take advantage of me if I don’t document everything ahead of time.” It’s not a guarantee that all parties involved will be fair, only that they will abide by the terms of the agreement. It doesn’t guarantee the best outcome for all parties involved. In fact, in many cases it prevents the best outcome because it is entered into without trust. That’s what happened to the “all day” workers in the vineyard. Their assumption before the workday began was that the master would only do what was best for him, not for the workers. As a result, they got only what they deserved. The other workers, however, assumed that the master would do what was right. As a result, they got more than they deserved.

We make a lot of assumptions about God. Some of them are accurate and some are not. For instance, we assume that since God is love (1 John 4:8 and 1 John 4:16) then He will not harm anyone or demonstrate His anger toward mankind. However, if you read through the book of Revelation you see that God will, indeed, pour out His wrath on mankind during the Tribulation. He will cause intense pain and suffering on those who refuse to believe in Him. He is still a God of love, but He is also a God who deserves to be worshipped and obeyed, and He will pour out His wrath on all who refuse to bow before Him.

Another false assumption that we make about God (demonstrated in the parable of the vineyard) is that He is fair. Fairness is “impartial and just treatment or behavior without favoritism or discrimination.” In other words, fairness is “giving everyone what they deserve.” If we stop and think about that, we realize that we really don’t want God to be fair, do we? If He was fair in the way He treats us, then we, being sinful human beings, would get what we deserve (the lake of fire). But, because He is not fair but is also merciful and gracious, He doesn’t give us what we deserve.

We know that God is righteous. He always does what is right. And, as we just said, God is love. The verb that the Apostle John used for “love” in his first letter is *agapaō*. This is a verb of action, not of feeling. We could define it as:

Performing deeds and actions for the purpose of benefiting the object of your love, being more concerned for the welfare of the loved one than yourself.

We need to believe that God is good and He will always do that which will ultimately benefit the object of His love.

Let’s talk about the kingdom of heaven for a minute. It doesn’t matter whether you have been a Christian for 5 days or 50 years, your reward in heaven will not be based on how long you have been saved, but on how faithfully you have served. Are you living your life focused on what you can get out of life, or are you living your life focused on what you can do for others? Are you living for yourself, knowing that you already have your “get out of hell free” card? Or, are you working in the vineyard, doing what He has asked you to do because you know He will reward you with, “whatever is right.”

## **Now What?**

It also doesn’t matter whether you have an “important” position within the body of Christ or a “lowly” position. What matters is where your heart is and “how” you serve. In the kingdom of heaven there will be some nursery workers and church janitors who will get greater rewards than pastors and worship leaders, because they are serving with humility, as a bond servant of the Master.

So, the bottom line is, are you living your life based on a contract with God? Do you have certain expectations based on what you perceive that He has promised you? Or, are you living your life in



gratitude for what He has already done, knowing that He will do “whatever is right” when you appear before Him at the Judgment Seat?

**Let’s pray.**

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