

Vineyard Workers and Trouble with Greatness

Matthew 19:30 – 20:16

Turn to Matthew 18 please. We will end up with the parable of the workers in the vineyard, in Matthew 20, but first we'll look around in Matthew.

Jesus told this parable to his disciples, because his disciples were having greatness troubles. The kind of greatness troubles in which they wanted to be greater than each other in the kingdom, greater than the other disciples, but did not know how to accomplish this.

Matthew 18:1-5. Greatest in the Kingdom. The disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be greatest in the kingdom. That seems a fairly innocent question. But Jesus answer tells us it was not an innocent question: *I tell you disciples the truth, unless you change, and become like little children, you will never even enter the kingdom of heaven!*

There was something bad in their question, something that did not belong in the kingdom. If they did not change what was behind that question, they would not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Children are not innocent now, and were not then. But children were taught to give respect and honour, not to receive it. The disciples want to receive respect and honour from others. That's why they asked about kingdom greatness. That's why Jesus said they must change and be like children, or they would not even enter. Those were their greatness troubles.

Matthew 19:13-15. The Kingdom Belongs to Child-like People. People brought little children to Jesus for him to bless them, but the disciples scolded those people for bringing their little children to Jesus. Jesus said to the disciples: *Let the little children come to me, don't hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*

Children were taught to give respect and honour, and don't bother the important people. THAT'S the kind of people that belong in the kingdom. The meek will inherit the earth.

The disciples had not learned the lesson from Matthew 18. They had not changed, they had not become like little children. They are still wanted to be greater than others. Their society was a shame and honour society, by which we mean EVERYONE competed for honour, that was a normal appetite, but competing for honour did not belong in the kingdom of God, not at all!

Matthew 19:23-25. Rich Man: Obedient and Blessed, but no Kingdom. Right after Jesus blessed the little children, the rich man came to Jesus and asked about eternal life. But he would not sell his possessions and give them to the poor and follow Jesus, so he missed the kingdom.

After he left, Jesus told the disciples how hard it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. He said it twice: it is so difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And the disciples were amazed! The rich man obeyed the commands, and by his wealth he obviously had God's blessing, and everyone honoured and respected this man, but he would not inherit eternal life! And the little children would inherit eternal life! How is this even possible? The disciples were lost.

Matthew 19:30; 20:16. First will be Last, and Last First. At the end of the rich man story, Jesus said this: *But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first*. And then Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard, which we'll get to soon. And after that parable, he says the same thing again: *So the last will be first, and the first will be last*.

He told the parable to the disciples, and the disciples were confused and misguided about greatness in the kingdom. And since Jesus says the first will be last, and the last first, before and after the parable, the parable somehow will teach that first and last in the kingdom are not what we would expect, the parable teaches that first and last are the opposite of what we expect.

Matthew 20:20-28 Can we Sit on Your Right and Left? Shortly after the parable, the mother of James and John asked a favour of Jesus: could her sons sit on his right and his left in the kingdom? Jesus did not answer the mother, he answered James and John, which means they were the ones who had the idea to start with, and Jesus knew it.

Jesus got the twelve together, and says, "You know how the rulers of the pagans lord it over them, and use their authority over them. But it will not be like that with you."

James and John wanted to lord it over the other ten. Jesus told the twelve in the end of ch 19 that the 12 disciples would sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Not enough for James and John. They want to be above the other ten. And the other ten were probably not any better.

"It will not be like that with you. You disciples want to be great in the kingdom? I can work with that. Here's how to be great: be a servant to the other eleven. You want to be the very greatest of the twelve? I can work with that, too: you be a faithful slave to the other eleven. Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

Matthew gives two other signs of the disciples' misunderstanding. One, after Jesus told the vineyard workers parable, but just before James and John want to be on the right and the left, Jesus predicted his death a third time (20:17-19). The Son of Man will be handed over, condemned, mocked, flogged, and crucified. Immediately after this, James and John want to sit on his right and left. Considering what Jesus has just told them, this is totally inappropriate and blind.

Two, right after James and John want to be on the right and left, Jesus heals two blind men (20:19-34). Jesus said to the mother of James and John, "want do you want?" He said the same to the two blind men, "what do you want?" The mother of James and John "wanted" James and John to sit on his right and left. The two blind men "wanted" their eyes to be opened, and when they were healed they followed Jesus. Matthew probably intends us to see this as an improvement on what James and John wanted.

Can you feel the greatness troubles of the disciples? They put down children, and compete with each other for honour. They want to be first, and to lord it over others.

Now you can see why Jesus would say to the disciples, *Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.* And again after our parable, *so the last will be first, and the first will be last.* Greatness in the kingdom won't look how they think it will look.

Now to our parable, Jesus speaking to the disciples.

Matthew 19:30 *But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

A denarius was generally minimum wage for a day labourer. It was the standard amount, and it was not very much. You could not miss many days work, or there would be real hardship. A landowner going out early to hire workers for the day would be a common thing.

³ *About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'* ⁵ *So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'* ⁷ *'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'*

Did you notice a shift the agreement? The owner agreed with the first workers to pay a denarius for the day. That means they said, "you will pay us a denarius at the end of the day, right?" and the owner agreed with them to do that.

The ones hired during the day were a bit more trusting. He said, "I will pay you whatever is right," and that was good enough for them. The last ones hired were not promised anything. He just said, "you also go work in my vineyard," and they went.

⁸ *When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'* ⁹ *The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.*

People sometimes think this parable teaches that everyone receives eternal life, no matter how long they have been a believer in Christ. It is true that everyone receives eternal life, no matter how long they have trusted and followed Christ. True, but it's not what this parable teaches.

The line, *many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first*, does not sound like “everyone gets the same.” “The first will be last” opens and closes the parable, so the parable must teach that line.

The workers did all get a denarius, but the parable is not teaching that everyone gets the same. The parable teaches: *many who are first will be last, and the last first*.

A denarius is not a good symbol for eternal life. It is minimum wage. If the owner had paid them all 100 denarii, THAT would be a good symbol for eternal life. But not just one. If the parable teaches that everyone gets eternal life, those hired first worked long and hard for theirs, and deserved all they got. Doesn't sound like eternal life. People inherit that, or receive it, not earn it.

The owner sets up the workers hired first, by making sure they watch those hired last get a denarius for one hour of work. By making those hired first watch this, their grumbling is almost expected, it is certainly natural.

The owner's answer to the grumblers is the most important part of this parable. The most important part is usually at the end, and here as well. That they are all paid the same happens by the middle of the parable. But the owner, who represents God, has not had his say yet. That's the crucial part of the parable.

¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³ But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Jesus is talking to the disciples here. The disciples were calculating and competing for greatness in the kingdom, for the most honour and wealth in the kingdom. V10 – those hired first expected to receive more. Because they had worked more. They are not being unreasonable. That would be a fairly normal expectation. But Jesus is talking to the disciples here.

By normal standards, then as now, those hired first had reasons to expect more than one denarius, based on what those hired last received. Here's the owner's answer:

'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? When God gives rewards in the kingdom, he will not be unfair. No one will be mistreated, no one will get less than they were promised.

I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

My brothers and sisters, we are now at the core of the parable. When the owner explains his actions, he twice says “I want.” “I do what I want. I want to give those hired last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my money? I was not unfair to anyone. You got what you asked. And after that, I do what I want.”

The disciples were calculating their reward in the kingdom, and competing with each other for honour and wealth. They were like those hired first, thinking about what they would receive. But how can you calculate or compete with each other, when the One handing out the rewards just does what he wants? You can't figure it out, nor can you compete! It will drive you nuts.

What question is this parable answering? This one: “Can believers figure out who will be first and who will be last in the kingdom of God?” That is what Jesus intends the parable to answer, and the answer is one word: “No.” No, believers cannot figure it out. As far as we are concerned, many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

As far as those hired first are concerned, the owner's answer does not satisfy. Why did they who worked more not receive more? He says, “You got what you asked for, I was not unfair to you, and after that, I do what I want.”

The owner's answer does not satisfy, because people who calculate want an equation, they want to know the system, but calculating and competing have become pointless, because there is no system. He just does what he wants! Jesus is trying to steer the disciples off their “how to be greatest in the kingdom” fixation.

Or are you envious because I am generous? What it actually says is, “is your eye evil because I am good?” But in Judaism “evil eye” had to do with wealth, so “envy” is a good translation.

Are you envious because I am generous? Again, Jesus speaking to the disciples. If six of the disciples found out the other six disciples would be honoured above them in the kingdom, would the first six be envious? In their current mood, for sure!

If the twelve found out that other followers of Christ would be honoured above the 12 in the kingdom, would the 12 be envious? In their current mood, for sure! Jesus wants them to leave all that behind.

The first will be last, and the last will be first. There will be rewards and honour in the kingdom, and not all will be treated equally. But we can NOT tell ahead of time, and there will be many surprises. Some standing at the front now, people like me, will be at the back. The first will be last. And some of you who are always at the back will be at the front. Both will surprise us.

Does God reward people? Yes. The parable teaches that God does not reward people in the way we expect. The ones we think will receive the most are not the ones who get the most. The ones we think will get the least are not the ones God rewards the least.

The parable is not about grace and works. Everyone works in this parable. The parable is not about God's great generosity. A denarius is not a high wage. This owner is charitable to those hired last, but overall not a particularly generous man.

The parable focuses on the goodness of the owner, and the envy of those who thought they should get more. The parable focuses on the absence of a clear system in the owner, no system that the workers can understand. The owner is unfair to no one, and after that does what he wants. He does not try to explain himself past that.

Serving God because he will reward us is not a bad motive. Jesus several times encouraged it. He told the 12 how to be great in the kingdom, by serving each other, and he meant it. But figuring out how much reward ahead of time offends God, and especially comparing ourselves to others. Which the disciples were doing.

Can we calculate our rewards ahead of time? No. Can we rank ourselves with each other ahead of time? No. Calculating rewards in comparison with each other is offensive, because we are to serve and help each other, and calculating is also useless, because God has his own ways of deciding these things, and we will all be surprised.

There are people out there, and it looks like they are doing little for the Lord, and it's true, they are doing little for the Lord. But there are others out there who serve the Lord faithfully and wonderfully, but no one knows, and they get no credit here. There are many such people. *Many who are last will be first.* Many who are last here should be encouraged. God is not blind to you.

Let us love God, and love each other. God will honour those who do this, which is good to know. Jesus taught it so we would be encouraged. So be encouraged, and then keep loving God and one another. Amen.