



February 1: The Parable of the Laborers

WEEKLY READING - MATTHEW 18-22

TODAY'S PASSAGE - MATTHEW 20:1-16

MAIN POINT

While we tend to think of love as a transaction, loving those who love us in return, the love of Christ is extravagant and free.

BACKGROUND

The only linguistic link between Matthew 19:16–30 and 20:1–16 is the conjunction “for”, but the passages stand in the closest relation. Peter has asked about rewards and learned that his followers will inherit eternal life and an array of attending rewards. Nonetheless, Jesus warns cryptically, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (19:30). The parable of 20:1–16 explains this statement. Lest anyone miss the point, Jesus closes the parable with roughly the same phrase: “So the last will be first, and the first last.” For the best clues given by Jesus to interpreting His parables look chiefly in 13:18–23 and 13:37–43 where Jesus helps His disciples interpret the parable of the sower. This parable, our parable today, and the other parables of the kingdom, read typically as a low-level allegory, with the main characters representing God, disciples, and other listeners.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Those who think they work hard for God can, like Peter, inquire about rewards, barely suppressing the notion that God owes them something. Jesus says he will reward every sacrifice, both in this life and in the life to come (19:28–30), but an undue interest in rewards is dangerous.

Bernard of Clairvaux said that if we demand a reward to obey God, we love the reward rather than God. “The soul that loves God seeks no other reward than that God whom it loves. Were the soul to demand anything else, then it would certainly love that other thing and not God.” If disciples keep an eye on rewards when they serve, love of God recedes. Then, even if they were first to serve Jesus, they might find themselves last in his kingdom, because love for him has declined as selfish concerns grew (20:16). It is possible—and soul sapping—to forget God’s amazing grace.

Still, questions about God’s fairness linger, since some disciples do bear heavier burdens. The parable gently corrects disciples who question God’s justice. It stresses that no one receives less than he or she deserves—all graciously receive eternal life as a gift or inheritance. If God gives even more to some, who can complain? He has the right to give gifts as he pleases. Are we envious because he is generous?

We expect Pharisees to object to God's mercy. Our parable suggests that we, briefly acting like Pharisees, can balk at God's generosity. If a disciple dwells on labors and rewards, he risks becoming last in the kingdom as he minimizes God's love and grace. Disciples should not serve Jesus for the sake of rewards that we, in our fevered dreams, eventually decide God owes us. Let none think more of rewards for service rendered than of the Jesus whom we serve. In the parable, every worker gets the same payment, one denarius. The denarius, as a living wage, represents eternal life. Believers can rest in that grace.

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
 - 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
 - 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
 - 40 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
 - 5 minutes - Prayer requests
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INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use at least one of these questions to introduce the topic of discussion.

- **What was the hardest job you ever had?**
- **Have you ever had a job you felt like you were paid too little for?**

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - Most of us grew up learning sayings like, "Equal pay for equal work" and "fight for your rights." We live with an inflated sense of our rights as consumers, a trait that is flipped on its head in the kingdom of God. The love of God that is demonstrated in the gospel is based on grace and not on works. Grace puts us in our place of need. Because we are all in great need, we should be glad God is gracious, grateful, and generous.

YEAR OF PRAYER - GROUP PRAYER

PRAY THE FOLLOWING PRAYERS TOGETHER AS A GROUP. HAVE A TIME FOR PEOPLE TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

We begin our time of adoration by acknowledging that you are the God whose right hand is filled with righteousness as we read in Psalm 48:10. Psalm 108:4 reminds us of Your great mercy. We acknowledge that You are the Great I Am and are worthy of all our worship and praise.

Offer your words of worship at this time. (pause)

As we are still in the Father's presence, we are reminded of Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." Father may our hearts be

broken for what breaks Your heart. Forgive us Father when we care more about what the world thinks of us than we care about our relationship with You.

Ask the Holy Spirit to search Your heart and reveal any unconfessed sin, in the quiet of this moment. (pause)

Father, we ask for a growing desire and ability to live out Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight. We come seeking Your divine direction. Guide our thoughts this morning and open our hearts and minds to all You desire to teach us. May Your wisdom lead us in all that we do as we grow in our understanding of how You would have us to advance Your kingdom.

John 3:36 reminds us that "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

Together take a moment pray for those on your heart that have yet to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and for missionaries you know working to make His name known to the nations. (pause)

Father, we ask for Your wisdom in all our decisions. May we make choices that bring You honor, allowing others to see Jesus in us. Guide us with Your Spirit so that we may act with discernment and integrity. Thank you, Father God, for your promise in Matthew 18:20 that reminds us that where two or three gather in the Father's name, He is with us." May we take time everyday to count our blessings – from the very air we breathe, to the restorative sleep at night, for bringing us together to support and uplift one another. May our collective thankfulness strengthen our bonds. We offer these words with grateful hearts in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Matthew 20 directly follows the story of the rich young ruler, who asked what a person must do to have eternal life. After Jesus detailed a series of commands that the young ruler said he had accomplished, Jesus had just one more call: "sell what you possess and give it to the poor." The rich young ruler left dismayed because of his wealth. The disciples, looking for commendation for their faithfulness, asked what they would receive. The parable addresses this very question.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 20:1-9 (COMMENTARY BELOW)

- **20:1-7.** The kingdom of heaven is not like a man, but like the story that is being told. The master is implied to be Jesus, and the vineyard is implied as the kingdom. Everything in the story starts out in a straightforward manner, master hires workers in the early morning and agrees to pay them one denarius, a typical daily wage. Around the third hour when the master noticed that others were idle in the market, he hired them and offered to pay what was just, implying that they would receive a proportionate pay to the hours they worked. At the sixth and ninth hours, the master again hired more workers, with the same promise of just payment for work. The master again goes to the market at the eleventh hour, and asks why workers are standing around. The master again invites them to go and work in the vineyard.

Put yourself in the place of one of the workers hired early in the day. How would you have felt throughout the day as new workers continued to arrive?

Put yourself in the place of one hired at the close of the day. How would you have felt?

Do you think we have an overinflated sense of the need for fairness in our culture? Where do you see it?

How might that impact our relationship with God? How about our relationship with others?

The first group of workers probably watched each group arrive, growing more surprised by the master's hiring patterns as the day progressed. They likely wondered what each group would receive as compensation for their work. The last workers to arrive, grateful for the work, must have seen the early workers as tired and burdened men who had served well all day.

Why is it important for us to see that the focus in this parable is on the employer, not the employees?

What do we learn about the love of God from this parable?

Though they worked different amounts of time, the one thing all these workers had in common was that the master did not have to hire any of them. Similarly, God isn't bound to invite anyone to be a part of His kingdom. He does so because He wants to. That invitation is purely out of grace, apart from whatever we think we deserve.

In what ways might we be tempted to think that we deserve to be a part of God's kingdom? What happens to our relationship with God and others when we do so?

What are some ways you might continually bring to mind your dependence on God's grace?

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 20:10-16 (COMMENTARY BELOW)

- **20:8-12.** The custom was that workers would be paid in the evening. The master instructs the "foreman" to pay them beginning with the last and going to the first. The last were not just paid first but given payment for a full day of work, a denarius. The first group saw this and expected that they would receive more than the late groups, but when they were paid they only received a denarius. The complaint from the first workers is that the master had made the last "equal to us." There was no difference between those working one hour and those who worked the whole day. From their point of view this was a great injustice.
- **20:13-16.** The master responds to one of the complainers, addressing him as "friend." The master's answer has two arguments. First, because the master had held up to the original agreement, no real injustice had been done to the workers. Second, it was the desire of the master to treat the last ones as he had treated those who worked all day. The verbs "wish" and "give" in the second statement convey the idea of grace. The last did not deserve what they were given, but they received it based on the desire of the master of the vineyard. Jesus' point is that the last will be shown grace and the first will receive their reward in time and in the justice of God.

Instead of marveling at the generosity of the master, the workers were too busy looking at each other to notice. When we start coveting the gifts God gives to others, we start complaining. Instead of being grateful for what God has given us, we start grumbling about what God has given someone else.

Why didn't the workers in this parable appreciate the generosity of their employer? Where was their focus?

Why is it tempting to compare what we get from God with what some else gets? What happens when we do?

Why might it be dangerous to demand that God give us what we deserve? How does such a demand demonstrate that we have misunderstood God's love?

If God gave us what we deserve, He would punish us for our sins. Then, we would be cut off from a relationship with Him; “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Anytime we think we are not getting something that we deserve, we should remember that we deserve to pay the penalty for our sins, and yet, God demonstrated His love for us by sending Jesus to die for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). God’s love is most profoundly displayed in the grace He offers us through the death of His Son. That grace should radically change the way we love others.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

When is a moment this past week when you have slipped into thinking that God owes you something? How might you remind yourself that God doesn’t owe you anything?

How can we as a group help each other remember that God’s love is free? How might we demonstrate God’s grace to one another?

What does the generosity of the master teach us about the love of God? Why is it important for us to focus on loving God as we serve others?

OPTIONAL GROUP ACTIVITY

Activity: “From Resource to Gift”

Goal: Help participants identify what they have, release control, and take one concrete step toward generosity.

Step 1: Reframe Generosity (1 minute)

Begin with a short statement: “Generosity is about intentionally using what God has entrusted to us for the good of others.”

Briefly name examples: money, time, skills, attention, encouragement, hospitality, resources.

Step 2: Inventory Exercise (3 minutes)

Ask group to quietly list (mentally or on paper) 3 things they have in abundance right now.

Prompt them with categories:

- Time or flexibility
- Skills or experience
- Financial margin or possessions
- Influence or access
- Emotional energy or encouragement

Emphasize honesty rather than comparison.

Step 3: Group Sharing (3 minutes)

Invite people to share one item from their list with the group or in pairs. Then ask:

- Which of these is easiest to give?

- Which feels most costly—and why?

Let conversation flow naturally.

Step 4: Turn It Into Action (2 minutes)

Ask everyone to complete this sentence: “This week, I will practice generosity by ____.”

Encourage actions that are:

- Specific
- Small enough to actually do
- Directed toward a real person or need

Examples:

- “Invite someone to a meal”
- “Send an encouraging message”
- “Give tithes and offerings”
- “Offer help without being asked”

Step 5: Accountability Moment (1 minute)

Invite everyone to share their action with one other person or the whole group and encourage the group to check in on one another (be the first to do this as the leader).

Close with this reminder: “Generosity grows when we practice it, not when we perfect it.”

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -

Closing Prayer Prompts: Thank God for His grace. Ask Him to remind you of your great need for Him and to help you celebrate His grace in the way you relate to Him and to others. Pray that God would

help you to grow to love others less like the world loves and more like Christ loves.