

Matthew 20:1-16

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[0 : 00] So Matthew 20, starting a new chapter. Do you realise we might finish Matthew this year? We'll see. I'm not going to promise. Matthew chapter 20. So prior to what we're going to read this morning, we're going to read the first 16 verses, I believe. Yes, the first 16 verses.

But before we read this, let's just remind ourselves that in the last session, we dealt with obviously chapter 19. And the last part of chapter 19 was about the account of the rich young ruler. And if we recall, everything that Jesus said to this guy challenged his heart.

But he was he was saying, what good thing can I do to give me eternal life? And the answer by a circuitous route, but the answer Jesus brought into was there is nothing good enough.

For you to simply inherit eternal life, there is nothing good enough. God is so good that everything else pales into insignificance beside him. So there is nothing you can do, nothing you can be that's good enough.

Therefore, the only way you can get into heaven is because of a gift. It's either gifted to us or we don't get it. And so there was this exhortation. In the previous chapters, there has been this exhortation, come like a child. And that is going to be reiterated again and again, because that's what Jesus requires of us is to be childlike in our approach.

[1 : 38] So that chapter ended with the realization that salvation is impossible by human effort. And that should give us much comfort because you can't work harder to get there.

You you're not being graded on how much you've done, which is particularly important to get the right mindset for what we're going to study this morning. But one of the things Jesus said at the end of chapter 19, if you look at verse 30 in chapter 19, he says, But many who are first will be last and last first. And it's not the first time he said that.

But he seems to if you remember, he washed the disciples feet to try to show them that if you wanted to be anything in the kingdom of heaven, you had to be prepared to take on the worst jobs that the most menial servant would do.

It wasn't a matter in the world. We have ambition, do we not? And we're encouraged to have ambition to go and excel in your profession and reach higher heights.

And if you've if you've been through the if you've been through the mill at school of career advice, if you simply want to be a dustman or something like that, you're encouraged.

[2 : 52] No, no. Set your sights higher. Don't do what you want to do. Do what will get you accolades. Do what will get you recognized. Whereas Jesus says the opposite. He says, do what needs to be done.

Do what will bless others and do what will bless the Lord, regardless of how menial it is. I will say, and I know I'm putting my own head on the chopping block when I say this, but nobody should stand and do this job if they're not prepared to clean the toilets or the basic stuff.

It's not a matter of position. All of our position is the same. In Latin, the phrase used is *primus inter paris*, first among equals. We're all equals in the sight of God.

But the disciples had already they'd already displayed their attitude to this whole thing. In Mark 9, verse 33, they were discussing which of them was the greatest.

And Jesus interrupts their discussion. And, you know, what are you talking about? Oh, nothing, nothing. We were just talking about who's going to be the greatest among us. So there was this craving for status, which they obviously lost after the resurrection because they became people who would give their lives for their faith.

[4 : 11] And they weren't trying to achieve status. They were trying to make Jesus achieve status. And if you go back to the talk, the speaking of John the Baptist, that's what John the Baptist did.

He said, I must decrease so that he can increase. So always in John the Baptist view was elevate Messiah and demote yourself.

Of course, these disciples at this point in their lives are still looking for promotion, not demotion. So they've already shown this ambition to be the greatest.

And then Jesus has taken them through several lessons over the last couple of chapters that challenge the heart. Where really is your heart? And it continues with chapter 20.

He embarks in chapter 20 on a parable. And it reads like this. We're going to read verses 1 to 16. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers in his vineyard.

[5 : 15] When he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius for the day, he sent them out into the vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

And to those he said, you also go into the vineyard and whatever is right, I will give you. And so they went. Again, he went out at about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing.

And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing around. And he said to them, why have you been standing around here idle all day long? They said to him, because no one hired us.

He said to them, you go into the vineyard too. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.

When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

[6 : 29] When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, these last men have worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.

But he answers and said to one of them, friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go. But I wish to give to this last man the same as you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious? Some of your versions will say, is your eye evil? We'll look at that in a moment.

Because I am generous. So the last shall be first and the first shall be last. So note that this statement, the last first and the first last bookends this passage.

You've got it as the last verse of the previous chapter and then the last verse of this section. So it's bookended by this expectation we should have that the first will be last and the last will be first.

[7 : 33] Which kind of seems unfair. But then life isn't designed to be fair. It's designed to be. If you think about yourself and the sin from which you've been forgiven and whatever kind of a reprobate you might have been up to this point.

Do you want what's fair? Not really. I'm already know that I'm getting what's not at all fair. It's far, far more than I deserve.

And therefore, I shouldn't be concerned if other people get more than me. Because actually, whatever I get, I didn't deserve. Do you see where the thinking is being placed here?

So it's a parable. The previous passage was not a parable. It was an account of a rich young man who approached Jesus and said, what can I do to be saved effectively?

And Jesus said, there's nothing you can do. You need to be saved. You need to be rescued. But that wasn't a parable. That was an account of a factual series of events.

[8 : 44] This is a parable. A parable is a relatable but fictional story that illustrates a spiritual truth. So God is trying to convey a message.

And in the very first verse, what we read is, for the kingdom of heaven is like. So the purpose of the parable is to reveal what the kingdom of heaven is like. Now, that could apply to all sorts of things, couldn't it?

And I've already realized my notes are inadequate here. So when I get lost in a moment, you can laugh at me as you often do. But it could apply to the here and now.

Are we living like kingdom people? Or does it apply to heaven itself? Well, it does say the kingdom of heaven. So it does apply to heaven itself. Are we in the kingdom of heaven?

Yes. But no. Yes, because we're saved. But no, because it hasn't happened yet. And so the kingdom of heaven is not available to us in all its fullness yet. So we've still got that to experience.

[9 : 50] So we're kind of applying something that's for the kingdom of heaven to our lives now, but also to heaven when we get there. And it particularly relates to heaven when we get there, because it's talking about judgment day and it's talking about rewards.

We'll come to that. But it's, you know, what do you what? What is the wage that you're going to get for whatever you've done is what's being spoken of here. And so to explain what the kingdom of heaven is like, he goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for the vineyard.

So if we think that the landowner is God, he's going out into the marketplace to get people who will work for him. And he's saying this parable to his disciples, who are the first ones he went into the marketplace and got.

So it applies directly to the disciples. And it's a picture. It's a metaphor for for God and his and his attitude to his disciples.

Parables do have two purposes. As I said, one is to convey a spiritual truth through a fictional story. But the other is to illustrate something for believers that unbelievers won't get is to conceal something from unbelievers and reveal it to believers.

[11 : 15] Hence, as you read this, you realize that after he'd spoken this parable, they had to privately ask him what it was all about later on. Well, this parable is only recorded in Matthew's gospel.

So what we've just read is to tell us what we would find in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven rather than the worldly kingdoms we are used to.

These disciples were undoubtedly going to have a massive impact on the world. And they were all going to die for their faith, with the exception of John, who they tried to kill but failed.

So all of them faced death for their faith. And of course, they changed the world. When they took the gospel to the world, it says they turned the world upside down.

So these first workers were going to do probably more than any other workers that have lived since. And one of the things that provoked this parable, if we go back to chapter 19, verse 27, the previous account in chapter 18 of the rich young man, the rich young man was told, if you want to get into the kingdom of heaven, one of the things you can do is give up all your stuff, all that stuff you rely on.

[12 : 40] Stop relying on that and rely on God and give it up. The Lord said in verse 23, truly, I say to you, it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. You then get this analogy with trying to pass a camel through the eye of a needle.

It's that hard. And the disciples, in verse 25, the disciples are saying, firstly, well, who can be saved then? And Jesus says, with people it's impossible, but with God nothing's impossible.

So he's told this rich young man in their presence, give up your stuff. And the disciples then in verse 27 say, or Peter says on their behalf, behold, we have left everything and followed you.

What then will there be for us? All right. You've told him to give up all his stuff to enter the kingdom of heaven. We've done that. So what can we expect? And that's what provokes this parable.

They want to know what they can expect. And they are those first workers who the Lord sought early in the morning. And they're the first ones on the scene and the ones who are going to work the longest and the hardest.

[13 : 50] And of course, just to remind us, they had already had that discussion. Which of us is going to be the greatest? So we've given up everything to follow you.

So what did we get? Now, a while ago, I was a boss of a fairly sizable team of people.

And if any of them got wind of the fact that someone else was getting more than they were getting, it created such a furore. They'd all signed a contract to say they were happy to accept the conditions of work they were offered.

And they came to work with light heart. And I've got a job. And, you know, good job, good benefits. Hopefully good boss. And then they discovered that there were people being paid more than them. Or sometimes they discovered that someone else's job was a more valuable job than theirs. And they wanted parity. And you then have to enter into all these discussions about length of service, about this job is more skilled than that, about the market rate for that job being a better market rate than your job.

[15 : 03] You get into all this minutiae because they're suddenly disenchanted with working conditions that they were perfectly happy with last week. And so what Jesus is then going to encourage through this parable is to take a different view of these things.

And you will note that he says in verse 2, When he agreed with the labourers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.

Have you got the picture of a denarius? All right. So this is the head and the tail of a denarius coin. So you'll see the Bible refers to the plural is denarii.

If you've got more than one, that's denarii. And a denarius singular is one coin like this. And that coin was a day's wage.

But it wasn't everybody's day's wage. It was a good day's wage. In fact, they used to pay Roman centurions one denarius per day. So they were among the more highly paid of people around that time.

[16:16] So it wasn't a small fortune. You weren't going to get rich on it. But it was a good, solid day's wage worth working for and would provide for you. And so in the parable, the landowner, metaphorically God, had agreed some conditions of work.

And one of those conditions was for your day's work, you get a denarius. So let's read down through. Yeah. So we're at the end of verse two.

So in verse three, you've got something slightly different happening. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. And to those, he said, you also go into the vineyard and whatever is right, I will give you.

So they went. And notice there was no commitment here to a denarius. It was just, we'll give you what's right. And then he does what in today's society is a strange thing.

Because he goes and he goes back out again. Now, just to give you an indication of you may already know this, but they would normally start the working day at around about six o'clock or dawn whenever that, but it was first light, they would start work.

[17:33] And then in equatorial, in the equatorial world, that's normally about six and dusk is about six. You've got this 12 hour window roughly. So the first hour was six o'clock.

So he went back out on the third hour, which would be about nine o'clock to us. And then we read again in verse five, he went out about the sixth hour, which would be noon.

And the ninth hour, which would be three o'clock in the afternoon. And he's still gathering people to work in the vineyard. And then most strangely, he went out at the 11th hour. And by the way, that saying that we have, you know, it all happened in the 11th hour or we're in the 11th hour or whatever.

That saying comes from this scripture. But why would you go out and get labourers when there's only an hour's work left in the day? They're not going to produce much fruit.

But that's what this landowner does. He's still reaping his labourers right up to the 11th hour. And I emphasise that because historically and politically, I think we're in the 11th hour.

[18:49] But that's another study. So he's done this. And then in verse seven, they said, well, nobody's hired us yet.

And he said, well, I'm hiring you. Come and work in my vineyard for one hour. So I don't know what kind of remuneration they were expecting because they've been told whatever is right, I will give you.

Whatever is right, I will give you. Now, our thinking would be if a day's wage is a denarius, then if we did half a day's work, we would get something worth half a denarius.

And if we only did the 11th hour out of 12, we would get one twelfth of a denarius as the reward. But this was a menial job.

Picking grapes is a menial job. It's not skilled. You don't need an ology to pick grapes. So likely it's likely that a normal day's wage for a grape picker would not be a denarius.

[19:51] So they were being comparatively well paid if they worked the whole day. Someone who worked just one hour of those 12 hours would probably get next to nothing.

And you'd have to be pretty desperate, would you not? To go and, you know, whatever I can get. You'd have to be pretty much in need. So this landowner then says in verse 8, When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group first.

So you've got guys who've been out there all day and you've got some have been there two thirds of the day and half the day and the last hour. And he's paying the ones who've done the least first. Now, again, you can imagine noses being out of joint. I've been here all day. Just give me my money and let me go home. But he's paying the ones that arrived last first.

And not only that, he's paying them a whole day's wage. I'm glad I didn't have to do that when I was a boss. Because it would. So you've got this payment taking place in front of all the others.

[21 : 08] Which I think is important. You see, I don't know when we get to heaven. I mean, various people have different amounts of fruit from their labours.

If one has the right attitude and somebody that I was. I hesitate to use these terms, but for want of a better way of being understood, someone I led to Christ.

Now, actually, I don't know whether you ever lead anyone to Christ. What you do is you present them with Christ and the Lord draws them. So we don't get the glory for leading people to Christ.

But however, the fact that they are Christians is part of the fruit of our labours. So when God hands out rewards and he hands them out to them first, I get to see their rewards.

And their rewards may well be as great as mine or even greater than mine. But I get to applaud. I get to say, go for it.

[22 : 12] It's so great that you've got this amazing reward. Unless my attitude is tainted where I think, well, I didn't get a reward like that. Do you see what's being attacked here?

The worldly thinking of expecting bigger rewards because you've been in the game longer. Preach more sermons. Clean more toilets.

Whatever the thing is that you do, I've done more than them. I should get more. Now, that's exactly what comes next, isn't it? Verse 9. When those hired at about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

When those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner saying, These last men have worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the scorching heat of the day.

Now, the one that we should emulate in all things is Jesus. I think you'd agree with that. Jesus came, took the whole burden of sin and died for everyone.

[23 : 25] So any of us who have just done a bit of work in the vineyard, we don't deserve anything and we should expect nothing. And therefore, we have two things to enjoy when we get to heaven.

One is the reward for what we did. Which, according to this parable, will be whatever is right. So we'll have nothing to moan about. So it'll be whatever is right.

And it will also be whatever he wants to give. And above and beyond that, it will be generous to those who may not have been around as long or done as much.

Because to give someone who's only done an hour's work or four days pay is really generous. And instead of being miffed because God is generous to someone else, we should be rejoicing and applauding because part of the fruit of our labour is the fact that they're there at all.

Now, in the carnal mind, it would evoke jealousy. And this landowner, and he's doing it in parabolic form, it's a parable. So he's not referring to an actual set of events with actual people involved, but he's referring to the mindset that the disciples have, which is, which of us is going to be greatest?

[24 : 53] Can I sit on your right hand and can I sit at your left? And all of this. And what he says is, you're all going to get a denarius. You're all going to get what's right.

The one thing is, nobody had anything to moan about. And I think the thing we mustn't forget is the generosity. There won't be one of us who, entering heaven, will be able to moan about our lot.

So this thinking of, well, I've worked longer and I suffered the heat of the day, so I deserve more, is carnal thinking. And Jesus, Jesus' motivation for this, as we read towards the end of the chapter, verse 14.

Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?

So first of all, we have to consider ourselves as his own. We're not just a faceless mass of workers in the vineyard.

[26 : 05] We are his own. So is it not okay for me to do what I want with my own? And those of us who've got children will be aware of those times when children, it's not fair, I didn't get one of those.

Yeah, but I still love you just as much as I love them. And so it comes back to being childlike and the child, not childlike, but childish, the childishness being addressed by the parent and saying, you needn't worry about what you're going to get.

You will get what is right. And we know from the people who only worked an hour and still got a full day's pay, that what is right will be generous.

So the message is stop worrying about it. Now, is your eye evil because I choose to be good?
Verse 15.

Is your eye envious or evil? Or the word is *poneros*, which means full of vice or sinful. And in this context, definitely means envious. Why are you envious?

[27 : 15] Do you know jealousy and envy is so destructive, so destructive. A couple of times in my life, I've had friendships taken to the very brink of disaster by jealousy.

I don't know why I'm not claiming any super spiritual lead on anybody else in this regard. But I've always been able to rejoice when someone else gets blessed. Envy is so destructive.

It makes person bitter. And when the person becomes bitter, the root of bitterness can grow up within them. And the Bible says a root of bitterness defiles us.

And when the temple was defiled, God couldn't live there. So it's so important to avoid this envy. So this all throws up a question that I want to at least partly address.

Because we've just read this kind of equality of rewards. And then we read elsewhere in the scripture things that might lead us to believe that this equality is not actually true.

[28 : 21] So for instance, if we think in 2 Timothy, turn to 2 Timothy and we'll find the 5.

I believe it's in 5. 2 Timothy 5. Except there's only 4, so it can't be that. Now it's the one where Paul says that he's run the race.

Chapter 4. Sorry? Yes. So Paul at this point is facing death. He's been imprisoned.

After he's written this, I'm not sure exactly how long after he's written this, but he was beheaded. So he knows his life is short-lived from here on. And he says in verse 6, For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. In future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day.

[29 : 27] And not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing. So there's a tendency to think, this is the Apostle Paul. So his crown is bound to be a lot bigger and a lot better than all the rest of us who came into the game late.

But what Paul himself says is, this crown is laid up for me, and not only for me, but there's a different more menial crown laid up for everybody else. No, he doesn't say that.

He says, there's a crown of righteousness put aside for me and for everyone else that's loved his appearing. So the denarius that we've read about in the parable is a sort of poor representation of the crown that Paul speaks of.

And the joy that we get with, if our attitude is right, is that we will see those who we had a hand in leading to Christ and there may be help to disciple them and maybe did some menial grape picking kind of work on God's behalf.

We will see them crowned because the last is going to come first and the first is going to come last. So we will see them and we'll see the fruit.

[30 : 46] And that blesses the socks off me. Turn to James chapter one. James is a bit near a revelation. And the key verse is verse 12, which says, Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him.

So there's a crown of life for those who suffer persecution. And when you think persecution often leads to death, the promise is that's not where it ends.

It ends in life because there's a crown of life waiting for you. Now, salvation, we've discussed this before. Salvation is not a reward.

It's not a wage. Salvation is a gift. You get that from Ephesians chapter two and verse eight. It's not a work so that none of us can boast.

Salvation is not a work because if it was, we could boast about it. It's a gift. It's given to us as a complete package, which includes the denarius from the parable, includes these crowns that we're talking about.

[32 : 01] Now, whether some will have more crowns than others, I don't know. We only have the crowns to throw at the feet of Jesus anyway as an act of worship. But no one gets overlooked.

And it isn't based on, well, you did three more miracles than he did or you did, you know, you took food passers around to the poor more than he did. It's not based on any of that.

We do those things because we love Jesus and for no other reason. We don't do it to earn brownie points. But brownie points will be awarded. And it seems generously, regardless of how much or little we got to do.

So if we and I recommend you read the whole of chapter one of James, but I won't do it this morning just for the sake of time. Go to Second Corinthians, chapter five.

And we're going to read verses one to ten. And what this passage is about is it kind of tells us what awaits us.

[32 : 59] Having become workers in the vineyard. Just before we read this, an analogy comes to mind. You know, if we had a long jump race or long jump competition off the end of Brighton Pier, the idea being to see who could get closest to France with their jump.

Right. So you've got, I don't know, 30, 35 miles at that point or something like that. The best performer wouldn't be that much nearer France than the worst.

And I think it gives me a perspective in that however much I think I've done, the people who came in late aren't going to be that far behind me. And the people who started before me aren't going to be that far ahead of me.

In the great scheme of things, it's all worth a denarius. Do you see what I mean? It's the difference when you view it from an eternal perspective and you take into account the population of the whole earth.

The difference is piffingly small. So we shouldn't be arguing over things that are piffingly small. We should be saying, yes, go for it. I'm so glad you got your crown.

[34 : 10] Second Corinthians five. Verses one to 10. For we know that if the earthly tent, which is our house, which is talking about our body, the earthly tent, which is our house is torn down.

We have a building from God, a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens. For indeed, in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.

Inasmuch as having put it on, we will not be found naked. Does that not make you, does it not give you a poke in the heart? That without what God has clothed me with, I will be found naked.

Inasmuch as we having put it on, we will not be found naked. For indeed, while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

Now that gives you a contrast there that says that this mortal is not life. We strive so hard to maintain this life and we want to live long and we want to prosper in this life.

[35 : 29] But this life isn't even life. According to this, it's swallowed up by life when we get to heaven. Don't you love that? Now he who prepared us for this very purpose is God who gave to us the spirit as a pledge, a promise.

Therefore, being always of good courage and knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight.

See, it's strange, isn't it? We claim to be in the presence of the Lord, but he's present by his spirit. He poured out his Holy Spirit upon us when we got saved.

So there's a degree to which we are with him. But there's also a degree to which we're not yet with him because that happens in heaven. Where we have close fellowship with him.

So verse 7, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

[36 : 37] So there should be a craving in our hearts. I know there's one in mine. There should be a craving in our hearts to be absent from all this and be with him.

And I don't care if I don't even get a denarius. I just want to be with him. Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to him.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may be recompensed. And that word recompensed refers to a wage. It's a word that means to be paid a wage.

May be recompensed for his deeds in the body according to what he has done, whether good or bad. There's a recompense for works. And we'll have no cause to be jealous of another person's works.

But he will give us what is right. Turn to Revelation 22 and verse 12. This is what Jesus had John write down to describe this time of coming judgment.

[37 : 49] Revelation 22 and verse 12. Jesus said this to John who wrote it down. Behold, I am coming quickly and my reward is with me to tender to every man according to what he has done.

I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. So I am coming quickly to render to every man according to what he has done.

That rendering is speaking of a wage paid. It's the point at which Jesus gives us what is right. And if we had time to do a more detailed study, what we would realise is that when believers are judged for their works, some believers' works will result in crowns and other believers' works will simply be consumed.

And there'll be nothing. You'll be in heaven, possibly with the seat of your pants on fire because you got in by the skin of your teeth. But you'll be in heaven and there won't be a crown.

But you'll still be in heaven. Colossians 3.24 says, Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward or wage.

[39 : 12] I think I need to stop there and say, Lord, thank you so much that you portray to us a different kind of thinking. We have over our lives become so trapped in carnal thinking.

Sometimes in order to survive, sometimes just in order to get a wage we can feed our families on, sometimes out of pure greed. But we've been led by the world to be ambitious sometimes for the wrong things.

Father, put into our hearts kingdom thinking, please. Where we will rejoice for all of those who get saved and whatever they do, that instead of comparing ourselves to them, we will rejoice in their achievements.

And on that day, be cheering and clapping with the rest. As you hand out your rewards.

Father, thank you so much that your word gives us comfort and direction in these matters. In Jesus' name. Amen.