

Matthew 20:1-16 “That unfair boss”

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So 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.’

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. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When 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? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

Many call this text an 11th hour parable.

“It’s never too late to repent and get right with God,” they say.

The thought that God readily forgives consoles me, but I don’t think Jesus told this parable to teach deathbed conversions.

It’s a dangerous to assume we can put God off till the last moment.

Jesus told this story for a reason, but not to comfort us about last-minute confessions.

This parable teaches a more important truth.

Matthew 20 centers on day laborers.

Jesus compared His Kingdom to a landowner, who hired temporary workers for his vineyard.



He went to the marketplace (agora) early in the morning to find laborers.

He found several workers, talked with them, and agreed to pay them a denarius apiece.¹

He did not bargain or haggle with the guys.

The word *agreed* translates the term from which *symphony* comes; a denarius made “music to the ears” of all parties’

A Roman denarius was a good day’s wage then.



A circumstance in LA, when we lived there, was similar to this setting.

About a mile south of our house, workers gathered each morning (at La Brea & Pico).

LA contractors and homeowners would go to that intersection and hire day-laborers to paint and do other day jobs.

In Jesus’ parable, the landowner went back throughout the day to hire additional workers.

Some stood idle all day because no one hired them.

The traditional quitting time was six PM, but the owner hired some guys at five, only an hour prior.

At day’s end, the owner paid all the workers in reverse order of the time he hired them.

All received a full day’s wage.

The workers who started at 6 AM got the same pay as the ones who began at 5 PM.

Can you imagine the profanity that evening?

The owner paid them the agreed upon wage, but early workers were miffed.

I’ve “blown gaskets” at lesser felt offenses.

Looking at it from a wider perspective, you have to admire the land-owner’s generosity.

He apparently thought of the families in the workers’ homes that needed food and clothing and generously shared with those families.

Recall: that AM, the early guys hummed a happy tune thinking of the pay they’d get at day’s end.

Except their resentment, nothing changed for them.

The message of this parable escapes most folks.

It’s not easy to understand, but it’s vital.

It’s a diamond worth digging to find.

What makes it difficult?

It’s hard partly because the Bible is separated into chapters and verses.

The original writers didn’t make those notations.

Chapters and verses came centuries later.

Those who put in the chapter and verse divisions often disregarded the context.

¹ The denarius originally as a silver coin (268 BC) weighed 1/72 of a Roman pound. From 241 until Nero’s time 1/84 of a pound. Nero reduced it to 1/96. Subsequent emperors reduced it until it became a copper coin with a sprinkle of silver.

In many cases, they even split sentences.
Chapters and verses help us find words and subjects.

Yet the best way to read the Bible isn't verse by verse, but book by book.

People who abuse the Bible usually take verses out of context and context is vital here.

When you read Bible books all the way through, you often gain different perspectives.

What's the context of Matthew 20?

In mid-chapter 19, a rich ruler asked Jesus,
“What good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

Jesus answered: **“Keep the commandments.”**

“I've kept them all. What's next?” the guy quipped.

Jesus: **“If you're serious, sell all your possessions and give to the poor. You will then have your treasure in heaven and then follow me.”**

This proud wealthy guy wasn't ready to give away his money and trudged off.

Jesus to his disciples: **“It's harder for a rich man to go to heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”**

Many claim that one of Jerusalem's gates was called “Needle's Eye” because camels had to bend their knees to get through it.



I think Jesus literally meant what he said and his statement astonished the apostles.

“If rich people, who can do all these good works can't make it to heaven, who can? Wealthy folks finance hospital wings and give to charity. The poor barely scrape by, how can they earn any heavenly credit?”

To that, Jesus said: “With men it's impossible. With God all things are possible.”

God makes many things possible that we think can never happen

See Peter's reply: **“Lord, we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”**

The gospels tell us that Peter, James and John gave up their fishing partnership. Matthew left his lucrative tax collection business. **Whatever jobs or businesses the others owned, they quit in order to follow Jesus.**

We begin to get some context now:

“Lord, we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

First, Jesus assured the twelve disciples:

“You will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel.”

Second, those who left everything **“will receive a 100 times as much and will receive eternal life.”**

How much would you have to pay a contactor to restore life to one person in the town cemetery?

All that person would have to do is raise one person out of his/her grave.
Yet God will give eternal life to those who trust him and glorify him in Christ.

Third, on the day God raises all folks: “Many who are first (now) will be last and many who are last (now) will be first.”

When Matthew chapter 19 ends, that’s the context.

Our Chapter 20 text begins with Jesus saying, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in the vineyard. . .”

Jesus’ use of the word for shows the parable’s connection with the events we saw in chapter 19.

So what’s the link?

Recall what Jesus originally said to Peter, James and John: “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

1. All Jesus’ followers are in the fishing business.
The last sentence of Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus’ instructions to the twelve just before he went back to heaven:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”²

This paragraph shows that Jesus wanted his disciples to keep fishing and to teach those they “catch” how to “fish.”



All God’s people should be fisher folk.

We’ve neglected our primary purpose—first, to be fishers of men and women.

Jesus: “Go teach all nations,”

Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “Teach them everything to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Most haven’t been “fishers” of people.

Imagine going into a store to purchase something.
The business advertises regularly and has abundant merchandise.

All the help are either visiting with one another or listening to a lecture by the manager.

You can’t find a salesperson anywhere.

² Matthew 28:18-20 NIV

Verse 20 shows how, at times, verse divisions split sentences.

A similar thing happens to visitors in many churches.

Members should be falling over one another to welcome visitors and to encourage others.

We’re fishers of folks from all nations.

Fisher people go where they expect to find fish.

They don’t wait for the fish to visit them.

We’ve forgotten our product and our mission.

“Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Jesus meant: “I want you to fish everywhere.”

2. We remember Jesus’ management principles.

The apostles were first to believe and follow Jesus.

But that didn’t give them a right to Lord it over people who would follow later

If you think the twelve were above doing that, consider Matthew 20:20.

The mother of James and John came to Jesus dragging them along and asking Jesus for a special favor.

She wanted Jesus to give her sons the most prominent places in heaven.

The other 10 fumed about her request.

It wasn’t the last time they argued the subject . . . At the Last Supper they still feuded about who was the greatest.

In God’s kingdom, we gain stature by serving.

Jesus: “In the Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last first.”

Bob are you sure this is what this is about?

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.’”³ That falls on many deaf ears, doesn’t it?

Folks argue certain points of this parable.

One detail stands indisputable.

3. The landowner in this parable is God.

You and I are short-term tenants.

Norma and I have acquired a few old atlases of Cherokee and Plymouth Counties.

Compare present land ownership with those holding title 70-80 years ago, you see many changes.

Most societies last no more than a few centuries.

We can speak of perpetuity, but what we consider permanent can change at any moment.

God is the only real landowner.

WHO IS THE MOST AWESOME PERSON TODAY?



³ Matthew 20:25-27 NIV In the original, the word *servant* is deacon, which meant a “table waiter.” The word *slave* refers to a bond-servant. Modern society rejects and resents connotations of those terms, but Jesus insisted that his followers be willing to submit to that status in order to qualify for his kingdom.

If we don't have priorities directed to him, we might find ourselves last in line on Judgment Day.



1. Jesus wants us to be fishers of men and women, humbly encouraging all to honor God.



2. . We reside here by God's mercy serving as Jesus unselfishly served, not ambitiously trying to make names for ourselves:

“The first shall be last and the last first.”



3. God holds the future; apart from our merciful God, no future exists.



Happy is he whose Hope is in the Lord His God.

He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— he remains faithful forever.
7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free,
8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
10 The LORD reigns forever . . . for all generations.
Praise the LORD. (From Psalm 146)

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