

PLOT TWIST

"GOD'S HANDS ARE BIGGER"

MATTHEW 20:1-16

This Week's Core Competency

Trinity – I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 13:14, *May the grace of the lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

Salvation is by *grace*, but rewards are by *works*. When it comes to salvation, we don't receive what we deserve; instead, we receive what we don't deserve. In other words, when it comes to salvation we receive *mercy* and *grace*. Paul tells the Ephesians: "For it is by grace you were saved, through faith— and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast" (2:8-9). And he tells Titus: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (3:4-5).

When it comes to rewards, we get what is due us. Again Paul tells the Ephesians: "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free" (6:8). And he tells the Corinthians: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good

or bad" (2Co 5:10).

But even when it comes to rewards, God's grace and mercy is evident in his generosity. Jesus makes that clear in the parable of The Workers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16).

One pastor explains (keep in mind as you read that "a penny" refers to "a denarius," the standard wage for a day's work):

"It is important to note that there were actually two kinds of workers hired that day: those who wanted a contract and agreed to work for a penny a day, and those who had no contract and agreed to take whatever the owner thought was right. The first laborers that he hired insisted on a contract.

"This explains why the householder paid the workers as he did: He wanted those who were hired first (who insisted on a contract) to see how much he paid the workers who were hired later. It was one way the owner could show those workers how really generous he was.

"Put yourself in the place of those workers who were hired first but paid last. They each expected to get a penny, because that was what they agreed to accept. But imagine their surprise when they saw the laborers who were hired last each receiving a penny! This meant their own wages should have been twelve pennies each!

"But the 3 o'clock workers also received a penny—for only three hours of work. The men last in line quickly recalculated their wages: four pennies for the day's work. When the men hired at noon also were paid a penny, this cut the salary of the contract workers considerably, for now they would earn only two pennies.

God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve.

— Warren W. Wiersbe

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"But the owner gave them one penny each. Of course, they complained! But they had no argument, because they had agreed to work for a penny. They received what they asked for. Had they trusted the goodness of the owner, they would have received far more. But they insisted on a contract.

"The lesson for Christ's disciples is obvious. We should not serve Him because we want to receive an expected reward, and we should not insist on knowing what we will get. God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve" (Warren W. Wiersbe, "Matthew," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 1:73-74).

day **1** ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Matthew 20:1-16

1 "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.

3 "About the third hour 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 the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh hour 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 the eleventh hour 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. 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, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. 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."

Companion Passage

Matthew 19:27-30

27 Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

28 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. (NIV 2011)

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Box "for" indicating *reason* in v. 1.
- * Bracket "kingdom of heaven" in v. 1.
- * Circle "workers" in v. 1.
- * Highlight "agreed to pay" in v. 2.
- * Circle "denarius" in v. 2.
- * Circle "third hour," "sixth hour," "ninth hour," and "eleventh hour," in vv. 3, 5, 5, and 6 respectively.

- * Highlight "whatever is right" in v. 4.
- * Circle "standing there" in v. 7.
- * Highlight "didn't you agree" in v. 13.
- * Circle "envious" in v. 15.
- * Underline "I am generous" in v. 15.
- * Next to v. 16 write, "Cf., 19:30."

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Jesus told this parable in answer to a question. Whose was it, and what was it?
2. Are we to assume the parable is about *salvation* or *rewards*? Explain.
3. Identify the *contrast* or difference between those who went to work early and those who went to work throughout the rest of the day.
4. How do you think the workers hired during the day expected to be compensated?
5. What appears to be *missing* from verse 7?
6. Those who were hired *last* received a denarius. How much were those hired *throughout* the day presumably paid?
7. Identify the *plot twist* in this parable.
8. Those hired *first* were not happy with their denarius. Did they have a legitimate grievance? Explain.
9. The landowner was *fair* to all but *generous* to some. To whom and why?
10. **Discussion:** Does this parable teach that all disciples will receive the same exact reward? Talk about it.

While the plot of Jesus' parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is simple enough—a landowner hires workers throughout the day and in the evening pays them all a denarius—the point of the parable is debated. Is it somehow about divine generosity and grace in bestowing *salvation*, as one commentator suggests? "All who are truly saved are equally precious in God's sight and equally rewarded with eternal happiness in the company of Christ and all the redeemed" (Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 305). Or is it about divine generosity and grace in bestowing *rewards*, as another suggests? "This parable . . . stands as a comment on the discussion of rewards for discipleship in 19:27-29 and on the saying about the last and the first which concluded that discussion and which is repeated after the parable in v. 16" (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, 747). The fact that the parable follows hard on the narrative in 19:16-30, more specifically Peter's question in verse 27 and Jesus' answer in verses 28-30, argues convincingly that it is about rewards and not salvation.

In 19:27, Peter, observing that the rich young man was unwilling to give up his possessions to follow Christ, says to Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you." In other words, we disciples have done what that man refused to do. And then he asks Jesus, "What then will there be for us?" In other words, will we disciples be rewarded for leaving everything to follow you? Apparently, the Twelve are considering whether their personal sacrifices made to follow Christ make sense. The Savior's reply is filled with encouraging words; he assures them they will not be losers in the end. They will exercise unique authority in the kingdom age, receive manifold recompense for their sacrifices, and inherit eternal life. In fact, he says, ". . . *everyone* who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or child or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (v. 29). Then, however, he adds this caveat, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first," which he goes on to explain in the parable.

The meaning of the parable hangs on the

contrast between those who had "borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" (v. 12) and those who had worked "only one hour" (v. 12). The parable's plot unfolds like this. A landowner, needing workers to harvest his grapes, hires day-laborers in the marketplace. He agrees to pay the first ones hired a denarius, the standard wage. Throughout the day, he goes back to the marketplace and hires additional workers, telling them only, "I will pay you whatever is right." They take him at his word, likely assuming that he will pay them a portion of the standard wage commensurate with the hours they work. At the end of the day, the landowner tells his foreman to "call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first" (v. 8).

At this point the plot takes an unexpected turn. The workers hired about the eleventh hour receive a denarius—presumably, as well as those hired about the ninth, sixth, and a third hour—which leads those hired first to expect more. As one commentator observes: "The first group of workers is stunned as they receive twelve times what they expected. The other workers naturally begin to anticipate similar increases and, in fact, all but the very first group hired do get more than they expected" (Blomberg, 303). But when their turn to be paid comes, they, too, receive the standard wage. At once, those hired first protest their employer's unfair decision to make those hired last equal to them. But the landowner defends his action saying, "Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?" Had they known the generosity of the landowner, they would have certainly acted differently; they would have gladly trusted him to pay them whatever he deemed right. Instead, unlike the others, they negotiated their pay. In the end, their employer proves himself to be both *fair* and *generous*—fair to those who negotiated their pay and generous to those who trusted him. Too bad, those who negotiated only limited the landowner's generosity.

So what does the point of parable contribute to Jesus' answer to Peter's question? How does it explain the caveat? Disciples are not losers. They will receive manifold recompense for their

sacrifices and eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. But they would be wise to follow Jesus

unconditionally, trusting God for their reward; otherwise, they will only limit his generosity.

The Message of the Passage

Disciples should follow Christ unconditionally, trusting God for their reward, knowing that negotiation only limits his generosity.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on 3 *living questions* to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Journal your answers to the following *living questions*:**

- How is God making himself known to you?

- How does God want to change you?

- How is God calling you to change your world?

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

- v. 1 **for** "The opening 'for' confirms that this parable refers to the issue of rewards and of first and last which has taken up vv. 27-30" (France, 749).
- v. 1 **kingdom of heaven** Jesus is not referring to heaven, the place righteous people go to await their resurrection at his return (2Co 5:6-9). When Peter questions Jesus about disciples' rewards, he replied, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (19:28). Jesus is talking to his disciples about the messianic or millennial kingdom (Rev 20:2-5; cf., Da 2:44; 7:13-14, 27).
- v. 1 **workers** "The day laborer did not have even the minimal security which the slave had in belonging to one master. There was no social welfare program on which an unemployed man could fall back, and no trade unions to protect a worker's rights. An employer could literally 'do what he chose with what belonged to him' (v. 15). In such a setting no work meant no food for the family" (France, 748-49).
- v. 2 **agreed to pay** The workers negotiated with the landowner to come to terms on their wages. "The householder apparently had little difficulty in getting workmen, and he came to an agreement with them that they should work for a denarius per day (this appears to have been the normal pay for a day's work [Tob. 5:14; a drachma was equivalent to a denarius]). There would probably have been no difficulty in negotiating such a deal, for it meant normal pay for normal work. With agreement reached he sent them off to this vineyard" (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 499-500). In subsequent instances: "There is no specific offer of a job, nor is there any indication of haggling over terms or even of coming to an acceptable agreement (as in the case of the first workers)" (500).
- v. 2 **denarius** Cf., "standard wage" (NET). "The denarius was a standard minimum day's wage" (Blomberg, 302). "Cf. the sum of two denarii paid to the innkeeper for an indefinite stay in Luke 10:35; also Tob 5:15, where the drachma is the Greek equivalent of the denarius. In Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.17, we hear of mutinying Roman soldiers early in the first century demanding a denarius a day as fair pay" (France, 749).
- v. 3 **third hour** I.e., the third hour after sunrise. "The day was divided into twelve parts, each called an hour, with the day beginning at sunrise and the night at sunset (the night seems to have been divided, not into hours, but into three or four watches)" (500). The landowner secured workers at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m.
- v. 4 **whatever is right** "The 'landowner' did not promise a particular wage, only that He would deal justly with the laborers. Jesus did not explain why the landowner kept hiring more workers throughout the day. That was an irrelevant detail in His story. All the workers trusted the landowner to give them what was fair at the end of the day" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Matthew," 2017 ed., 336, www.soniclight.com).
- v. 7 **standing here** "Families in the ancient world often went day to day, earning only enough for the food for that particular day (cf., 6:11). If they did not find work, they would not have enough to eat, so they continued to wait for someone to hire them" (Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, 664).
- v. 13 **didn't you agree** "When a man makes a solemn agreement and keeps to his side of the bargain, there should be no thought of injustice. This man had made a legal agreement with his workmen; they would work for a day, and he would pay them a denarius. That was what they did and what he did. Where is the injustice?" (Morris, 503).
- v. 15 **envious** Cf., "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (NKJV); "Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (NASB); "Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (ESV). "The expression 'are you envious' (20:14) can be rendered literally, 'Is your eye evil,' indicating that the laborer could not be thankful because he was blinded by his self-centered envy. The 'evil eye' in the ancient world was one that enviously coveted what belonged to another" (Wilkins, 665). "The fact that he chose to be generous to other people gave these men no new rights. Their discontent was due to envy, not to the overlooking of any of their rights" (Morris, 503).
- v. 16 **last . . . first** Cf., 19:30. "This parable . . . stands as a comment on the discussion of rewards for discipleship in 19:27-29 and on the saying about the last and the first which concluded that discussion and which is repeated after the parable in v. 16. It is therefore about the reversal of human expectations in the kingdom of heaven—which, in various ways, has been the dominating theme of the whole of ch. 19" (France, 747-48).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

My favorite movie of all time is *The Princess Bride*. I know. It's a real classic. It's one of the only movies I can watch over and over again and still laugh. In case you haven't seen it, the movie begins with a granddad coming over to read a story to his grandson while he is home sick from school one day. At first the boy is reluctant because he thinks it's a love story but soon gets into it as the adventure begins. At one point in the movie, the little boy gets very anxious because events in the story are not turning out the way in which he wanted. The hero is losing and the bad guy is winning. The boy is upset and finally asks his granddad why he even started reading the book to him. Sometimes life just isn't fair. In varying degrees, we all have a sense of justice. When we feel that we or someone else has been unjustly treated, we generally react. In Jesus' parable, the workers are upset because they feel as though they were treated unfairly. What they failed to remember is that the work was a gracious gift in the first place. I do that too. I forget that God's grace is a precious gift I do not deserve and wallow in the pits of self-pity when things aren't "fair." I'm praying that I live gratefully in His goodness.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Mt 20:1-16

1. For what wage did the first workers agree to work?
2. How much were the workers who started last paid?
3. How did the first workers react?

What Do You Think

1. In what way was the landowner generous to all the workers?
2. How do you react when you are treated unfairly?
3. What are some ways to respond in a way that honors God?

What R U Going To Do

I hope you are working on our memory verse passage from this series. It's Psalm 119:9-16. Illustrate this week's verse and bring it to church next Sunday to show your small group.

Core Comp

Trinity - I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Memory Verse

Psalm 119:11 - *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity 2 Corinthians 13:14

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace Ephesians 2:8-9

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God Psalm 121:1-2

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ John 1:12

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church Ephesians 4:15-16

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity John 3:16

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion Psalm 82:3-4

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity John 14:1-4

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship 1 Timothy 6:17-19

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship Psalm 95:1-7

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer Psalm 66:16-20

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study Hebrews 4:12

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness Matthew 6:33

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts Romans 12:4-6

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community Acts 2:44-47

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time Colossians 3:17

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith Ephesians

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life Romans 12:1

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy John 15:11

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace Philippians 4:6-7

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness Proverbs 3:3-4

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control Titus 2:11-13

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility Philippians 2:3, 4

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love 1 John 4:10-12

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience Proverbs 14:29

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness 1 Thess. 5:15

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness Philippians 4:5

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope Hebrews 6:19-20

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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Wendy Hollabaugh (B.S.W. University of Texas at Arlington) is the Children's Minister at Pantego Bible Church. Wendy has over ten years of experience in Children's Ministry. She has a passion for leading families to connect with God and each other. She enjoys creating compelling environments where kids fall in love with God and His Truth. Wendy and her husband, Greg, are also involved in their own personal youth ministry as they are training their three teenagers, Hannah, Aaron and Noah.



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