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Matthew 20:1 - 20:16



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this thought-provoking piece, Steve Gregg reflects on the parable of the laborers in Matthew 20:1-16. He highlights the employer's seemingly unfair decision to pay those who worked the shortest time first and goes on to explore the spiritual message behind the parable, focusing on the idea that God's dealings with humanity are not based on what is earned. While Gregg notes that the parable may not necessarily be aimed at teaching Christians not to strike against employers, he emphasizes the importance of honoring promises made to employees.

Transcript

Today, I'd like to begin reading at Matthew 20, verse 1. This is a parable that occupies the first 15 verses, and then in verse 16, Jesus gives sort of an application. Jesus said, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now, when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you. And they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise, and about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, Why have you been standing here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one hired us.

He said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive. So, when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first. And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

But when the first ones came, they supposed that they would receive more, and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they murmured against the landowner, saying, These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the heat of the day? But he

answered one of them, and said, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours, and go your way.

I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good? So, the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

Now, in this parable, there is a man who has a vineyard, and he requires laborers, and he goes into the marketplace to find those who have not yet been employed. I suppose this is the way that it was often done in biblical times. I guess that is really the way it's still done in some cases.

I've heard of contractors who go down to the lumber store, and they sometimes have found men hanging around looking for work. I don't know if this is done very commonly, but I've known men who found work by going down at such places early in the morning and finding someone who needed a laborer and going out and working with them. In any case, these men were obviously not fortunate enough to be landowners, and they required that someone hire them, or else they could not earn a wage.

They could not feed their families. And this is really a parable about compassion, and yet it is more than that, because it has a deeper meaning about the purposes of God in general. Now, what happens here is the man goes into the marketplace, and there are, in the morning, at the beginning of the work day, a number of people standing around who need work.

And so he hires them, and he promises them a denarius for a day's work. Now, a denarius simply is the ordinary wage that a laborer earned in those days. I think the King James Version calls it a penny, which would be misleading to us, because a penny is a coin of very little value.

But in the Greek, the denarius is what is referred to, and that was the regular and fair wage for a laboring man. So these people were glad to be hired. They went out to work in the vineyard, and they looked forward to getting their pay at the end of the day.

And so he had need of more workers, it would appear, and so he went out at the third hour and the sixth hour and the ninth hour. Now, when we read of the third and the sixth and the ninth hour, we need to remember that the Jewish people regarded the day as beginning at six in the morning and ending at six at night. And so the third hour to the Jew was three hours after six in the morning.

So he went out at nine in the morning, that's the third hour. Then the sixth hour was noon, and the ninth hour was three in the afternoon. Now, that's getting pretty late in the working day, but even later than that, two hours later, at five o'clock, the eleventh hour, he went out and found some more who were not working, and he sent them out to

work.

Now, in each of these cases, when he hired these people who were hired later in the day, he did not mention to them how much they would be paid. He just said he'd give them a fair wage. And so they all went out to work.

Now, at the end of the day, it was customary in Israel to pay your laborers and send them home. In our own society, it's more common for us to work for a week or maybe even two weeks, sometimes even a month before we see a paycheck. But in biblical times, because people didn't have the luxury and the stored-up wealth that we have, they could not live two weeks without pay.

In most cases, they lived day by day. And so it was common when you hired a poorer sort of person and he worked for a day that he got paid that day so that he could eat that day or his family could eat that day. So at the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard calls for his steward.

And he says, okay, come on, call in the laborers and we'll pay them. Now, he says, begin with the last and end with the first. Now, it's not initially clear why it is that he starts by paying those who've worked the shortest time first.

He says, begin with the last and end with the first. That means that the guy who's been working all day in the heat of the sun has to stand in line longer than the others in order to get his pay. That seems like a strange policy.

Now, we can see at the end of the parable, it is a necessary part of the parable that man did this for two reasons. One is that at the end of the parable, Jesus says, so the last will be first and the first last. So whatever that statement means, it is something Jesus is trying to get across in the parable.

And by the way, that same statement was found at the very end of chapter 19. The very last verse of chapter 19 said, but many who are first will be last and the last first. So Jesus says it twice here quite in close proximity to each other.

And so in the parable, in order to get this point across that the first will be last and the last will be first, which meaning we will consider in a moment, Jesus has the man paying first those who've entered the field last. Now, I don't know that there's any reason to assume that this is the way it was always done. Or, you know, this master seemed to have some idiosyncrasies.

Certainly there was nothing wrong with him. And he could do what he wanted to do as the point of the parable is to say, but he had his own little ways apparently. And so he decided to pay the last man first.

Now, the other reason that this is necessary for the parable is that it allows those who've

worked all day to see how much pay is given to those who work shorter time. And that's an important part of making the point of the parable, because these men who worked the shorter time received a denarius. Now, the men who had worked only part of a day had not been told how much they would earn.

And now at the end, at the pay period, they receive a full day's wage, although they've not worked a full day. And so, of course, those who had worked all day thought, well, this man, this this landowner is quite generous. He's giving these people a day's wage for a few hours work only.

So, of course, we will receive more because we've worked all day. And yet when they get up front and they receive their pay, they receive only a denarius, the same as the others. And this this bothers them.

They murmur about this. They said, you know, we have borne the heat of the day and we've borne the burden of it. And we only get one denarius.

And these others get the same thing we get. And they've only worked one hour. Now, to tell you the truth, I have a feeling that many of us, as we read the parable, are somewhat sympathetic with this complaint.

I don't know. Perhaps some of my listeners are employers and and therefore would be more sympathetic to the landowner's rights. And really, that's the way we're supposed to be.

Jesus intends for us to side with the landowner in this situation. But I realize that there's something about the story that we would tend to to make the same complaint these others did. Even though the men received what they were promised.

It didn't seem fair that somebody else received the same thing without having done as much work. And I think that there's much in human nature that would cause many of us to to to be upset about this and say, well, why did I have to do so much in order to get this amount when these others had to do so little to get the same reward? And so this is the complaint that they make. Now, it's not a valid complaint.

It is not a valid complaint. That's a very important thing for us to note. And that's the point of the parable.

The man corrected those murmurs by saying to them, friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? In other words, I have not given you less than what you expected. Nor what you deserved or what was promised.

I have done the right thing. I've been honest with you. I've been just.

And I have I've been a straight shooter with you. Now, he says, take what is yours and go

your way. I wish to give this last man the same as to you.

Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I'm good? Now, the man makes a very good point. Is it not lawful for me to do with my own things what I wish? Now, before we look at the some of the other points of the parable, I'd like to just point out that Jesus here is on the side of the landowner. Actually, in the parable, the landowner represents God himself.

And that being so, Jesus represents God as a landowner. And asserts that landowners really have the right to do with their own things what they wish. Now, I don't care to get political on this program very often.

And I don't even now. But it should be observed before we go beyond this that Jesus believed in private ownership. He believed in apparently free enterprise.

He believed in what we would call capitalism. Now, again, I'm not a big one to talk about politics or economics or any of that. But we're talking about Jesus here.

We're talking about what did Jesus teach. And many people have the mistaken notion that Jesus taught something like communism or socialism. Because he certainly taught that the poor need to be considered in all of our giving.

And the stewarding of the money that God puts in our hands. When God gives us more than we need, it is so that we can help those who have less than they need. And in that sense, we have an obligation before God to do with his money, which he gives to us, which he puts into our hands, what he wants done with it.

And there is even a principle that expresses God's heart in terms of the body of Christ. This is expressed in 2 Corinthians where Paul said, Those who gather much have nothing extra and those who gather little have no lack. That is actually a quotation from Exodus where God provided in the wilderness enough manna for everyone to have an equal amount.

And some people were able to gather more of it. Some were not able to gather as much, but it was divided up equally. So that those who gathered much had no extra.

Those who gathered little had no lack. And Paul quotes that in 2 Corinthians as a good principle, really, for the Christian church. That those of us who have perhaps more than what we need to survive are to share with those who have less than what they need to survive.

This is, however, to be voluntary. In this parable, the man, the landowner, was a capitalist. He owned land and he asserted his right to do with his property what he wanted to do.

Is that not correct? That's exactly what he asserted, and Jesus was on his side in this matter. The man said, Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Yes, it is. The man can give a denarius to those who worked all day, and he could have given ten denarii, if he wished, to those who worked one hour, because he's a generous man if he wants to be generous.

And that's just the point. Although this parable does, in its own indirect way, affirm free enterprise and private ownership and so forth, it also does so in the context of generosity. The man owns a great deal, but he is generous.

Now, it is not said what motivated this particular man to give so much to those who worked a short time and not to give more, not to show the similar generosity to those who'd worked all day. But, of course, that is part of the parable's function, to get across a particular spiritual point that we will make in a moment. What I want to point out, however, is that the employee does not have rights to his master's things beyond that which justice would require or what is promised.

You know, there are many people today who join unions, and then they decide after a while that the employer that they're working for, management, is not really treating them right. It's not that management is giving them less than what they promised. It's that maybe with the cost of living increases and so forth and hardships situations, that they feel like they really ought to be given raises more than they're given, that they ought to be given more benefits than they're given because some other employers give them.

And because of that, many times people go on strike and try to punish their employers for not doing more for them than what is promised. And really, when it gets down to it, the only time a Christian should even sympathize with a strike would be if an employer has promised certain things and has defaulted that promise. In other words, they hired someone on false pretenses, and when that person was hired, they did not give what they said they would give.

That would be, of course, a case of an injustice. That would be a case of dishonesty on the part of the employer. However, when the employer has promised one thing, and the person has accepted the job on the terms of that promise, then if that employee becomes dissatisfied later because employees somewhere else are treated better by their employer, it is not just for them to try to punish or complain against their employer who does nothing more than what he promised.

Now, I realize that people who are not saved have little else to motivate them than their own well-being. But Christians are to be motivated by a sense of justice. And this being so, I can hardly imagine a Christian participating in a strike against their employer.

After all, it goes against everything the Bible says about contentment. John the Baptist

himself told the soldiers, Be content with your wages, and the Scripture commands all Christians in Hebrews chapter 13 to be content with such things as you have, and let your life be without covetousness. If you follow the Scripture and you are content, and if you are in an employment situation where your employer is giving what he promised, even if it is not what you now desire, you have no business complaining or murmuring or seeking to hurt the business of that employer.

The manipulation of an employer is a wrong spirit altogether on the part of an employee. And that's, of course, what unions are capable of doing, and that's one of the reasons I have very little sympathy with them. Now, I'm admitting, I want to make it very clear, I don't think that this parable that Jesus told is one that is intended to teach Christians not to strike against their employers.

There's a very different meaning of this parable that underlies it, and we will identify that. But I should make very clear to you that Jesus took it for granted that his listeners would understand the justice of an owner's right to do with his own things what he wants to do. And that's a given.

I mean, the complainers in this parable stand humbly corrected because anyone in Jesus' audience would have acknowledged, oh, yeah, that's true. The possessions do belong to this man. He doesn't have to give more than what he has promised.

And so I just want to point that out because in our own age, Christians often don't take for granted even as much as Jesus expected his listeners to take for granted, even before he added more light and clarified and made new application. Now, the application that he's making here is this, as I understand it. At the very end, he says, so the last will be first and the first last.

What does that mean? Well, as I understand it means this, that in God's dealings with humanity, the first persons who had an opportunity to know God were the Jewish people, and the last to get such an opportunity were the Gentiles. And the Jewish people knew about God for centuries before the Gentiles really got much of a chance to hear about God. And yet when Jesus came, he found that many of the Jews were rejecting him.

Most of the Jews were rejecting him. And to this day, the majority of the Jews have rejected Christ. But you know who has tended to be much more open and willing to receive the gospel? Usually Gentiles.

And what he's saying here as an application of the principle of the parable is that the Jews who were initially the first in terms of privilege will be the last in terms of actually coming around and embracing the gospel, whereas the Gentiles who were the last in terms of the privilege of knowing the truth will be the first to embrace the truth. And that is the point of the parable. Now, in this parable, those who've worked all day represent the Jewish people.

They, throughout their long history, have suffered, as it were, in the heat of the day. They've suffered persecution. They've suffered hardship as they've been called upon to keep alive the knowledge of God in very hard times and under persecution.

The Gentiles, on the other hand, who have come to Christ, have really come late in the game. And the Gentiles do not have anything like the history of service to God that the Jews had in terms of the number of years that the Jews were the people of God and laboring in his service, whereas the Gentiles come in late. And yet what Jesus, I believe, is saying is that those who come in late will have the same privilege as those who come in early.

Now, alternately, if Jesus is not speaking specifically of the Gentiles here, he might be speaking of the people like the tax collectors and sinners who lived like the Gentiles. There were Jewish people who had rejected the Jewish religion and were living in sin. And therefore, they were, in a sense, the last to come around to Judaism, but they were among the first to come around to Jesus.

Whereas the first, those who had been eager to embrace Jewish demands, the Pharisees and people like that, were among the last to embrace Jesus. It's not, of course, entirely clear which of these two scenarios Jesus has in mind because both of them are true. The last persons that you would expect to be saved were the first who are saved.

And those who have served God the longest should not be complaining, like the prodigal son's brother. He complained because his father showed such generosity to the returning prodigal. However, the father rebuked him, just as these people were rebuked by the master.

And so, the idea here is that God is generous to all. And if he does not wish to be more generous to those who've worked longer, it is just because he gives them what their due is. He can show greater generosity, if he wishes, to those who haven't had as much time.

Remember, the ones he hired last, he said, why are you standing around here unemployed? And they said, no one has hired us. It was not their fault. They would have been working.

They had as much need as the others, and therefore, they received as much as the others. And in God's dealing with humanity, he doesn't give us what we have earned principally. He gives us better than what we've earned.

He gives us what we need. And those who have come to God late in life, or in history, for that matter, have the same need for God and for salvation as those who came earlier on. And therefore, the Jewish people should not have complained when God showed such generosity to those who had not been on the wagon as long as they had been.

Well, we're out of time for today's talk. I hope you'll tune in again next time, and we'll

continue our studies in the Gospel of Matthew at that time.