

## Chapter 80: The Last Will be First

*Matthew 20:1–16*

It is an extraordinary thing that Jesus would make the first to be last, as Jesus said in the previous passage (Matt. 19:30). Even a rich man in the vibrance of youth—someone who possesses everything that this world insists upon as essential—only holds those gifts for a period of time. Today, two thousand years afterward, his riches have rusted and his once-young body has rotted. The first have been made last. Yet, in Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus now fills out the rest of this idea. Not only does he make the first last, but *Jesus makes the last first*.

### Calling (Matt. 20:1–7)

The word “for” indicates a strong connection between the preceding discussion and the parable that Jesus tells.<sup>1</sup> Since “for” gives a ground clause, we might paraphrase Jesus’ transitional phrase as, “Let me tell you what I mean by that....” Specifically, Jesus seems to have two major ideas from the previous section in view. First, Jesus gives special attention to the the final phrase of the previous chapter, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt. 19:30). At the end of this section, Jesus make a nearly identical statement: “So that last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16). Second, Jesus seems to have Peter’s question in mind: “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matt. 19:27). That question seems echoed in the description of the *first* laborers who strike an agreement with the master of the house for a denarius in exchange for their labor (v. 2).<sup>2</sup> At a general level, then, Morris is correct in his summary that Jesus is continuing his teaching about “the dangers of riches and warning his followers against giving themselves over to the pursuit of personal gain.”<sup>3</sup> To gain more specificity in to the lessons Jesus intends through this parable, we will need to work our way through it.

To begin our study of this parable, then, we must note that the setting is a vineyard, which is often used as an image of Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 80:8–10; Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1).<sup>4</sup> It is possible, then, that this vineyard connects to some degree back to Jesus promise that the disciples will eventually “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). Still, there are two major reasons not to think that Jesus is speaking exclusively about the Jews as first and the Gentiles as last.<sup>5</sup> First, as we will see in our exposition of this parable, Jesus does seem to offer a particular warning to *Peter*, who is a Jew, but who is also one of Jesus’ first followers as a disciple and

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<sup>1</sup> So many commentators, e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 764; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 499; Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 569.

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 765.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 498.

<sup>4</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 302.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 504–05.

an apostle. In this parable, however, the “first” who become “last” are not merely demoted in this parable, but rather sent away entirely (v. 14), which would not fit Jesus’ intention here as it relates to Peter.

Second, theologically, the Scriptures insist on the continuity between Israel and the Christian Church. So, during Jesus’ ministry, he insists that *he* is the true vine (i.e., within this vineyard), and that his disciples are the branches who can do nothing apart from him (John 15:1–8). Jesus does not speak only of his first disciples, but, as the later context makes clear, he has all subsequent disciples in view, whether Jew or Gentile (John 17:20). Later, Paul describes the church as a vineyard (1 Cor. 3:9, and, relatedly, Israel as an olive tree and teaches that Gentiles have been grafted into that tree (Rom. 11:11–24). In both cases, it is clear that we are seeing a general warning given to steer us away from a particular attitude and approach to labor in the kingdom, rather than a narrow target on one particular people. Thus, rather than seeing this as a parable about the late arrival of Gentiles after the long service of the Jews, we should see a much more general caution toward any who arrive earlier about their attitudes about those who come later.<sup>6</sup>

Next, when Jesus speaks about the *first* laborers, as mentioned earlier, Jesus says that these laborers struck an agreement with Jesus “for a denarius a day” (v. 2). Lenski is correct when he writes that “the chief point is that these laborers insist on a definite wage, so much per day; and not until this agreement is reached do they go to work. Such a contract was not demanded by the other laborers who went to work later. These first laborers thus manifest a mercenary spirit. We hear the voice of Peter in 19:27, ‘What, then, shall be ours?’”<sup>7</sup>

A little later, the master goes out in the third hour (i.e., around 9:00am) and finds “others standing idle in the marketplace” (v. 3). This time, the master does not strike a specific agreement with the laborers, but only says, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you” (v. 4). Then, Jesus says that the master went out two other times (at the sixth hour/12:00pm and the ninth hour/3:00pm) and “did the same” (v. 5). At one level, Hagner is correct that the promise Jesus makes to these subsequent groups of workers does seem to imply that the master would pay them in a manner “proportionate” to the hours that they have worked.<sup>8</sup> At another level, however, we must notice that the laborers enter into no specific kind of agreement and entrust themselves to the justice of the master. It is also correct, then, that there is an implicit repudiation of Peter’s question from Matthew 19:27, which Lenski here summarizes as, “What shall we get for what we do?”<sup>9</sup>

Then, in v. 6, we could to the *last* group of laborers, who stand contrasted in every way with the *first* laborers. In his narration of the parable, Jesus gives three important details about the last laborers. First, Jesus points out that they were “standing...idle all day” (v. 6). Again, Lenski gets at the implication of this: “Eleven hours out of twelve wasted. Through a fault of theirs they will be able to do so little for the kingdom.”<sup>10</sup> At some level, the master holds these laborers responsible for their idleness. Second, however, the laborers’ response explains a critical qualification for their idleness:

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:412.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 765.

<sup>8</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 570.

<sup>9</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 769.

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 770.

“They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us’” (v. 7a). Hagner’s comment is worth reproducing in full:

The purpose of this insertion, which breaks the pattern of the previous hirings, is apparently to underline the fact that these are the ones rejected by other employers as unworthy. These “last” ones assume particular importance in the second half of the parable (cf. vv 8–9, 12, 14, 16). They are analogous to the tax collectors and the harlots invited into the kingdom by Jesus (see esp. 21:31). To these workers, regarded as undesirable by others, the master gives the invitation “even you...go into the vineyard”—the same invitation given to the earlier group.<sup>11</sup>

Hagner’s citation of Matthew 21:31 is important: “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.” To be sure, their sin played an important role in the reason that they were last. Nevertheless, their willingness to follow the call of Jesus meant that they who were last will ultimately become first.

This idea brings us to the third important detail. While many of the middle laborers were given a promise that they would be paid “whatever is right,” these last laborers receive no promise of compensation. The master tells them to go and join the others, and they do. Much less than the verbal contract that the first group required, the last group has no assurances whatsoever that their labor would not be exploited. Thus, Jesus highlights both their desperation for honest labor and their faith in the goodness of the master.

## Compensating (Matt. 20:8–12)

Finally the end of the workday arrives, and it becomes time for the master to pay his laborers for their work. For the payment, the master insists that the laborers should be paid “beginning with the last, up to the first” (v. 8). Although no terms of payment had been made at all with these *last* laborers, the master shockingly pays each of them a full denarius, as though they had worked the entire day (v. 9). Seeing the lavish generosity of the master toward these last laborers, Jesus then tells us that “those hired first...thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius” (v. 10). We should note two things here. First, part of the reason that the master paid the last laborers first was precisely so that the first laborers would see how much the last had been paid, since otherwise those hired first “would have gone their way and never found out what the other men received.”<sup>12</sup> Second, Jesus tells us only that those hired *first* expected to receive more, but we read nothing about those who were hired at the third, sixth, and ninth hours. Presumably they should have expected proportionately higher compensation for their labor too, but we do not read that the idea crossed their minds.

More significantly, only those hired first “grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day

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<sup>11</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 571.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 773.

and the scorching heat” (vv. 11–12). Notice how they particularly rankle at the fact that those called last were made “equal” with them, even though the first alone had worked long (“borne the burden of the day”) and hard (in “the scorching heat”). At one level, we understand and even agree with these laborers. France observes that, while the “reader instinctively sympathizes with the aggrieved workers,” and while anyone “who took this parable as a practical basis for employment would soon be out of business,” nevertheless “the kingdom of heaven does not operate on the basis of commercial convention. God rules by grace, not by desert.”<sup>13</sup>

But even so, is their complaint really all that unjustifiable?

## Casting Away (Matt. 20:13–16)

When the master replies to these indignant employees, he uses a unique word that the ESV translates as “friend” (v. 13a). This word, however, only appears in two other places: in Matthew 22:12, when the “friend” is the wedding guest who has come to the banquet without a wedding garment and is about to be kicked out, and in Matthew 26:50, when Jesus tells his “friend” Judas to do quickly what he came to do—that is, to betray him. Thus, R. C. Trench rightly calls this “a word of evil omen.”<sup>14</sup> Even the first word of address has dark overtones.

Next, the master points out the justice of his actions: “...I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?” (v. 13b). This is where Jesus’ words become particularly pointed at the spirit behind Peter’s question. Without necessarily saying that Peter specifically is in view of this parable, Jesus is explaining why asking what the disciples can hope to receive for their sacrifices is wrong-headed. Even when we get what we negotiate for, we will not be satisfied with it. Furthermore, this “mercenary spirit” will lead to significant character lapses as we justify the worst sins in order to take for ourselves what we think that we deserve: “Judas, too, thought that he ought to get more out of Jesus and he got it, stolen money, and then the thirty pieces of silver.”<sup>15</sup>

Then, the master issues a word of judgment: “Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (vv. 14–15). In this verse, the master justifies his own actions on the basis of his own choice to give away his resources. As Morris writes, “He had made a legal agreement, and both sides had kept to the bargain. There was nothing more to be said along those lines.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, by telling these workers to “go,” the master is telling the man to depart from his presence. As Lenski observes, this word is the same word that Jesus uses to drive away Satan at the end of his temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:10).<sup>17</sup> The symbolism here is jarring: those who serve Christ for what they can get out of their service may receive the temporal gifts that they seek, but they will not, in the end, gain Christ. On the other hand, those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness will also gain all other things beside him (Matt. 6:33). Literally, the master asks them, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” In other words, he asks whether they are not merely

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<sup>13</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 748.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 776.

<sup>15</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 775.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 503.

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 777.

wanting more for themselves, but whether they despise him because he is so generous with other people.

Thus, Jesus concludes his parable by saying, “So the last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16). We should observe that Jesus actually reverses the order here from what he had said back in Matthew 19:30: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas the point in the previous passage had been to say that many who are “first” in this life (especially the rich young man) will ultimately be excluded from the kingdom, now Jesus’ point is to emphasize the magnitude of God’s grace toward those who are “last”—that is, those who have wasted much of their lives and are despised and cast off by the world, but whom Jesus calls into the kingdom at the eleventh hour.

Some have argued from this passage that Jesus here teaches no differentiation in the degrees of reward that the Lord will issue in heaven. For example, Blomberg writes that “Luke 12:47–48 teaches that there are degrees of punishment in hell; Matt 20:1–16, that there are no degrees of reward in heaven.”<sup>19</sup> This, however, is not what the passage is teaching, since the “first” in this passage are actually cast away. Like the hypocrites, they received their reward in full in this life, and they could expect nothing more from Jesus—not even the eternal life that Jesus promises to his people (see Matt. 6:2, 16).<sup>20</sup> Instead, Carson more accurately writes, “God’s grace makes some who are last first. The point of the parable is not that all in the kingdom will receive the same reward but that kingdom rewards depend on God’s sovereign grace (cf. v.23).”<sup>21</sup> Thus, as Calvin writes, “those who were first in point of time have no right to boast or to insult others,” so that, as Paul urges us toward “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 2:13), we must “arouse ourselves to persevere in running.”<sup>22</sup>

## Discussion Questions

1. What does the little word “for” in v. 1 tell us about the connection between this passage and the preceding one? How does Jesus characterize the “first” laborers to be called into service? What agreement do they strike with the master of the house (v. 2)? What agreement does the master strike with those hired at the third, sixth, and ninth hours? What agreement does the master strike with those whom he hires at the eleventh hour (v. 6)?

2. Why have those hired at the eleventh hour been “idle” all day until the very last hour for working (vv. 6–7)? How, then, does Jesus characterize those who are “last”? How does the master reward those who are “last”? What do those who are “first” deduce from the lavish reward that the master gives to those who are “last”? Why do the “first” grumble at the “equal” treatment that the “last” receive?

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<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 779.

<sup>19</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 304.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 503.

<sup>21</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 484.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:409.

3. What should we make of the master's word, "friend" (v. 13)? Why is the master justified in giving those workers only a denarius (v. 13)? How forceful is the master's insistence that the "first" should take what belongs to them "and go" (v. 14)? What does it mean when the master suggests that the men "begrudge his generosity" (v. 15)? In what way does Jesus now teach that he makes the last first and the first last?

4. Where do you have an entitled, "me-first" attitude? How does this parable confront your pride? Where do you need to repent from despising God's generous, lavish love towards others by elevating them so that they are "equal" with you? What kind of joy awaits those who willingly embrace being last? Why does the gospel demand that we entrust ourselves to God's promises rather than to our performance?