

### The Parable of the Landowner and the Laborers

#### Matthew 20:1-16

Matthew 20:1-16 - *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. <sup>6</sup> 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?’ <sup>7</sup> 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.’*

*<sup>8</sup> “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.’ <sup>9</sup> And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ <sup>13</sup> But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. <sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”*

#### Background Notes

“Rewards in the kingdom” is the subject of most of Matthew 20. In fact, the topic of “rewards” began back in the last section of Matthew 19, when the Lord answered Peter’s question about rewards. He said that the disciples would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Believers will be rewarded for their faithful service to the Lord. So the Bible teaches that believers not only inherit eternal life, but receive rewards as well. These rewards will include rewards in heaven and, when our Lord returns to earth, rewards in His earthly kingdom.

So reward in the millennial kingdom is not just for the twelve apostles, but for all believers who have been faithful, and who have been willing to sacrifice for the sake of Christ. And there will be many surprises! Some Christians who have been in the limelight in this age will not be in the limelight in the age to come. Other believers who lived in obscurity in this life, but were faithful and sacrificed greatly for the Lord, will receive great reward in the age to come.

Look at Matthew 20:16 again: *“So the last will be first, and the first last.”* This verse is essentially the same as Matthew 19:30 - *“But many who are first will be last and the last first...”* Remember, there were no chapter divisions in the original texts of the Bible, so it is clear that this parable in Matthew 20 has to do with rewards in the coming kingdom. And notice: when the rewards are given out, many who thought they would be first in the kingdom will be last, and those humble believers who may have thought they would be last, will actually be first!

It is important to remember that the parable about the landowner and his workers is about reward for believers - **not** about the salvation of unbelievers.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Reward in the kingdom is not based on time of service.

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (v1).*

The phrase “kingdom of heaven” here refers to **the form of the kingdom now** - at the present time, between the two advents of Jesus Christ. Both John the Baptist and our Lord Himself announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

*“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (3:1-2).* And when our Lord began His ministry: *“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17).*

The Messianic Kingdom that was promised and predicted in the Old Testament was indeed *“at hand.”* It was presented and offered to Israel at the first advent of Christ. But Israel rejected her King and His offer of the kingdom, and as a result, that glorious Messianic kingdom on earth has been **postponed** until our Lord’s second advent.

When the Lord Jesus returns to earth, He **will** be set up His kingdom. This is called the “millennial” kingdom of Christ because it will last for a thousand years (Revelation 20). This is the kingdom in which all believers will realize their kingdom rewards. In the meantime, between the two advents of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is in “mystery form” – that is, in the biblical sense of mystery. A biblical mystery is truth that was concealed in the Old Testament, but is now revealed in the New Testament.

In the “Parables of the Kingdom” that our Lord gave, the mystery form (or present form) of the kingdom is revealed - especially the parables in the Gospel of Matthew. Until the Lord’s return, there will be “the wheat and the tares” (Matthew 13), there will be “the wise and the foolish virgins” (Matthew 25), and there will be “the good and the bad fish” (Matthew 13). These negative elements of the present form of the kingdom were not revealed in the Old Testament. That’s why it’s called a “mystery.” However, they have been revealed in the New Testament since the King and His offer of His kingdom were rejected by the nation of Israel.

So this parable illustrates and teaches the **basis for reward in the future**. It also teaches that future reward for believers is not just reward in heaven, but reward in the millennial kingdom of Christ on earth as well.

In addition, this parable clearly teaches that reward in the kingdom is not based on length of time of service. Some of the laborers worked all day in the heat of the sun, some worked only part of the day, and some only worked one hour - but those who worked only one hour got the same wage as those who had worked the whole day! Does that seem fair? Shouldn't there be more pay for a longer time of service? Well, that's not the way God's kingdom operates! Reward in the kingdom is not based on the length of time a Christian has served. Notice that no laborer was cheated. The early workers got exactly the amount they agreed to. The later workers received the same wages as the first - based **entirely** on the **sovereign grace** and kindness of the landowner!

This parable should be very encouraging to those people who were saved later in life, and didn't have the chance to serve the Lord in their younger years. Remember, reward in the kingdom is not based on length of service.

## **2. Reward in the kingdom is based on willingness to serve.**

*"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.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise" (v3-5).*

Notice that no agreement was made in the hiring of the later workers. The landowner simply said, "...*whatever is right I will give you.*" The workers were willing to work, and they trusted the landowner about wages. They believed the word of the landowner when he said that he would do what was right.

*"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...'"* Notice these laborers were not idle because they were lazy, or "gold bricking," or had a bad attitude. No! They were willing to work, and when they were given the opportunity they worked willingly, and left the wages up to the landowner.

The lesson is obvious: **reward in the kingdom is based on willingness to serve**. Let me ask you - are **you** willing to work for the Lord? Or do you just live your life for yourself? I'm sure that many of you are committed servants. You're "working in the Lord's vineyard" - and you will be rewarded!

Remember, faithful service for the Lord doesn't necessarily entail becoming a foreign missionary in a distant country! Working faithfully and living for Christ at your job is service for the Lord. Being godly parents and building a Christ-centered home is service for the Lord.

Some of you may feel you haven't had much opportunity to serve the Lord for one reason or another, but you're **willing** to serve, and you pitch in here and there, when and where you can. Be encouraged - you will be rewarded!

Unfortunately, some believers are not very willing to serve. Maybe you're a believer who attends a worship service on Sunday morning, but that's all you do. You're not really willing to spend time helping in any capacity in the church fellowship. You don't spend much time in prayer, or in caring for others. You rarely even consider leading your family in Bible reading or prayer at home. You're a Christian couch potato. If so, don't expect much in the way of reward in heaven or in our Lord's kingdom on earth - because reward in the kingdom is based on **willingness to serve**.

Listen to the promise of 1 Corinthians 15:58: *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."* So - workers and laborers, don't be discouraged, and don't grow weary! You will be rewarded!

## **Practical Application**

### **Are you envious because of the Lord's generosity?**

Look at the landowner's statement to the laborers who worked all day: *"Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"* (v15).

Are you envious of other believers because of the Lord's generosity? When you look around at fellow believers, you may think that the Lord has generously given them so much more talent than He gave you, or given them a better childhood background than you had, or better health than you have, or given them a nicer job than yours, or a more pleasant area of service for Him. Are you envious? It can easily happen. We're all vulnerable to jealousy!

The Lord would ask each one of us the same question that the landowner asked the laborers: *Are you envious because of the Lord's generosity?*