

Equality in the Kingdom

Scripture: Matthew 19:30–20:16

Code: 2345

INTRODUCTION

A. God Treats People Equally

1. The defense of Ezekiel

One of the great men of God in the Old Testament was the prophet Ezekiel. Prophets like Ezekiel were common in the land of Israel. One of the duties of those spokesmen for God was to warn the people about sin. Ezekiel often reminded the children of Israel of the sins that had caused them to be taken into Babylonian captivity so they wouldn't repeat them. One of the things that had caused God's judgment upon them was their accusing God of being unfair. That attack was leveled against God's nature and character. Ezekiel 18:25 says, "Ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Here now, O house of Israel, is not my way equal? Are not your ways unequal?" The same thing is repeated in verse 29. God is a God of perfect equality. If we think He isn't, then it's our ways that are unequal. God is the standard, not us.

2. The defense of the New Testament

That wasn't the first or last time God has been accused of being unfair in His treatment of men. The writers of Scripture took on this accusation repeatedly. At least a half-dozen times this statement is made in the New Testament: "God is no respecter of persons." That's another way of saying God treats everyone equally.

a) Romans 2:9-11--The apostle Paul said, "Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek; for there is no respect of persons with God." Those who don't know God will be judged, and those who do know God will be blessed.b)

Colossians 3:24-25--"Knowing that of the Lord, ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done, and there is no respect of persons."

God rewards those who do right and judges those who do wrong. He has no regard for their individual personalities.

B. God Gives Salvation Equally

God also gives the blessings of salvation equally to all. All who come to the Lord Jesus Christ receive the same salvation--no one gets any more or any less. No matter what the circumstances are and no matter how diligent or faithful our service, it is God's pleasure to give us the same salvation. Let's look at Matthew 19:30--20:16: "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a man that is an householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And 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 market place, and said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatever is right, that shall ye receive. So when evening was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their hire, beginning

from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a denarius. And when they had received it, they murmured against the householder, saying, These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong. Didst not thou agree with me for a denarius? Take what is thine, and go thy way; I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last."

Notice that the parable is bracketed by a repetition of the same proverb: "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first the last shall be first, and the first last." It is apparent that the parable is designed to illustrate that maxim. To understand what our Lord is teaching we will look at four elements: the proverb, the parable, the point, and the principles.

I. THE PROVERB

A. The Riddle Defined

A proverb is a short statement of wisdom, usually of unknown or ancient origin. In this case it is this: the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Now it may be that the Lord borrowed this particular proverb from His own day. We don't have any evidence of it in any other writings, but it may have been a common statement. Perhaps He coined it Himself. We do know He used it on several occasions. So it was certainly a part of His teaching.

B. The Riddle Solved

Some proverbs come in the form of a riddle, and this is one of them. It's hard to know what it means when you first read it. What does "first" and "last" refer to? Before I began to study this passage, I mulled over the parable in my mind. The one thing that stands out is that everyone will be the same. In a typical race, someone finishes first, someone finishes last, and some finish in the middle. But in this race everyone crosses the finish line at the same time. In a sense, the last are first and the first are last. All are the same.

II. THE PARABLE

A. The Scene Set (v. 1)

Matthew 20:1 says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man that is an householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard." Christ is discussing the Kingdom of heaven, which means this is a spiritual lesson. We're not talking about earthly things; we're talking about things in the sphere of God's domain. For us to understand the spiritual dimension, we need an earthly illustration because we're earthly-minded. Parables are earthly illustrations.

1. The owner introduced

Jesus begins the parable by introducing us to a man who is what the Greek text labels an oikodespotes--oikos means "house" and despotes means "ruler." Verse 15 says, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" The money he paid the laborers was his own, which indicates that he was the owner.

2. The work illuminated

a) The time of day Incorporated within the man's estate was a vineyard. Verse 1 says he went out early in the morning. That means he went out prior to six o'clock in the morning. The Jewish day began at six in the morning and ended at six at night. They worked a twelve-hour day. So he went into town to hire laborers to work in his vineyard.b) The type of work The Jews were very familiar with vineyards. The land of Palestine is divided into two basic types of land: plains and mountain slopes. The plains, such as the valley of the Jordan, the valley of Sharon, and the valley of Esdraelon (otherwise known as the plain of Megiddo where Armageddon will be centered), are characterized by

grain fields. The slopes of the mountains are terraced for the planting of vineyards. It was difficult work because the terraces had to be supported with stones that were carried by hand and put in place. Any soil that was required in the terraces had to be carried on the shoulders of the men. It required great effort because they were steep slopes. c) The time of harvestThe crop was planted in the spring. During the summer, the vines would be pruned. The branches would be tied down to produce the greatest amount of fruit. They would harvest the grapes near the end of September. It wasn't long after that the rainy season began. So it was vital that the harvest be completed before the rains began. Harvest time was hectic. The owner knew he had to get his crop in. He needed more help beyond his regular servants, so he went to the village to hire day-laborers to help him harvest his crop.

3. The laborers identified

The laborers would gather in the town, usually at the marketplace (Gk., agora)--a common meeting place for day-laborers. There they would wait for anyone who might hire them. The owner of the estate showed up before 6 A.M. so he could hire them for a full day.

a) Their classificationWhat kind of laborers did the owner hire? In the society of Israel, there were people who owned land. Then there were those who were employed by the landowners on a long-term basis. Household servants and slaves would be included in this group. But the lowest class of people on the economic ladder were the day-laborers. They had no guarantee of work beyond the moment. They came to the marketplace every day, hoping they would be hired. b) Their wageThe wage the day-laborer received was usually very low. But they had to work for it because they were desperate just to have work. A Roman soldier was paid a denarius a day, and that was a respectable wage. Servants who were well-respected by their employers were often paid a denarius a day. But a day-laborer was usually hired for much less because he wasn't in any position to negotiate. If he didn't work, he didn't eat that day. He was barely able to provide for himself, his wife, and his family.

God's Concern for the Day-Laborer

God's concern for such workers is clearly stated in two verses from the Old Testament:

1. Leviticus 19:13--"The wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning." When a man was hired for a day, he needed to be paid at the end of the day.

2. Deuteronomy 24:15--"Thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it; lest he cry against thee unto the Lord, and it be sin unto thee." The day-laborers were on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. But the Lord included within the Levitical law the command that they be cared for properly. When they worked a day, they were to be paid a day's wage. If they didn't get paid, they couldn't eat that day. They weren't able to stockpile their resources. They were not self-sufficient apart from their daily labor.

B. The Laborers Hired (vv. 2-7)

1. The first group (v. 2)

Matthew 20:2 says, "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard." The owner offered the laborers an honorable wage, one that was more than they would normally receive. The men agreed that it was fair because they went to work for that amount.

2. The second group (vv. 3-4)

The owner "went out about the third hour [nine o'clock in the morning], and saw others standing idle in the market place, and said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you. And they went their way" (vv. 3-4). When the owner went back to town, he found other men who were out of work. They weren't idle in terms of not wanting to work, otherwise they wouldn't have been gathered at the market place waiting for someone to hire them.

I get the feeling that the owner didn't need the workers as much as he was compassionate for their needs. He knew if they didn't work, they wouldn't eat. After finding them, he sent them into the field to

work. Notice that he didn't negotiate a price with them. All he said was, "Whatever is right, I will give you" (v. 4). They took him at his word, knowing him to be an honorable man. They weren't in any position to negotiate-- they had no choice but to take whatever they could get. Consequently, day-laborers often were taken advantage of. But apparently they trusted this man, so they went to work in the vineyard without an established wage.

3. The third and fourth groups (v. 5)

Matthew 20:5 says, "Again he went out about the sixth [noon] and ninth hour [three o'clock in the afternoon], and did the same." The owner continued to go back to the marketplace and gathered more to work in his vineyard.

4. The last group (vv. 6-7)

The work day was almost gone when verse 6 says, "About the eleventh hour [five o'clock in the afternoon] he went out, and found others standing idle." Those workers had been waiting all day. By that time they would have been feeling depressed, realizing they would be providing no sustenance for their family that day. But the owner said to them, "Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us" (vv. 6-7). Perhaps they had not been hired because they were older, weaker, or ignorant, but certainly not for their lack of desire. Then the owner said, "Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatever is right, that shall ye receive" (v. 7). You can be sure they ran to get in all the work they possibly could, knowing they were working without an established wage.

C. The Laborers Rewarded (vv. 8-15)

1. The generosity of the owner (vv. 8-9)

Verse 8 says, "So when evening was come [six o'clock], the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their hire." The owner was an honorable man--he was faithful to the commands in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to pay the laborers at the end of the day. Then the owner added, "Beginning from the last unto the first" (v. 8). That intersects with our proverb. Those who came to work last were paid first and the ones who came to work first were paid last. That is how the parable illustrates the proverb. The men in the front of the line worked one hour while those at the end of the line had worked twelve. Verse 9 says, "When they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a denarius." That was a whole day's wage given for just one hour of work.

2. The grumblings of the last in line (vv. 10-12)

a) Their false assumption (v. 10) You can imagine the men at the end of the line were saying, "Did you see that? He's paying a denarius an hour!" They thought by the time he got to them they'd receive twelve days' wages. Implied in the parable is that the three o'clock, the noon, and nine o'clock groups received a denarius. Verse 10 says, "But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a denarius." Is that fair? Well, what had he promised to give them? A denarius (v. 2). And they believed it to be a fair wage. b) Their jealous murmurings (vv. 11-12) Matthew 20:11 says, "When they had received it, they murmured against the householder." The word translated "murmured" in the Greek text is egogguzon. It's onomatopoeic--the word is formed by the sound that is made. They grumbled and complained. In verse 12 they said, "These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden and heat of the day." The owner wasn't unfair with them; it was just that he was generous with the rest. Some people have a hard time when others prosper. The issue here is not the fairness of the householder, but the jealousy of those who worked the longest. Don't impugn God; impugn them. They received what was fair, but they were filled with envy, saying, "Thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden and heat of the day" (v. 12). The Greek word translated "heat" is often used of the scorching east wind that would parch the lips and crack the skin. They very graphically dramatized their plight. It is extremely hot in that part of the world at the end of September. If you have ever performed hard labor as they had, you can appreciate their situation. You could easily agree with their analysis.

3. The goodness of the owner

In Matthew 20:13 the owner answered one of them and called him "friend." That is a translation of the Greek word hetairos, which is a nondescript term for a person. Then the owner said, "I do thee no wrong. Didst not thou agree with me for a denarius? Take what is thine, and go thy way; I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (vv. 13-15).

An "evil eye" is jealousy. The evil eye resents what someone else has. Jealousy is a part of our fallen nature. The first laborers weren't upset over their wage because they knew it was a generous one. What they couldn't stand was someone else getting the same thing without working as hard as they had. They should have said, "Isn't it wonderful how generous the owner is to those who have the same need we have but weren't hired as early?"

D. The Proverb Repeated (v. 16)

Verse 16 says, "So the last shall be first, and the first last." The King James Version adds, "Many are called, but few chosen." The better manuscripts don't include that phrase. It seems to have been borrowed from Matthew 22:14.

III. THE POINT

What is the point of the parable? We understand that the owner paid all the laborers equally, whether they started early or late. So the last shall be first and the first shall be last means everyone receives the same thing. The last laborers hired were the first in line to receive their wages, and the first were last in line to get the same wage. The point is equality. But what is the spiritual point? What does this parable teach about the Kingdom?

A. The Commentary on the Parable

1. The interpretation

The householder represents God. The vineyard is the Kingdom-- the sphere of God's rule. The laborers are those who come into the service of the King. The day of work is their lifetime. The evening is eternity. The denarius is eternal life. You could say the steward represents Jesus Christ, to whom has been committed all judgment. So what does it all mean? No matter how long you worked in God's Kingdom and no matter how hard or easy your circumstances were, when you get to the end of your life, you will receive the same eternal life as everyone else in God's Kingdom. Isn't that a great truth?

2. The implications

Some Christians serve Christ their entire life, and some for a very short time. You can imagine how those who worked the full twelve hour day felt. They had worked in the hot sun while those who were hired at five o'clock worked when the breezes began at twilight. But that's how it is in God's Kingdom. We all enter into the same eternal life. We all inherit the same glories in heaven.

Our Lord is teaching us that no matter how easy or hard our lot in life is, and no matter how long or short our service, we will all receive the same spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. To put it another way, the penitent thief will inherit the same glories of eternity that belong to the apostles. Peter was crucified upside down for the cause of Christ. The penitent thief was crucified for his crimes. But both entered into eternal life to receive the same blessings. You may think that is inequitable, but it is more than any of us deserve. It is only by God's good pleasure that we are able to enter His Kingdom. Those who come to Christ early in life will receive the same eternal life as those who come to Him late in life. Those who have not served Christ with a great amount of toil will receive the same eternal life as those who have served Christ to the point of dying a martyr's death. The benefits of the Kingdom are the same for everyone as a result of God's grace and nothing else. That tells me we cannot earn our way into heaven. Entrance into the Kingdom is not based on a merit system.

A pastor I know very well related to me the circumstances that surrounded his father's death. His father lived his whole life as a Christ rejector, which was the opposite of his son, who had loved

Christ and preached His gospel for years. His father suffered a stroke. While he lay in the hospital near death, no longer able to communicate, his son presented the gospel of Jesus Christ to him with all his heart. He told him how he could embrace Christ even at this point in his life, and even after rejecting Him for so many years. My friend told me, "I don't know whether he received Christ or not, but I did all I could to give him the message. And I have the confidence to know that if he believed, he'll inherit the same eternal life as I." That's a good illustration of what Jesus is teaching in the parable.

B. The Context of the Parable

1. The rejection of submission

In Matthew 19:16-22, a rich young ruler came to Jesus to find out how to get eternal life. Jesus told him how, but he didn't want it because it meant making a sacrifice he wasn't willing to make.

2. The recipients of salvation

In response to Christ's dialogue with the ruler, Peter spoke on behalf of the Twelve in verse 27: "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee." They did what the young ruler wasn't willing to do. You could say that the disciples are in the 6 A.M. group. When Jesus began His ministry, He called the Twelve first. So this parable is primarily directed to them. They were the ones who had been working through the heat of the day. They had been bearing that burden much longer than a twelve-hour day—it had been nearly three years. Since they had deprived themselves of a home and cut themselves off from former relationships, they wanted to know what they would receive for their sacrifice.

The disciples thought they were going to receive something special. I believe they loved Christ. I also am confident they believed He was the Messiah. They struggled with that idea at times, but they were genuine believers. However, connected with their genuineness was the idea that they were going to inherit the Kingdom very soon, and that excited them. They expected an earthly, political Kingdom and all the glory and riches that would come with it. They thought that since they were the first group, they would sit at the right and left of the Messiah, calling the shots when the Kingdom came. They believed Jesus was going to bring the Kingdom at any minute. That's why they were so confused when it didn't happen. And you can imagine what must have been going through their minds when it looked like the entire prospect had collapsed at Christ's crucifixion. Even after Jesus rose from the dead and they met together in Acts 1, they still said, "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). They expected to get their crowns and thrones right then. They were looking for something special for themselves.

3. The requirement of suffering

In Matthew 20:17, which immediately follows the parable, Jesus is going to Jerusalem with the disciples. He then pulls them aside away from the crowd to explain their purpose for going there. He says, "We go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him. And the third day he shall rise again" (vv. 18-19). Jesus tells them He was not going to Jerusalem to set up the Kingdom, but to die. The disciples didn't understand that.

4. The request of selfish men

a) The instigation of the two disciples Matthew 20:20-21 says, "Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons [James and John], worshiping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these, my two sons, may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom." When you think about the apostle John, you usually picture a gentle, sensitive, and humble guy. And you can conceive of James as someone who was willing to be all that the Lord wanted him to be. But they wanted to be hotshots in the Kingdom! The disciples were constantly arguing about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom. When Jesus washed their feet in the upper room the night before His death, they argued about it (Luke 22:24). That's why no one thought about washing the others' feet before the

meal. None of them wanted to take the role of a servant and be disqualified from being the greatest. They all wanted to be the head man next to Jesus. So Jesus girded His loins and washed their feet Himself (John 13:4-5). James and John were so hungry for the chief seats in the Kingdom that they brought their mother to appeal to Jesus. They remembered He had told them that "in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye shall also sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). James and John interpreted that to mean there would be a throne on His right and one on His left. They were self-centered. Jesus told them that they wouldn't be able to handle what He was going to have to go through, and that only the Father could give those seats to them (Matt. 20:23).^b The indignation of the ten disciples Verse 24 says, "When the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren." Why? Because they thought James and John might get something they wouldn't. They were upset because they wanted the seats next to Christ. You can imagine what the Kingdom would have been like had they all entered with those attitudes. They would have made mad dashes to get the inside seats! Jesus probably grew tired of their quibbling about what they thought they might get as a result of their sacrifice in following Him. So Jesus taught them about being humble: "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister" (v. 26). Jesus isn't looking for people who want the chief seats, but for those who will serve like the Son of man, who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (v. 28).

5. The restoration of sinners

After Jesus taught them about service, they came across two blind men as they left Jericho. Blind men were outcasts in that society. Many were forced to line the roads and beg for money to support themselves. As Jesus passed they said, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David. And the multitude rebuked them, that they should hold their peace; but they cried the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David. And Jesus stood still, and called them, and said, What will ye that I should do unto you? They say unto Him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. So Jesus had compassion on them, and touched their eyes; and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed him" (vv. 30-34). You can well imagine that the disciples did not consider those two blind beggars as being in the same class as themselves. That was the attitude Jesus wanted to correct. The blind beggars came to Christ later than the disciples. In a short time Jesus was going to die. What did they endure? They were like the laborers who were hired at five o'clock and worked for an hour in the cool of the day. It didn't seem like they had to pay a high price to get into the Kingdom.

C. The Conclusion of the Parable

1. Equal salvation for all

The Lord was attempting to deal with the selfish, indulgent, envious, and confused perception of the disciples with the parable of the laborers. He was saying, "Salvation is not earned; it is a gift I give according to My sovereign will. It is not a question of when you came in, how long you worked, how hot the trials were, or how hard you worked." There is nothing mentioned in the parable about how hard anyone worked.

Jesus is going to give the same reward to everyone. However, we often think in the same way as the disciples, saying, "I've served the Lord through many trials. I've suffered through great pain." Yet we all will receive the same eternal life. Tax collectors, harlots, beggars, and blind people will share in the same eternal life as those who served their entire life or were martyred for the cause of Christ. We all will be blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus because that's the way God wants it.

2. Equal inheritance for all

When we get to heaven, we'll all live in the Father's house. Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2). We're all the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). None of us are just guests at the wedding. Romans 8:17 says we are "heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ." The Roman inheritance was different than the Jewish inheritance. The heads of Jewish families gave a double

portion to the older son, but the heads of Roman families gave equal inheritance to all members. And that is the kind of inheritance Paul was referring to in Romans 8:17, only with greater significance because we don't each receive an equal part; we each receive the whole!

The Ultimate Reward Now you might bring up the subject of rewards at this point, for certainly the epistles tell us that we will receive rewards for our service to Christ. But that is a different issue because Jesus is discussing the equal nature of eternal life.

There are different rewards that the Lord will be pleased to give His children. I don't know what those rewards are, but I can't imagine anything better than everlasting life. Once you've received that, how could you have anything more perfect than perfect life? There are degrees of punishment in hell, but everything in hell is typified by the absence of God. You can't have more or less of the absence of God. And if you have everlasting life, you can't have more or less everlasting life. I don't understand what God's rewards will be like; I just know He gives the same eternal life to all believers. He makes no distinction between male and female, rich and poor, or Jew and Greek (Gal. 3:28).

IV. THE PRINCIPLES

A. God Initiates Salvation

In the parable, the householder went out to find the laborers and bring them into his vineyard. God goes into the marketplace of the world to seek those who would serve in His Kingdom. Since God does the seeking and the saving, we have no right to put demands on what we ought to get. If He happened to seek and save us early so that we have our whole life to serve Him, that is His choice. If we are saved late so that we have just a brief time to serve Him, that too is His choice.

B. God Establishes the Terms of Salvation

The householder told the first laborers that he would give them a denarius. He set the price and they agreed to those terms. The rich young ruler didn't agree to pay the price Christ set. But these day-laborers were so poor and in need that they willingly came on his terms. When he approached the other groups of laborers, he told them he would pay them what was right, and they came on those terms. They didn't argue.

C. God Continues to Call Men into His Kingdom

I believe the reason that laborers were hired at different hours is to show us that all through man's day God is calling people into His Kingdom. It is an ongoing work. In John 9:4 Jesus said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh, when no man can work." Redemption continues on until the judgment comes.

D. God Redeems Those Who Are Willing

The men who were looking for work needed someone to care for them. They were not rich, self-sufficient, or complacent. They were poor and meek, begging for work. Those without resources came to the master for what they could get only from him. Those are the kind of people who are saved--those who in the last hour of life still have no resources. It is only through the compassion of the owner who gives the denarius that they are saved. We don't know why the householder didn't hire all the men in the morning. But neither do we know why God saves people at different stages of life. We do know that the need is always there. It is His sovereignty that determines when He will come to those whose hearts are willing because they lack resources.

E. God Is Compassionate Toward Those Who Have No Resources

God reaches out to those who recognize their need. The householder asked the laborers why they were idle. They said to him, "Because no one will hire us. We want the right thing, but no one will provide for us. We want sustenance, we want bread and food, but we don't have anyone to give it to us." It is those kind of people that the Lord reaches out to.

F. God Saves Those Who Are Willing to Work

All who came into the householder's vineyard worked. Some may have come in at the last hour, but they worked. I don't see any freeloaders in the group. Some worked a short time and some worked a

long time, but they all worked. And that's the way it is in salvation: your faith is known by your works (James 2:18).

G. God Keeps His Promise

The householder told the first group he would give them a denarius. I believe that illustrates that God never gives less than He promises. When some of us came to Christ, we knew well what was prepared for us of the fullness of eternal life. We had been instructed in the gospel or raised in the church. There may be others of us who came to Christ in desperation--in a situation where there was no price to negotiate. Maybe we came to Him later on in life when we were desperate because we needed sustenance. But whatever He wants to give us is enough.

H. God Gives More Than We Deserve

The householder gave the other groups of laborers, who did not work a full day, more than they deserved. Everything we receive is of grace.

I. God Requires Humility

We need to have a sense of unworthiness. There is no room for jealousy--no place for thinking I ought to have more in glory than you ought to have. There is no room for me to act the part of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The younger brother lived a wild life, wasted all his substance, and wound up in a pig pen. He finally came home, repented, and embraced his father. The father killed the fatted calf, put a ring on his son's finger, put a robe on him, and had a celebration for him. What was the older brother doing? Complaining. Why? Because he didn't get a fatted calf? No. He could have had all the fatted calves he wanted. Because he didn't get a ring? He could have had all the rings he wanted. Because he didn't get a robe? He had many robes in his closet. He was complaining because he didn't think his brother deserved what he got. You could say, "I've been faithful in the church. I haven't blown my life. I know of other Christians who left the church but then the Lord accepted them back. Surely in heaven there will be more for me." No. That's the older-brother mentality. That attitude has nothing to do with the equality of grace, but it has a lot to do with the jealousy of men.

J. God Is Gracious

All we receive from God is a matter of His grace. Our works bring nothing to bear on our salvation. God dispenses His sovereign grace to all who come into His vineyard, no matter how long or how short they work, or how hard or easy the work seems. God gives the same eternal life to all who trust in Him. The equalizer is grace, because where sin abounds, grace much more abounds (Rom. 5:20). I think that's what the apostle Paul was referring to when he said this to the Ephesians: "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath made us alive together with Christ (by grace ye are saved), and hath raised us up together, and hath made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4-7). God wants to forever give us the fullness of all that eternal life is, and that's why He redeemed us. God treats everyone equally. When entering His Kingdom, His grace allows us to inherit the same eternal life. The parable of the laborers wonderfully exalts God's grace and eliminates any thought man might have of attaining eternal life on his own.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What was one of the principle duties for God's spokesmen?
2. What does the phrase "God is no respecter of persons" mean?
3. What is a proverb?
4. What is the meaning of the proverb in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16?
5. Why do we need an earthly illustration to teach us a spiritual lesson?
6. Describe the householder.
7. What kind of laborers did the householder hire? Describe them.

8. What kind of wage did the householder offer the first group of laborers? What kind of wage did he offer the other laborers?
9. What event in the parable intersects with proverb in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 (Matt. 20:8)?
10. What was the false assumption of the first group of laborers?
11. What were the first group of laborers really complaining about?
12. What do the various people and things represent in the parable of the laborers?
13. What is the spiritual point of the parable?
14. To whom was Jesus' parable primarily directed?
15. What kind of expectations did the disciples hold for the Kingdom?
16. What reason did Jesus give for going to Jerusalem (Matt. 20:17-19)?
17. What did James and John desire for themselves? Why were the other ten disciples angry with James and John (Matt. 20:20-24)?
18. What kind of people is Jesus looking for to enter His Kingdom?
19. Describe how the Roman inheritance was different from the Jewish inheritance. How does the inheritance God gives His children differ from both (Rom. 8:17)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Have you ever accused God of being unequal in His treatment of people? Give some examples. From this study we have learned that God treats everyone equally. But what about your treatment of others? Do you treat everyone equally? Read James 2:1-13. Analyze your treatment of others in light of this passage. What changes can you put into practice today?
2. The first laborers were envious of the last group because they received the same pay. The Bible has a lot to say about envy. Look up the following verses: Proverbs 14:30; Romans 13:13-14; and James 3:14-16, 4:1-4. Based on those verses, what have you learned about envy? According to James 3:17-18 and 4:7-10, how can you overcome the sin of envy? Commit yourself to follow the suggestions of James to deal with any envious attitudes you have.
3. Review the principles we can learn from the parable of the laborers (see pp. 13-15). Which ones deal with things God does for us? Which ones deal with our responses to God? Think back on the circumstances involving your salvation. How did those principles apply in your circumstances? Don't forget all that God has done for you in giving you salvation. Draw near to Him right now and thank Him for His grace.

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