

Say What?

Hard Sayings of Christ:
The First Will Be Last- Matthew 20:1-17

Parables

Jesus often spoke in parables. Parables are short, true-to-life stories that teach a point or a couple points. Parables are usually set in the events of everyday life, giving them a timeless feel. Jesus used parables to teach us about salvation, God, grace, mercy, the kingdom of God, the return of Jesus, and many other topics. Many of the parables have an end times focus looking at the day when Jesus will return.

Jesus has three main topics of interest in the parables: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship, and the dangers of disobedience. Many insights concerning each emerge when the parables are analyzed and studied. For instance, we find that the central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. It is both present and future. It includes both a reign and a realm. It involves both personal transformation and social reform. It is not to be equated either with Israel or the church, but is the dynamic power of God that creates a community of those who serve Jesus in every area of their lives.

The teaching of the parables raises the question of Jesus' identity. Who is this one who, by his teaching, can claim to forgive sins, pronounce God's blessing on social outcasts and declare that final judgment will be based on the responses people make to him? Jesus' claims to be Messiah are concealed in the parables. They are not as direct as in some other parts of the Gospels, but they are present nevertheless.

Jesus' parables include implicit claims to deity. Jesus associates himself with authority figures in his parables which obviously stand for the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. His audiences must decide whether to accept these claims and worship him or reject them as misguided or even blasphemous. But Jesus' parables leave no neutral ground for casual interest or idle curiosity. They sharply divided their original audiences into disciples and opponents. They continue to function in the same way today (Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, IVP, 326).



**Digging
Deeper**

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*"So the last will be first, and
the first will be last."
Matthew 20:16*

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available for download at
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Background for the Parable

In this passage Jesus uses a literary device common in ancient literature called *inclusio* to bracket off sections of material on a particular topic. Matt. 19:30 and 20:16 bracket off this parable, which follows naturally on the message of sacrificing in this age in 19:23-29. Most Jewish people believed that the day of judgment would set all things right. In their way of thinking, though, the Gentiles (non-Jews) would be cast down and Israel exalted (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background*, IVP, 98).

The parable depicts harvest time, during which a farmer will hire a certain number of seasonal workers each day according to his needs. The number of times this man has to look for more workers suggests that the story is not entirely realistic and that Jesus is more interested in communicating spiritual truths. The denarius was a standard minimum day's wage, so that the farmer's promise is entirely fair.

The farmer goes back out to hire more labor three hours into the workday at 9:00 a.m. with others who are "doing nothing." This phrase could literally be translated as "without work." These men are not deliberately avoiding labor. With their families they may well go hungry that evening if they do not find work. The marketplace sits at the center of town as the major gathering site for community activities. The employer gives them the same assignment as those he hired at sunup, but promises payment merely in terms of what is "right." They would have expected the appropriate fractional percentage of a day's wage, but the farmer never specifies his commitment.

The farmer goes out again at noon and 3:00 p.m., the remaining major divisions of the ancient workday. The employer apparently makes the same vague promise of a fair wage. The workers no doubt have the same expectations as their predecessors. With only one hour of the working day left, at 5:00 p.m. the farmer hires yet one more group of workers. Because Jesus will center attention on this group when the master begins to pay his workers, he stops abbreviating the story here and draws out the dialogue in more detail (Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew*, Holman, 302-303).

In Bible times, the hired servant or worker was always paid at the day's end. Leviticus 19:13 says, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight." And Deuteronomy 24:15 says, "Pay him (the hired worker) his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin." Hired servants lived on the edge of destitution and this kindly provision of the law safeguarded their rights.

There were certain times in Palestine when this story could actually have happened, especially at the grape harvest which came at the end of August and the early part of September. By the middle of September the rains came and it was always a race with the weather to get the crop in (William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, Westminster, 162)

Understanding the Parable

The landowner uses the word "friend" (20:13) as a mild rebuke of the laborers. He tells them that he is not cheating or defrauding them. The owner paid the agreed wage (20:14). Should he want to pay others more, that is his business. Provided he has been just in all his dealings, does he not have the right to do what he wants with his money? These rhetorical questions (20:13-15) show that God's great gifts, simply because they *are* God's, are distributed, not because they are earned, but because he is gracious. God is showing us how the principles of the world don't always translate to the principles of the kingdom of God. The principle in the world is that he who works the longest

receives the most pay. That is just. But in the kingdom of God the principles of merit and ability may be set aside so that grace can prevail (D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew*, Zondervan, 428).

All the workers in the vineyard stand for God's true people. Some appear more deserving than others, but all are rewarded equally. The various hours at which the different men began to work merely illustrates the diverse nature of the citizens of God's kingdom. God's people come to repentance at different times in their lives, at different stages throughout history, with varying levels of commitment and faithfulness. From this parable we learn that many seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to the sovereign, free choice of God (Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 224).

Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's question, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" He says in effect, we have staked our existence upon you, given up our jobs, sacrificed our families and homes. Are we, he goes on in thought, going to be on the same level as the people who take it easy and enjoy life until they grow too old and too worn out to amuse themselves as they did before and then suddenly have an attack of religion, a kind of last-minute religious panic, and quickly become converted? You too, Jesus of Nazareth, will be turning the whole economy upside down if that's the way you are going to treat your people! Jesus then replies to this objection by telling this parable, and this is his thesis: The very thing you do *not* want is precisely what I do. Anybody who comes at the last hour, I pay him in full.

This parable only makes sense when we consider that Jesus is talking about how things work in the kingdom of God. And because he is talking about the way things work in the kingdom of God, nothing we receive can be viewed as something earned or merited. On the contrary, it says that this work is itself a gift and carries its reward in itself; for it brings the workers near to God. We shall understand this parable only if we see that Jesus is here speaking against legalistic religion, against *all* religion of the kind that dwells in our hearts by nature. It is a good thing to realize very clearly how men have toiled, and still toil, in the sphere of religion to earn heaven; they pile high the altars with sacrifices, they do good works solely in order to gain merits for heaven. We must realize that these people are once and for all not doing all this as children who live and move about freely and happily in the Father's house, but that they are doing it as slaves, doing it out of fear, that all this comes not so much from the heart but is for them a means of making themselves worthy of heaven. *If* these people were right- if fellowship with Jesus were a business transaction- then it would be unjust if the person who entered the Lord's service at the end of life were to receive the same as did all those who had toiled for God throughout their life. It is highly important to see that our parable characterizes as absolutely false this whole "religious" view of things.

Nor should we be jealous of those who came to God late in life. If the people who come last in our parable, if the latecomers to faith really understand who he is that has called them into his service, the idea will never even occur to them to laugh at the others because they have worked from early morning through the heat of the day while they have got off so "easy." They most certainly will not flaunt their cheaply earned denarius before the others. No, on the contrary, they will regret every hour they spent in idleness, every hour before they found their way through to the meaning of their life, to the great homecoming.

They will realize that all the time they squandered away in futile freedom outside the vineyard was not a good time after all, and they were not happy in it either. They will regret every hour in which they did not know the Lord, and wasted their life on unimportant things. They will not say, "Thank God we got our denarius so cheaply; thank goodness that a last-minute repentance is enough." Rather, they will thank God for rescuing them from eternal destruction. We, too, should thank God for saving these. For they came into the kingdom of God the same way we did: by God's sheer grace (Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, Harper & Brothers, 116, 120-121).

Home Group Questions

1. Read Matthew 19:27-30. How does this parable help answer Peter's question?
2. How does the pay scale in this story reflect the way things work in the kingdom of God?
3. Is it fair that people can come to Jesus late in life? Why or why not?
4. How does this parable illustrate Jesus' words that "the last will be first, and the first will be last"?
5. Does jealousy exist among Christians? Why?
6. What do we need to understand to protect ourselves from getting jealous?
7. What steps we can take to get rid of jealousy?

Questions for Personal Application

8. How do you view people who have more "success" in the Christian life than you? Do you thank God for what he is doing in their life or harbor jealousy? What would Jesus' response be to your jealousy?