

Rewards For Faithful Service

(Matthew 19:27–20:16)

Intro: Labor Day, which is celebrated on the first Monday in September each year, is one of America's great national holidays. The proposal to celebrate a day honoring those who labor grew out of the trade and labor unions in the late 19th century. Labor Day has been a national holiday since 1877 and is celebrated in all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia. It is often accompanied with parades, and is observed by people as a time for traveling, picnics, family get-togethers, or just plain relaxing. Labor Day is called the “unofficial end of summer” because it marks the end of the summer season. Football fans are especially excited at this time of the year, because the National Football League (NFL) host their season's opening game on the first Thursday after Labor Day.

In recognition of Labor Day, I would like to look at the Lord Jesus' take on labor, and its rewards. The central passage on the subject of labor and eternal rewards is recorded in Matthew chapter 20:1-16. Most of you will be familiar with this parable of the Workers In The Vineyard. This is actually the central portion of an extended section in Matthew's gospel that follows right after Jesus' confrontation with the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-26. In fact Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler serves as the foundation to Jesus' teaching on Rewards for faithful service.

This rich young man came to Jesus and asked Him, “*What must I do to have eternal life?*” These words reflected the common Rabbinical teaching of the day—that doing good deeds would guarantee eternal life. The rich young man claimed to be righteous, in that he had kept the Mosaic Law. However, he wanted to know what good work he could perform to guarantee eternal life. Jesus attempted to show the young man, that in spite of his claim to have kept the Law perfectly, he was a sinner in need of salvation. The Lord Jesus zeroed in on the young man's *sin of covetousness* by telling him to go and sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow Him. The young man's unwillingness to follow Jesus' instructions showed he was a sinner in need of salvation. Unfortunately, he went away grieved because he was one who owned much property (19:22).

Jesus' interaction with this rich young ruler prompted Peter's question to in verse 27: “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” Peter and the rest of the disciples were serving the Lord, and

they had sacrificed to do so. Christ responds to Peter's question with this parable about the Workers in the Vineyard. He demonstrates that faithful service will be rewarded, not according to human principles, but according to God's graciousness. Jesus frames the parable with these words, "*Many who are first will be last; and the last first*" (19:30 and 20:16). God will determine the rewards each person will receive.

This brings us to our study this morning **Rewards for Faithful Service**
Matthew 19:27–20:16

I. Rewards in the Kingdom (19:27-30)

A. Peter's question (v. 27)

Peter, having listened to the interaction between the rich young ruler and the Lord, steps forward and asks Jesus in Matthew 19, verse 27, "*Behold Lord, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us when You come in Your Kingdom?*" Peter, speaking for all the disciples, the "we" is emphatic in the Greek, realizes that they had in fact done what the rich young ruler refused to do. They had left all and followed Jesus in discipleship. The disciples wanted to know what reward they would get because they had left everything and followed Jesus.

B. Jesus' reply (vv. 28-30)

v. 28—And Jesus said to them, "*Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*"

The Lord Jesus promises His disciples that they will share in the eschato-logical rule and judicial power of the Son of Man when He comes again in the *regeneration* at the end of the age. The Jews were looking for Messiah to come, and after defeating all of His enemies, expected Him to create a new heaven and a new earth. The OT prophet Isaiah records two prophecies in 65:17-25 and 66:26 depicting this future regeneration or restoration of creation. The only other place this word "*regeneration*" is used in the NT is in **Titus 3:5**. Paul uses

“*regeneration*” in Titus 3:5 to refer to the spiritual rebirth the Holy Spirit performs on believers when they trust in Jesus Christ.

This imagery of the Son of Man coming in power and great glory comes out of **Daniel 7:13-14** where the Ancient of Days, God the Father, gives all the kingdoms of the world to His glorified Son. Jesus will sit on His glorious throne, and His twelve disciples will sit upon twelve thrones, and judge over the twelve tribes of Israel. The time of this promise will be fulfilled in that future day when the Son of Man comes in glory to judge this Christ-rejecting world. **Matthew 24:29-31** says “*Immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . the Son of Man will come on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory, and He will send forth His angels to gather together His elect.*” **Matthew 25:31** records a similar scene of the Son of Man “*coming in glory, and all His angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne, and all the nations will be gathered before Him for judgment.*” One final picture of Jesus’ glorious second coming is recorded by John in **Revelation 19:11-21**.

v. 29—Promise of rewards “*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.*”

Jesus assures these twelve disciples—excluding Judas who would be replaced by Matthias—that their sacrificial service to Him will be richly rewarded in this life and in the life to come. A broader promise, given to all believers, is recorded in **Mark 10:29-30**, Jesus says, “*Anyone who gives up family or farms to follow Him as a disciple, will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, and in the age to come they will receive eternal life.*”

v. 30—contains a warning in connection with rewards. **Jesus says, “Many who are first will be last; and the last first.”** The Lord says in effect, “*There are going to be some surprises in heaven.*” Many who thought that they were so spiritual, who served so much and were first in God’s eyes, are going to actually end up last in line in the kingdom. And others, who were viewed as nobodys by those who thought they were somebodys, will end up first in line for rewards in heaven. They will receive many more rewards than anyone else. God will judge every man’s service for Christ and render rewards according to His gracious

character. **Jesus says, “*The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*”**

The Lord Jesus goes on to illustrate His warning in 19:30 with the Parable of the Gracious Landowner in 20:1-16.

II. Parable Of The Gracious Landowner (20:1-16)

B. Hiring laborers (20:1-7)

Jesus tells a story in which a landowner hires workers to pick grapes in his vineyard. The number of times the man returns to the market place to hire additional workers may reflect the need for additional workers to harvest the grapes. Harvesting ripe grapes is a matter of utmost urgency. Grapes have to be harvested when they reach their peak, when their flavor and sugar content reaches its optimum level. **Raccoons know when to pick**

vv. 1-2—“*The kingdom of heaven is like a certain landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 “And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.*”

The first group of workers, hired early in the morning, probably 6:00 a.m., bargained with the landowner. He agreed to pay the laborers a *denarius* for the day, and sent them into his vineyard. As noted earlier in our study of Matthew, a *denarius* was a Roman silver coin used to pay a day-laborer. This first group of laborers is the only group of laborers that Jesus bargains with. The remaining groups of laborers all go to work trusting in the landowner to do “*whatever is right.*” Keep this in mind, as it will be important to the conclusion of the story.

vv. 3-5—The landowner returned to the market place about the third, sixth, and the ninth hour, *at 9 a.m., 12 and 3 p.m.*, and hired additional men. **He promised to give them whatever is right, just or fair**, so they went to work in his vineyard. These workers would have expected the appropriate division of a day’s wage, but the landowner never specifies an amount.

vv. 6-7—describe how the landowner, with only one hour of the work day left “*went out about the eleventh hour (5 p.m.), and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’*” **7** “*They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into the vineyard.’*”

Notice that with this last group there is no mention of compensation. They trusted that the landowner would do what was right.

B. Paying the laborers (20:8-16)

As the workday draws to a close, the owner of the vineyard moves from hiring to paying the laborers. **We read in vv. 8-9**

vv. 8-9—“*And when evening had come (6 p.m.), the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’”* **9** “*And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.”*”

The landowner directs his foreman to call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group first. The first group of workers to be paid, the last group who had worked only one hour, must have been shocked when they were paid a denarius, a day's wage, for working only one hour.

vv. 10-12—“*And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.*” **11** “*And when they received it, **they grumbled at the landowner,** 12 saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’*”

The first group of workers that grumbled over the landowner's generosity represent the Jews' of Jesus' day. They rejected Jesus' gracious offer of forgiveness, but grumbled against Him for reaching out to tax-gatherers and sinners. The grumbling workers also represent the Jews' that continually grumbled against God in Moses' day (Exod. 16:7-12; Num. 14:27; Deut. 1:27).

vv. 13-15—“*But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 ‘Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’*”

The landowner provides a threefold defense: first, he reminds the grumbling workers that no injustice had been done to them, for they had received the amount they had demanded of him, a *denarius* for a days work (v. 13); second, he has the right to do what he wants with his money, especially when he is showing generosity in the use of his money (v. 14); and third, the basic issue is not that they have been wronged, but they are jealous. Literally, they have an evil eye because he has shown generosity to others.

The parable ends in v. 16 by restating the central truth on rewards: ***“Thus the last shall be first, and the first last.”***

The literary artistry Jesus employs in the telling of this parable is marvelous. Whereas the order of hiring is from the earliest to the latest, the payment of the wages is in reverse order, ***from the last to the first***. This causes a heightening of expectation on the part of the earliest workers. They are furious when they receive exactly what they had bargained for.

Praise God for His mercy and grace, which He has displayed to us Gentiles who truly were last, but have been made first through faith in Christ!

Conclusion: Jesus uses this parable to teach His disciples that the matter of rewards is under the sovereign control of God, the “Landowner” in the parable. God is the One before whom all accounts will be settled. What is more, He is gracious and merciful, and we can trust Him to do what is right. ***Rewards are entirely of grace and not according to works.*** Many who have prominent places will someday find themselves demoted. And many who often find themselves at the end of the line will find themselves promoted to the head of the line: ***The last will be first, and the first will be last.***

I am reminded of the story of an elderly missionary couple, Henry C. Morrison and his wife. The Morrises were returning to New York City to retire after 40 years of service in Africa. They had no pension—there were no retirement

programs for missionaries in those days. Their health was broken, and they were defeated, discouraged and afraid. They discovered that they were booked on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big-game hunting expeditions. Everyone on board tried to get a glimpse of the famous president, but no one paid any attention to them. Henry, feeling a little depressed, said to his wife. “Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years and have no one care a thing about us? This man comes back from killing animals in Africa and everyone makes much over him.”

When the ship docked in New York, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor and other dignitaries were there, but no one noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap flat on the East Side, hoping the next day to see what they could do to make a living in the city. That night Henry’s spirit broke. He said to his wife, “I can’t take this; God is not treating us fairly.” And as an ideal, spiritual helpmeet would, she replied “Why don’t you talk to the Lord about how your feeling.” A short time later he back to his wife with a transformed look of contentment on his face. His wife asked, “What happened dear?” Henry replied, “The Lord settled it for me.” “I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. “And when I finished complaining, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Henry, you’re not home yet!’”

God has promised us eternal reward for faithful service when we get home to heaven. He has also provided us with rewards here and now.

It may be well to keep before our minds the familiar Christian saying:

“Tis only one life, twill soon be past.
Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Closing song: **He’s Always Been Faithful To Me!**