

The Parable of the Vineyard

📖 Matthew 19:27-20:16

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Last time we dealt with the little children in 19:13-15 and the rich young ruler in 19:16-26. The instance of the children coming to Him is rather simple. In 19:13 Jesus and His disciples were “in a house” beyond the Jordan and the parents of small children brought them to Him that He might lay His hands on them and pray as was rabbinic custom. The disciples rebuked the children for invading Jesus’ privacy. The parallel in Mark says that Jesus became indignant. In 19:14 Jesus said “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me.” The disciples were not acting with humility. This was contrary to Jesus’ earlier teaching about not hindering another disciple. Here He extended that teaching to little children. Jesus then explained why, “for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” drawing a comparison between how the little children were coming to Him, in simple faith expecting to receive a blessing, with the way a person enters the kingdom, by simple faith expecting to receive a blessing. And in 19:15, after taking the time to lay hands on all of them, Jesus departed from there. The first lesson is that simple faith in Him is all that is necessary to enter the kingdom. The second lesson is that humility is required for greatness in the kingdom. The two lessons address both salvation and discipleship.

The instance of the rich young ruler coming to Him is not so simple. It’s difficult to understand why Matthew included this in his argument and why Jesus responded to him with a message of works rather than simple faith. The commentary literature gives a wide diversity of interpretation. However, when we understand that the rich young ruler thought that he had to and was able to do some singularly good thing to enter the kingdom (19:16) we understand better that Jesus was simply trying to show him that such was not possible with man, but only with God (19:26). It is included because the rich young ruler depicts the leadership of Israel at that time. They were seeking to establish a righteousness of their own and therefore stumbled over the stone of stumbling (Rom 10:1-4).

In 19:16 the rich young ruler came to Him, and I’m paraphrasing the question he asked Him, “What singular intrinsically good act must I do in order to obtain eternal life, that is, to enter the kingdom, to be saved?” In 19:17 Jesus responded by centering on the concept of intrinsic goodness since there is only One who is intrinsically good. “Why are you asking Me about what is intrinsically good? Do you think I have some connection to the One

who is intrinsically good? Or do you think perhaps that I am the One who is intrinsically good? Jesus was trying to correct this man's deficient view of God and his own abilities to please God. But the rich young ruler did not understand and so Jesus said, "but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." Jesus responded with a message of works in order to reveal to this ruler that he was a sinner in need of a righteousness from outside of himself. In 19:18 the ruler said to Him, "Which ones?" Which commandments? The Pharisees had added many commandments beyond the 613 laws of Moses. Which ones was he to keep? Jesus quoted several commandments from the second table of the Ten Commandments and in 19:9 gave a summary of that table, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Had the ruler kept these commandments? Perhaps in the Pharisaic interpretation of externals, but certainly not in the internal sense that God intended. At this the ruler still did not accept that he was a sinner in need of external righteousness and said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" This man was self-righteous, like the rest of the leadership. In response in 19:21 Jesus said to him, "Since you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." What Jesus is doing is taking it to the nth degree. The standard He projected was the standard for a committed disciple. If this standard was kept it would result in great reward in the kingdom. The ruler was an unbeliever but Jesus was elevating the standard simply to show him that he was a sinner and that there was nothing he could do to merit God admitting him into the kingdom. But the ruler apparently would not turn to faith. In 19:22, when he heard this statement, he went away grieving because he owned much property. The ruler loved his riches more than he loved God and more than he loved others. Therefore, in 19:23 Jesus took this as an opportunity to teach His disciples, saying, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The phrase "Again I say to you" indicates that both verses mean the same thing. Therefore, if you say that verse 23 is saying that it is only difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom then you must also say that it is only difficult for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. However, it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Therefore, what Jesus is saying is that it is impossible for a man who trusts in his riches to enter the kingdom of God. That is simply because he has a misplaced trust. One must put his faith in the Messiah for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The ruler never understood this. In 19:25, when the disciples heard this they were very astonished. They viewed riches as a sign that one was favored by God and thereby "saved." So if a rich man wasn't saved then who could be? In 19:26, Jesus, looking at them intently said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." The point is that men cannot save themselves, they cannot merit salvation, and thereby only those men who come to God in non-meritorious faith can be saved. The rich young ruler did not and would not come this way. Jesus tried multiple times to get him to realize his inability to do anything to merit God's favor but the man never realized this and so went away grieving and never had faith, as far as we know.

This discussion provides the background for the next discussion in 19:27-30 and leads into the parable of the vineyard in 20:1-16. Jesus is continuing to teach His disciples in order to prepare them for ministry in the coming

Church age. The parable, like the rich young ruler, has a wide divergence of opinion in the commentary literature. Probably very few commentators have actually centered on the real issue in the parable.

To get into it, Peter heard something in Jesus' dialogue with the rich young ruler that peeked his interest and so in 19:27 he inquired. What peeked his interest was verse 21, "...go, sell all your possessions, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me." This was something the rich young ruler was unable to do, but in 19:27, **Peter**, as spokesmen of the group, **said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"** What exactly is the treasure we will get in the kingdom? There are three things to observe about this question. First, they expected a future kingdom where there would be possessions. They expected if they made sacrifices in this life then they could store up treasure in heaven to be used in the kingdom. This was a right expectation. There is an earthly kingdom to come wherein those who made sacrifices will have possessions. Second, they did not have the correct attitude toward getting possessions in the kingdom. The surrounding context shows that he and the other disciples were overly obsessed with being the greatest in the kingdom and wanted to know where they would be ranked. Earlier, in 18:1 they were arguing among themselves as to which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. Later, in 20:20 the mother of the sons of Zebedee requested of Jesus that her two sons sit one on His right and one on His left in the kingdom. So they were right to expect an earthly kingdom to come wherein those who made sacrifices will have possessions but they had the wrong attitude toward getting possessions. Third, they wanted to know ahead of time what possessions they would get, presumably because they wanted to make sure that what they were sacrificing would be worth it. This question really sets the stage for the remainder of Jesus' teaching and the parable of the vineyard which is an illustration of the teaching.

In 19:28 **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."** Now the phrases here are very significant for understanding the kingdom so we're going to deal with them and then come back to the central issue. First, the word **regeneration** is the Greek word *παλιγγενησια* and refers to some kind of renewal or rebirth. It is used only two times in the NT, here and Titus 3:5. In Titus 3:5 it is used of the spiritual rebirth. Here it is probably being used of the renewal of the world in the kingdom to come. Montefiore says, "It is used by Josephus for the new birth of the Jewish nation after the return from the Babylonian exile, and by Philo of the new birth of the earth after the flood and after its destruction by fire. The new birth here denotes the world or Israel at the time of the second advent—at the Parousia."¹ It could refer either to the national regeneration of Israel or the renewal of the earth at the initiation of the kingdom. I prefer the idea that it refers to the kingdom but both are true. The nation Israel will undergo a national salvation in connection with the second advent and the world will be renewed at the same time. The Jews expected both and Jesus affirms that they were right to expect both, but probably a renovated earth is in view. Second, the timing of the renovation is **when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne. His glorious throne** is the throne of David promised in the Davidic Covenant of 1 Chron 17:10b-14. David sat on an earthly throne as sole

monarch over all Israel in earthly Jerusalem. In the covenant God promised David that He would set up one of his descendants after him who would be of his sons and this son would build a Temple for God and God would establish his throne forever. This throne, therefore, is also an earthly throne to be established in earthly Jerusalem, not a heavenly throne. It is to be established at the second advent in fulfillment of the covenant. The title **Son of Man** is a title that comes from Dan 7:13. In that context, after the four Gentile kingdoms have run their course then "One like a Son of Man" will come up to the Father and be given eternal dominion, eternal glory and an eternal kingdom so that all people of every nation on earth and every language will serve Him. It was this title that Jesus used of Himself more often than any other. Since the Daniel passage said that He is "like" a **Son of Man** it means that He only resembles mere humanity but is also God. So the **Son of Man** here sitting on His **glorious Davidic throne** is the God-man Messiah ruling in His kingdom.

It's at that time that Jesus said, **that you who have followed Me...will sit upon twelve thrones**. Those who followed Him would exclude Judas Iscariot. Judas had only followed Him physically. He had not followed Him spiritually. Judas was not even a believer. So only those who are believers and followed Him spiritually would **sit upon twelve thrones**. So we may conclude that this is a special privilege for the twelve and that would eventually include Matthias who filled the vacancy left by Judas. I see Matthias as the twelfth apostle, not Paul. In any case, a throne signifies rule and just as Jesus would one day rule in the coming kingdom on David's throne so those who left everything and followed Him would also rule in the coming kingdom.

There would be **twelve thrones** because there are **twelve tribes of Israel**. Note that in the kingdom there are still **twelve** distinct **tribes of Israel**. The word **Israel**, which means "prince with God," always refers to Israel in the NT and never to believing Gentiles or the Church. Constable says, "Israel" always means Israel, the physical descendants of Jacob (Israel), whenever this term appears in the New Testament."² In its 73 uses all 73 refer either to the whole nation of Israel including believers and unbelievers or to the believing remnant of Israel only. But one thing is sure, it never refers to Gentile believers or the Church. Since in the kingdom the whole nation of Israel will be saved then the whole nation is equivalent to the believing remnant. Also note that within that nation the tribal distinctions will also be maintained in the kingdom. Israel and the tribal distinctions will always be maintained, even into eternity, though it's not clear if in eternity there will be any functional distinction. In the kingdom the twelve disciples will sit on **twelve thrones and judge** these **twelve** distinct **tribes**. Since all of them will walk in obedience to the Lord, what will they judge? The word **judge** is from *κρίνω* and in the OT commonly meant to "govern." What is being promised is that they will govern the twelve tribes of Israel. They will serve in administrative positions in the Promised Land.

So they wanted to know in advance what they would get so they could see if the sacrifices they were making would be worth it. Jesus has now told them what they would get. They would get thrones and govern the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a very prominent position. Toussaint said, "The Lord thus confirms the promise He had already given to Peter (Matt 16:19) and enlarges it to include all of the apostles. They are to be rulers over

Israel in the kingdom.”³ Now it’s interesting to point out that these twelve men will become part of the Church in the Book of Acts, they’ll be baptized by the Spirit, but they will rule over the **twelve tribes of Israel** in the kingdom. And what this shows is that when a Jew becomes a part of the Church he does not forfeit His Jewish inheritance promised in Israel’s covenants. Those covenants are eternal in duration and that means they are not suspended during the Church age. Instead the believing Jew is a member of the Church and at the same time a member of the remnant of Israel. Therefore, he will have an inheritance among Israel as well as among the Church. And still these are forever kept distinct.

In 19:29 Jesus goes on to say, **“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”** His point here is to say that it is not just the twelve who will be rewarded for their sacrificial service, but **everyone** who sacrificially serves **will receive much more, and will inherit eternal life.** There are a couple of things to notice here. First, the word translated **many times as much** is a word that means “a hundred times more.” The point is that whoever makes sacrifices to follow Him will receive much more than he sacrificed. Wiersbe said, “In other words, they were not making sacrifices—they were making investments.”⁴ You’re not really giving anything up when you forfeit something to follow Him. You are actually making an investment to enjoy later. Second, Jesus says they **will inherit eternal life.** To **inherit** means “to come into possession of.” Here Jesus says the one who makes such sacrifices will come into the possession of **eternal life.** It’s important to understand that **eternal life** is not an expression primarily of duration of life but of quality of life. To come into possession of eternal life is to come into possession of a high quality of life in the kingdom. In other words, there are degrees of quality of life in the kingdom and this relates to rewards. Rewards are something beyond salvation, they are not to be confused with salvation. Salvation is a free gift but as we see here rewards require us to make a sacrifice for His name’s sake. And notice that it is not just making a sacrifice but making a sacrifice for His name’s sake. If you make a sacrifice for some other reason it will not result in reward. It is only a sacrifice for His name’s sake that results in reward.

But the important point here is that the disciples were wondering if the sacrifices they were making to follow Him would be worth it, what will we get? And Jesus is saying that the sacrifices are really not sacrifices but investments and the return on these investments will be many times more than the sacrifice. So they should not worry about trying to figure out exactly what they would get. God always gives us more than we deserve, that is the main idea.

Now, 19:30 is a strange saying, **But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.** This is a warning. Wiersbe said, “Jesus detected in Peter’s question the possibility of a wrong motive for service. This was why He added the warning that some who were first in their own eyes would be last in the judgment, and some who were last would end up first. This truth was amplified in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.”⁵ Peter and the others wanted to agree to a set reward they would receive before serving. They had the wrong motive. If one

serves with that motive they will only serve half-heartedly and so while being first in their own eyes they will be last in God's eyes and vice versa. The truth is we shouldn't concern ourselves with what we are going to get before the time and we shouldn't try to figure out what our place will be in the kingdom, that is for God to know and decide and we are simply to trust Him. Constable said, "This statement introduces the parable of the workers and their compensation (20:1–15). Jesus repeated it at the end of the parable but in reverse order (20:16). This structure shows that the parable illustrates the point of this verse."⁶

In 20:1 we come to the parable of the vineyard. The expression **For the kingdom of heaven is like** is identical to that found in Matthew 13 when Jesus first began to speak to the crowds in parables. The point of the parables is to conceal truth from those who are rejecting Him and to reveal it to those who are following after Him. A parable is a spiritual truth thrown down alongside of something well-known from everyday life. It is a comparison and it usually points to one major spiritual truth. Therefore, every detail is not to be pressed but we are to search for the one major point.

Let's read the parable and try to find the main point. Verse 1, "**For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.** ²**When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.** ³**And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place;** ⁴**and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.'** **And so they went.** ⁵**Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.** ⁶**And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around;** **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 go into the vineyard too.'** ⁸**When evening came, 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**When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.** ¹⁰**When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.** ¹¹**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.'** ¹³**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, 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?'** ¹⁶**So the last shall be first, and the first last."** Let's make some

observations. Then we will see if we can identify the main point. First, how many groups are there? The first group is verse 2, they **went out early in the morning**. The second group is verse 3, they **went out the third hour**, which is about 9 am. The third and fourth groups are verse 5, they **went out about the sixth hour and the ninth hour**, which is about noon and 3 pm respectively. The fifth group is verse 6, they **went out about the eleventh hour**, which is about 5 pm. So there are five groups all together. Second, apart from the different amounts of time they worked, what is the difference between these groups? There is only one difference. Note

in verse 2 that the first group made an agreement with the landowner. **When he had agreed with the laborers.** That's the only group that made an agreement. They agreed to work **for a denarius for the day**, which was a common Roman soldier's salary for one day. What did the landowner say to the second group in verse 4? **Whatever is right I will give you.** And what about the third and fourth group in verse 5? **The same thing**, he would give them **whatever is right**. And the fifth group in verses 6-7 we are to assume the same thing, he would give them **whatever is right**. There is no agreement made. What can we learn from this? You may be able to count up five distinct groups but in reality how many groups are there? There are only two groups. There is the first group that made an agreement to work for a set wage and the others that made no agreement, they simply went to work and trusted that the landowner would give them what is right. That is the most crucial point of the parable. Third, which group did the landowner instruct the foreman to pay first? The last group first. Verse 8, **beginning with the last group to the first.** So he paid those who started at 5 pm first, then those who started at 3 pm, then those at noon, then 9 am and lastly those who started **early in the morning**, those who had the agreement. Fourth, how did that group respond? They got mad. They probably saw the first group who worked one hour get a whole denarius and thought, boy, we worked 12 hours, we're going to get 12 denarii. But then they saw those who worked three hours also got a denarius, so they quickly did the math and saw their wages cut to four denarii. Then they saw those who worked six hours also receive one denarius, so they quickly pulled out their calculators and concluded that their wages would be cut to two denarii. At the last it turned out they all got one denarius. What then is the point of the parable? It's tied in with the answer to a final question. Fifth, why did the landowner instruct the foreman to pay them in this order? It is one of the striking things that it was done in this order? Why did he do that? To teach them that he was generous and that they had the wrong attitude toward service in seeking to make an agreement with him simply because he is generous. Instead they should just trust him to give them what is right.

Now, this is interesting. What I'm saying is this is not really about rewards. Lots of people interpret this to be about rewards. It's not about rewards. If it's about rewards what do you run the risk of concluding? That everyone gets the same rewards. But 1 Cor 3:8 says, "each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." So everyone does not get the same rewards. What is it about? A parable has one major point and one major point only. Can anyone see? It's about who the landowner is. It's about his character. And who does the landowner represent? God. This is about the character of God. And who is the foreman? He's only mentioned in verse 8. He carries out the will of the landowner. He pays them. He's Jesus, the Messiah. And who is the first group who made an agreement with God to work in the vineyard? The twelve. Everybody else, they're the ones who will receive a hundred fold. Now do you understand the problem with Peter's question in 19:27? Go back and look at the question. We've left everything and followed you, what are we going to get? What did Peter and the twelve want? They wanted an agreement. They said, "We'll make a deal with you God. We'll work for you, but we want to know in advance what we're going to get so we can decide if it's going to be worth it." Was that the right attitude? No. Warren Wiersbe nailed it right here, "The parable is emphasizing *a right attitude in service.*"⁷

The disciples had the wrong attitude. He goes on, "This explains why the householder paid the workers as he did: He wanted those who were hired first (who insisted on a contract) to see how much he paid the workers who were hired later. It was one way the owner could show those workers how really generous he was."⁸

This is a big point. It's not a big point about salvation. It's not a big point about rewards. It's a big point about the generosity of God and that we should not concern ourselves with what we're going to get because if we serve with that attitude we will serve half-heartedly. We should serve simply on the premise that He is a good and generous God and then we will serve full-heartedly. He is not only just but He is also gracious and will therefore always give us above and beyond what is deserved. "The lesson for Christ's disciples is obvious. We should not serve Him because we want to receive an expected reward, and we should not insist on knowing what we will get. God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve."⁹ Until then, let us not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Cor 4:5).

In summary, in 19:27 Peter took his cue from Jesus statement in 19:21 that if we leave everything and follow Him we will have treasure in heaven. Peter wanted to know what that treasure would be. In 19:28 Jesus answered that in the regeneration, the kingdom to come, when the Son of Man would sit on the glorious throne of David, they would sit on twelve thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, in 19:29 all who make sacrifices for His name's sake will receive a hundred fold as much, and will possess a high quality of life in the kingdom. 19:30 is a stiff warning that many who are first in this life will be last in the kingdom to come and vice versa. In 20:1 Jesus used a parable to illustrate. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. In 20:2, after some haggling he made an agreement with the laborers for a denarius for the day. In 20:3 he went out and hired another group about 9 am. In 20:4 they made no agreement but only trusted that the landowner would give them whatever is right and they went to work on that basis. In 20:5 the same thing happened at noon and at 3 pm. In 20:6-7 it happened again as late as 5 pm with only one hour of work to go. The important point is that only one group, the first group, insisted on an agreement. In 20:8 the landowner called the foreman and instructed him to pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first. In 20:9 the first group must have been shocked when they saw that those who worked only one hour received a whole day's wages. But as they saw each other group also receive one denarius 20:10 indicates that they still expected to receive more but they too only received a denarius. In 20:11 they got mad at the landowner and in 20:12 made their argument. But in 20:13 the landowner said to them, did you not agree with me for a denarius? That was the agreement and that is what you worked for. As for me, I wish to give the man who worked one hour the same as you who worked twelve hours. In 20:15, is it not lawful for me to do what I want with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous? So the last shall be first, and the first last." The point is really only one issue, and that is that God is a generous God and therefore we should not seek to know how He will compensate us. It is simply enough to know that He is generous. Those who do so

may be last in this world, but they will be first in the kingdom to come. And those who serve Him expecting a set return may be first in this world, but they will be last in the kingdom to come.

¹ Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 2:270, quoted by Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 229.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 19:27.

³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 229.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 73.

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 73.

⁶ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 19:30.

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 73.

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 74.

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