

God's Kingdom and the Strange Employer

Thomas Robinson, *Wide-Eyed—Listening to Jesus 4*, February 1, 2015

Matthew 19:28 – 20:19 (ESV Adapted)

²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in **the renewed world**, when **the Son of Man** will sit on his **glorious throne** [Dan 7:13-14], **you who have followed me** will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a **hundredfold** and will **inherit life of the age to come** (*aionios*, eternal). ³⁰ But many who are **first will be last**, and the **last first**.”

20:¹ “For **the kingdom of heaven** is like a master of a house who went out **early** in the morning (6 am) to **hire laborers** for his **vineyard**. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a **denarius a day**, he sent them into his vineyard.

³ And going out about the **third hour** (9 am) he saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and **whatever is right I will give you**.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the **sixth hour** (noon) and the **ninth hour** (3 pm), he did the same.

⁶ And about the **eleventh hour** (5 pm) he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here unemployed all day?’

⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’

He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’

⁸ And when **evening** came (6 pm), the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’

⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, **each of them received a denarius**. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

¹¹ And on receiving it they **grumbled** at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and **you have made them equal to us** who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. **I choose to give to this last person as I give to you**. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ In this way the **last will be first**, and the **first last**.”

¹⁷ And as **Jesus was going up to Jerusalem**, he took **the twelve** disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ “See, **we are going up to Jerusalem**. And **the Son of Man** will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will **condemn him to death** ¹⁹ and hand him over to the Gentiles (nations) to be **mocked** and **flogged** and **crucified**, and he will be **raised** on the third day.”

Philippians 2:5-7

⁵ ...Messiah Jesus, ⁶ ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....

Romans 6:23

²³ The wages of sin is death, but God's gift of grace is life of the age to come in Messiah Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13:45-46

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

A Story with the Wrong Ending

Mt is describing the final stages of Jesus' ministry as he is nearing Jerusalem and the final confrontation in the temple. In these sections Jesus says something that leaves his hearers (disciples) wondering – like that camel going through a needle's eye: it's hard for those 'blessed' with money to be saved (19:24). Here he tells a parable about the Kingdom of heaven – a wonderful example of the challenging way Jesus' parables work.

The story is simple and everyday. A vineyard owner goes out at 6 am to hire day laborers for a typical 12-hour work day. Typical pay was a denarius, a silver coin. (Say \$120; \$10 / hour.) It's a good day for work so goes back to the marketplace and hires more workers at 9 am: "I'll pay what is right." (3/4 den. \$90). Then again at noon, 3 pm, even at 5 pm. It's the end of the day but "no one has hired us." He sends them all into the vineyard.

Then at 6 pm comes pay time. They come up in reverse order. The one-hour workers get \$120. Wow! Generosity! This is going to be a good day. The 3-hour workers get \$120 (\$40/hr); not as good but more than they expected. The wow factor fades. Each group gets the same, but less per hour. Finally, those who worked all day. If generosity is here, they of all people should receive it. But no, just \$120, 1 denarius. No wow. Grumbling!

We understand how they feel! We know the language of money. Wages, expectations, generosity, stinginess, fairness, justice. Sure, the employer has paid them what they agreed, but why reward late-comers? Besides, it's crazy. What'll happen tomorrow?

Fixing Jesus' Parable

It's easy to imagine better ways for the employer. Regular pay: fair, no grumbling, less money. Give everybody time and a half. All surprised and happy. Cheering. May cost less too!

Or the story could give some explanation. The last workers had special needs (sick children) that motivated generosity. Or the all-day workers were lazy. The one-hour workers did as much in one hour as the others did all day. Theologically, the all-day workers are legalists thinking they can earn salvation. The one-hour workers are the outcasts trusting grace.

The problem is that Jesus doesn't really give us such explanations. He lets us hear the grumbling: "You've made them equal to us." And the employer's agreement: "I choose to give to this last person as I give to you." But it still seems arbitrary, unfair, unsatisfying.

The story will never work within our familiar language of money, proportional reward, fairness. First, last; last, first? Jesus pushes the disciples/us to break into a different way of thinking.

The Son of Man going to Jerusalem

In Mt 19 Peter asks about disciples who left all to follow. Jesus speaks of the enthroned 'Son of Man' (Dan 7) to tell of wonderful things in 'the renewed world' – thrones, 100x renewals, eternal life/life of the age to come. It's playful, not literal. A hundred mothers! You'll be wonderfully surprised! 'Many first will be last and last first.' Then he tells the parable.

The Kingdom is not like the world of competition and reward. It is the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price. It is everything. It is the life of God given to us. It starts now and never stops. It is living within the love of the eternal God whose love challenges every form of injustice, hatred, oppression, violence. The last being first and first last is not a reversal of reward but is everyone brought to the front (now also the back) – all "equal to us."

But that Son of Man on the throne is also the Son of Man on the way to Jerusalem. He is the one with absolute claim to be first. But he empties himself. He's handed over. He loses. He changes how we see this world's power. He creates new, resurrection life. The first is last; is first. It is in that Messiah Jesus that we begin now to live out God's gift of His life.

Matthew 20:1-19 God's Kingdom and the Strange Employer

- ¹ Ὅμοία γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν
ἀνθρώπῳ οἰκοδεσπότη, ὅστις ἐξῆλθεν ἅμα πρωτῷ
μισθώσασθαι ἐργάτας εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα αὐτοῦ.
- ² συμφωνήσας δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐργατῶν
ἐκ δηναρίου τὴν ἡμέραν
ἀπέστειλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα αὐτοῦ.
- ³ καὶ ἐξελθὼν περὶ τρίτην ὥραν
εἶδεν ἄλλους ἐστῶτας ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἀργούς
- ⁴ καὶ ἐκεῖνοις εἶπεν·
ὑπάγετε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα,
καὶ ὃ ἐὰν ᾖ δίκαιον δώσω ὑμῖν.
- ⁵ οἱ δὲ ἀπήλθον.
- πάλιν [δὲ] ἐξελθὼν περὶ ἕκτην καὶ ἐνάτην ὥραν
ἐποίησεν ὡσαύτως.
- ⁶ περὶ δὲ τὴν ἐνδεκάτην ἐξελθὼν
εὗρεν ἄλλους ἐστῶτας καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς·
τί ὧδε ἐστήκατε ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν ἀργοί;
- ⁷ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ·
ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἡμᾶς ἐμισθώσατο.
λέγει αὐτοῖς· ὑπάγετε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα.
- ⁸ ὁψίας δὲ γενομένης λέγει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος
τῷ ἐπιτρόπῳ αὐτοῦ·
κάλεσον τοὺς ἐργάτας καὶ ἀπόδος αὐτοῖς τὸν μισθὸν
ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἕως τῶν πρώτων.
- ⁹ καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ περὶ τὴν ἐνδεκάτην ὥραν
ἔλαβον ἀνὰ δηνᾶριον.
- ¹⁰ καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ πρώτοι ἐνόμισαν ὅτι πλεῖον λήμψονται·
καὶ ἔλαβον [τὸ] ἀνὰ δηνᾶριον καὶ αὐτοί.
- ¹¹ λαβόντες δὲ ἐγόγγυζον κατὰ τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότη ¹² λέγοντες·
οὗτοι οἱ ἔσχατοι μίαν ὥραν ἐποίησαν,
καὶ ἴσους ἡμῖν αὐτοὺς ἐποίησας
τοῖς βαστάσασιν τὸ βάρος τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τὸν καύσωνα.

¹³ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς ἐνὶ αὐτῶν εἶπεν·

ἑταῖρε, οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε·

οὐχὶ δηναρίου συνεφώνησάς μοι;

¹⁴ ἄρον τὸ σὸν καὶ ὑπάγε.

θέλω δὲ τούτῳ τῷ ἐσχάτῳ δοῦναι ὡς καὶ σοί·

¹⁵ [ἦ] οὐκ ἔξεστίν μοι ὃ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς;

ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου πονηρὸς ἐστίν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθὸς εἰμι;

¹⁶ οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι

καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι.

¹⁷ Καὶ ἀναβαίνων ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα

παρέλαβεν τοὺς δώδεκα [μαθητὰς] κατ' ἰδίαν

καὶ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς·

¹⁸ ἰδοὺ ἀναβαίνομεν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα,

καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου

παραδοθήσεται τοῖς ἀρχιερεῦσιν καὶ γραμματεῦσιν,

καὶ κατακρινοῦσιν αὐτὸν θανάτῳ

¹⁹ καὶ παραδώσουσιν αὐτὸν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν

εἰς τὸ ἐμπαῖξαι

καὶ μαστιγῶσαι

καὶ σταυρῶσαι,

καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἐγερθήσεται.

	Number hired	hours worked	Denarius = \$120 Pro rated pay/day	Total pro rate pay	Pay given out	Per hour pay
First hour (6 a.m.)	10	12	\$ 120.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 10.00
Third hour (9 am)	10	9	\$ 90.00	\$ 900.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 13.33
Sixth hour (noon)	10	6	\$ 60.00	\$ 600.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 20.00
Ninth hour (3 pm)	10	3	\$ 30.00	\$ 300.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 40.00
Eleventh hour (5 pm)	10	1	\$ 10.00	\$ 100.00	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 120.00
				\$ 3,100.00	\$ 6,000.00	

Philippians 2:5 Τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ⁶ ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, ⁷ ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

ESV **Philippians 2:5-7**

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Romans 6:23 τὰ γὰρ ὀψώνια τῆς ἀμαρτίας θάνατος, τὸ δὲ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ ζωὴ αἰώνιος ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν.

ESV **Romans 6:23**

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13:45 Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ ἐμπόρῳ ζητοῦντι καλοὺς μαργαρίτας· ⁴⁶ εὐρών δὲ ἓνα πολύτιμον μαργαρίτην ἀπελθὼν πέπρακεν πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν καὶ ἠγόρασεν αὐτόν.

Matthew 13:45-46

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”