

Matthew 20 • Merit, Grace and God's Kingdom

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On Sunday morning, we're going through the Book of Matthew and we're doing it one chapter at a time. We're in chapter 20 so open your Bibles there please to Matthew chapter 20.

Although we're getting started in Matthew chapter 20 this morning, I'm going to have you look at the very last verse of the previous chapter. All right. For most of you, you probably won't even have to turn a page, but it is verse 30 of the previous chapter.

And it simply says, *“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* And we talked about that last week briefly. But the reason I wanted you to reread that verse as we get into the study this morning is because the very first parable that Jesus is going to tell here is an illustration of that principle that is given in that verse 30, *“...many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* Here's a picture of that very thing. Okay.

Follow along as we read beginning in verse 1 of chapter 20. *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, (and that was the common day's wage for a man back then) he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle 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 and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour (which means there was just one hour left in the work day) he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle 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, 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. (and that would have been very surprising because they'd only worked one hour, they got a full day's wage) 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 worker 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 So the last will be first, and the first last.” (ESV)

Stop there for just a minute, we're going to talk about this a little bit.

I think there's some people that really don't like this parable very much because they're very fair minded sort of folks. And to be sure, this wouldn't fly today. I mean, the labor union would be up in your face immediately about this sort of a thing.

But first of all, this story is interesting in that it is very Jewish in its origin. It was very common for a person who worked a day out in the fields doing whatever they might do, to receive a denarius. That was a typical and common days wage. And those who worked all day assumed that they would receive the denarius when they got done with their work day.

However, when they saw the master of the vineyard paying those who only worked one hour or a few hours of full denarius, they just immediately assumed that they were going to receive much more for the time that they had worked, and they complained when they didn't, claiming that it wasn't fair.

Well, what's the point to this parable? I mean, why did Jesus give us this parable? What was He trying to say to us? Well, He's talking to us about the kingdom of God. This isn't about the kingdom of man.

In the kingdom of man, we do our best to always be fair. Many of you work jobs where you punch a clock, or you do something to let your boss know how many hours you've put in, and they pay you accordingly. Because you're paid, most of you are probably paid a wage for a certain number of, for a given hour. Unless you happen to be on salary or something like that. But even then there's a sense of, I work this much, I get paid this much. And that's just, very common sort of a thing.

But this is not about the kingdom of man. This is about the kingdom of God. And we have to remember, we know very little about the kingdom of God, except what we're told.

And Jesus is giving us this parable to help us understand what the kingdom of God is like as it relates to these sorts of things. And you say, well, what sorts of things? Well, we're talking about in terms of how much you've labored in the kingdom of God. What you've done for the Lord and on and on and on.

Here's the point. I believe this is the message that the Lord is trying to communicate to us. Regardless of what you've done for God, regardless of how much you've labored, how much time you've put in. Your effort, your merit, or what you think you may merit, puts no obligation whatsoever on God to be more generous to you than to those who have done less.

In other words, there may be people that we see when rewards are passed out in heaven, who maybe came to the Lord in the last hour, and they really didn't have much time to serve the Master.

And there are others who will stand before the Lord, who all their lives sought to serve God with their whole heart. And they labored, and they suffered, and they endured difficulty, after difficulty, after difficulty.

But we have to remember something about our labors. Once again, our labors put no burden of obligation on God to do less for those who have done less.

And I know that there's always going to be people who struggle with this concept. This parable is a difficult one for those of us who live in the world to embrace because this is just not the way we do things. This is not life for you and me. I work 12 hours and I expect to get paid for 12 hours or whatever the case might be.

But here's what we have to remember about the kingdom of God and I think this is something that we do often forget. All of our human effort, all of our energy, all of our labor, all of it, pales beside what Jesus did for you and me on the cross. It can't, you can't even compare it.

And although we like to think sometimes, that God owes me. Because again, that's the way we think in this world. God owes you nothing. If you serve the Lord your whole life and you give everything you have to Him, He still owes you nothing.

Now, that doesn't mean that God isn't going to reward people because He is, He's promised to do it. In fact, the Bible talks quite a bit about rewards. Some people are uncomfortable with that and they think, well, we shouldn't talk about

rewards because that might skew our motivation. Well, Jesus talked a lot about rewards so I'm not afraid to bring up the topic.

But even though we talk about rewards, even though we know biblically that there's coming a time when believers will stand before the throne of God, and God will dole out rewards for what we have done for Him; those things which last.

Paul talks about this. He talks about, that all of us are going to stand before God one day, and some of what we have to offer is going to be wood, hay, and stubble, and it's just going to burn. But then there's other things that we'll be able to present that can stand the test of the fire of God's glory. And they will remain and we will be rewarded for those things. (1 Corinthians 3:12-14) And that's wonderful and I'm glad to even be able to talk about that. But that doesn't mean God owes you anything.

God doesn't owe you and me anything. He loves you. He will reward you for those things done in the kingdom of God and for His glory. But He's doing that because of His goodness, not because of obligation. God is no man's debtor. And that's the important thing to remember in this whole thing.

Jesus actually talked about this and it's another passage. It's not in Matthew, it's in one of the other Gospels. But it's an interesting statement and again, it can make you feel a little uncomfortable, like God doesn't appreciate you. But here it is. I'll put it up on the screen. From Luke chapter 17, He says,

Luke 17:7-10 (ESV)

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, (hey) ‘Come (on in) at once and recline at table’? (and we’ll have dinner together) Will (no) he (is not going to say that, he says, will he) not rather say to him, (hey) ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? (he says) Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? (listen to this) So you also, when you have done all that you were

commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Now, again, this passage from Luke is one that can make us feel like, oh, okay. God doesn't really appreciate anything that I do for Him. That's not what it's saying, but it is helping us to understand that God is not under obligation.

He rewards us and He blesses us, not because we have merited a reward, but because He's good. He's gracious. And the very definition of grace, as means unmerited favor. Something we need to keep in mind.

Let's keep going through the chapter, verse 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 that means, basically we're going for the last time) And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."*

You know what's challenging about this statement? It's not that Jesus made it, and this isn't the first time He made it, even in Matthew's recording of Jesus statements. What's troubling is the fact that there's no record of the disciples responding in any way.

Now, the first time Jesus talked about the fact that He was going to be crucified, you guys remember what happened? Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him. He said, let there be no more talk about this. This is not going to happen. And you'll remember that Peter got a rebuke back, *"Get behind me, Satan!"* For you don't have in mind the thoughts of God, but the thoughts of man. (Matthew 16:22-24) Remember?

So the first time Jesus made mention of His upcoming crucifixion, the response wasn't very good. And this response seems to be missing altogether. Interestingly enough, Luke records this very same declaration that Jesus gave to the disciples on the way to Jerusalem for the last time. Let me show you his record of it.

From Luke chapter 18, on the screen. It says,

Luke 18:31-34 (ESV)

And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

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Isn't that fascinating? Now, you might read that passage and assume that somehow God puts a, I don't know, a block, a spiritual block on their hearts and minds so that—but I don't think that's the case. I think that their expectations were such, that they just, they had no room in their hearts and minds for this message.

See again, the disciples, or I should even say, the Jews at large, they ignored the Scriptures in their Hebrew Bibles that talked about the suffering of Messiah. And they jumped ahead to the glorification of Messiah, and the fact that Messiah would come against their enemies, and rule and reign from Jerusalem over the whole earth.

Well, that's going to happen you guys when Jesus comes the second time. And we call that the Millennial Kingdom where Jesus is going to reign for a thousand year period on the face of the earth after He returns at the conclusion of the great tribulation. But see, for the Jews, they skipped over all that the prophets had to say about the suffering of Messiah and they went right to the glory.

When Jesus talked about the fact that He was going to be arrested and turned over to, first of all, the Jewish religious leaders, and then they would turn Him over to the Romans. Because the Jews didn't have the right to put anybody to death, so then He would be all treated shamefully and ultimately crucified. They were like no. No, I don't have any room for that and I choose not to believe it. And I think that was more the block than anything.

I've learned something as a pastor over the years. I didn't know this earlier. I'll just share you a little something that I learned. Because I'll share you, how I communicate this.

I got a note just this last week from a gal who wrote to me from another country. And she said, my family strongly believes in polygamy. That it's all good and fine for a man to have multiple wives. She said, I know that's not true, but could you give me a Scripture that I could share with my family?

Well, I thought, okay, yeah, I gave her a scripture based on our study from last week where Jesus was answering the question about marriage and divorce and remarriage. And He brought it all the way back to the original statement in the Bible where God created marriage and said, “...*the two shall become one...*” right? (Genesis 2:24) Not the three, five, or ten, “*the two...*” God intended marriage to be between a husband and a wife. And that was always God's intention from the beginning.

So I shared that verse with her but then I shared a little warning. I said, don't think that you're going to go to your family and share this verse and they're going to go, oh, okay, well, then that's what's true, and we've been believing a lie all this time. Because that's not going to happen.

And then I shared this. I said, I've learned something over the years. People don't believe things because they're true. They believe them because they want to believe them. Right. And that's the only explanation.

When you confront someone who believes something that's clearly not in the Bible, I mean, there's nothing in the Bible about it, but they believe it anyway. You could ask them the question and say, well, why do you believe that? And they probably wouldn't give you the right answer. But what the right answer is, I believe it because I want to believe it. And if somebody wants to believe in polygamy, they're going to believe in polygamy, regardless of what the Bible says, right? That's the way people, that's human nature.

Now you might've noticed that when I was opening up in prayer this morning, I was saying, Lord, teach us because we want to learn the truth. The reason people accept the truth, even when it has to supplant something that is untrue. It's because they want to believe what is true, even if it challenges what they've previously believed. I hope that describes every person in this room today. I hope that all of you want to believe what is true, regardless of what you've learned in the past.

And the reason that you believe something is true is because it's biblical. Not because I said it or somebody else said it. It's because it's in the Word, right?

Well, I believe that this is the reason why the disciples just had no room in their hearts for Jesus informing them that He was going to be crucified because they just didn't want to believe it. They wanted to believe other things and to prove that, look at the very next thing that happens after Jesus makes His announcement that He's going to Jerusalem for the last time and will be crucified.

It says in verse 20, *“Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee (that's James and John) came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.”* In other words, she said, Lord, I want You to give me what I asked for. ²¹ *And he said to her, “What do you want?”*” And He was saying, what do you want Me to do for you?

But I want you to stop there for a minute before we talk about her request. I want to have you think for just a moment about this question that Jesus gives or asks to James and John's mother. What do you want Me to do for you? *“What do you want?”*

And the reason I want you to think about that for a moment is because I think it's a very important question and a lot can be revealed by the answer that we might give if Jesus were to walk up to you and say, what do you want Me to do for you? I want you to think for just a minute. What would you say? What would you say if Jesus said to you, what do you want me to do for you? Because your answer is going to reveal what's in your heart, right? Anyway, I just want you to think about that.

It goes on here, I know we're, I interrupted us in the middle of a verse. We're in verse 21. He asked her, *“What do you want”* Me to do for you? And *“She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.””* This is what she wanted Him to do for her. Okay?

And it was no doubt what James and John wanted too. In fact, they probably asked mom to go talk to Jesus because, yeah, why don't you, you do it, so you ask him. We already said something, you want to, He can't say no to you so you go ask Him. And she's asking that they be seated on His right and on His left. And make no mistake about it, they are asking for positions of glory.

And again, this is what was in their hearts. They had no room for suffering and crucifixion to them. We're just, we're moving, we're going to Jerusalem for the last time. They're going to crown Him king.

And I'm sure that when He came in for that last time in what we call the triumphal entry, they thought, well, this is all happening just like we thought. I mean, they're referring to Him as the Messiah, as we're walking into the city, this is not, it's going to be just a few days before we're sitting on thrones.

Oh, and by the way, Jesus, could we be on Your right and on your left? I mean the closest positions. And that's exactly what she's asking. That's exactly what they're asking because their expectations were of glory. They've got no room for anything else.

And Jesus answered in such a wonderful way. Look at verse 22 in your Bible. *"Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking.' And that's the first thing He says to them. But then He asks them a question. 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?'"*

And when you think, what is that cup? It's the cup of suffering. It's the very cup that Jesus prayed about in the Garden of Gethsemane. And we'll see this later on in Matthew, but let me put it up on the screen from chapter 26.

Matthew 26:39 (ESV)

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

And so the cup that Jesus had to drink was the cup of suffering and it was a terrible, terrible cup. And He knew it, but He also knew there was no other way.

And so Jesus asked them, *"Are you able to drink (of) the cup that I (of which I) ...drink?"* And look at their response in verse 22, *"They said..., 'We are able.'"*

They have absolutely—they think it's the cup of glory. They think it's this is a cup of prestige and respect and honor. And the people are going to look at them

and say, these are the men, these are the ones. They have no concept. If they had any concept, they would have said, I like to refuse that cup thank you very much. But they had no idea what this cup contained.

And so they're just instantly like, yeah, oh yeah, we can drink it. We can do it. We'll do it for sure. No problem. Where's our crown? Just point me to my throne and I'll sit down.

And look at what Jesus says in verse 23. *"He said to them, "You will drink my cup,..."* And you know what He's telling him, don't you? You will suffer. In fact, He, if He was going to be really revealing, He would have said, James, you will be the first to die, and Herod will chop your head off.

And John, you will suffer your whole life and they will try to kill you many times, but it won't take. And eventually they will abandon you to a penal colony on an island called Patmos, where you will live out your days. Thankfully He saved them from the gritty details, but He did tell them, *"You will drink my cup."*

And then He went on to say, *"...but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."*²⁴ *And when the ten heard it,..."* They were mad that they didn't ask their mothers to try to get Jesus to... It doesn't say that actually, but I think that's why they were indignant.

It says, *"...they were indignant at the two brothers."*²⁵ *But Jesus called them to him* (and this is so important) *and (He) said, (you guys) "You know (you know) that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, (don't you? You see that, don't you?) and their great ones* (meaning those people over those folks, oh, they love to) *exercise authority over them."*

But then He says in verse 26, and this is so important for all of us in Christ to hear. *"It shall not be so among you."* And guys, can we just pause for just a minute? Because again, this chapter is about the kingdom of God. It's about the difference between man's kingdom and God's kingdom.

And He's making the point that you know how things operate in man's kingdom. They love, people love to have authority. They'll work all their lives just so they can gain authority over others. And so they can crack the whip and say, do this, go there, whatever the thing. And this is just the way the world works. And He's calling their attention to this whole sort of a hierarchy of authority. And He

says, you guys see this every day, you see it, but it's not, this is not the way it's supposed to be among you.

This is not about authority here in the kingdom of God. It's not about you being higher than someone else and being able to boss people around.

He goes on here in verse 26 to say, *"But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,"*

Because you see, slaves were last, always last. And then I love this statement in verse 28. He says, *"even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Did you guys, you did pay attention, right, during worship and we were singing this very thing? We were talking, remember we were singing, The Ransom from Heaven? In the last song that we sang? That word ransom is a really important one and I think most of us understand what the word means. To pay a ransom means to pay an amount. Usually it's money to free someone from their captivity, right?

And that's why Jesus used that word to describe His life and His ministry and what He was going to do on the cross for you and me. He said, *"...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom..."*, so that you and I would be able to be set free from our captivity to sin and the curse that goes along with that. That's why He came. But He came also to model for us what it means to serve.

Jesus was the only person to live on the face of the earth who really deserved to be served. Do you understand that? I mean He's the only one that was deserving of having people serve Him and yet He came to serve.

So for you and me and this whole idea of serving, we should just understand, well I'm not deserving to have anyone serve me. Jesus came and did it anyway, and now He has given me the model of how I'm to live my life for others. I am to serve. My goal is to serve.

And this is something that I have to confess. I forget. I have to be reminded, just like you. I have to go back to the Word, and I have to remind myself, Paul, you're not here to have people serve you. You're here to serve others. You're to be a servant, not to be a master. So don't expect people to serve you. Don't expect people to do it for you. Do it yourself. And if it means getting down on

your knees and humbling yourself, and cleaning up somebody else's mess, then do it.

It's so funny. We're just so geared in our culture and in our human mindset to think that we deserve better than what we're getting. It dawned on me at one point that when I get angry at other drivers on the road, and yeah, that does happen occasionally.

Like when I'm at a stoplight, and I'm the second or third car back, and I see the light turns green and the person at the front doesn't go, isn't that just infuriating? And you're just like. And if they could hear me, they'd hear me say, green means go. That's what I usually say.

But the reason I get upset is because I think I have a right. It's like you're impinging on my right to move forward. I deserve, the light is green. It's time to go. And it's all about me. It's not, I don't, I'm not thinking about that person in that first car. Maybe they're heartbroken. Maybe they've just received some of the worst news that a person could possibly receive, and they're just not paying attention. Maybe they're hurting in ways that I can't even begin to understand, and yet I'm going, green means go! And it's all about me. Because you see, I deserve to have my way.

Oh, Lord save me from myself. Don't you ever say that to the Lord? Save me from myself. “... *the Son of Man came not to be served.*” The Son of Man! Jesus, who is God, in human flesh, “...*came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Verse 29. “*And as they went out of Jericho, (they’re on their way to Jerusalem) a great crowd followed him.* ³⁰ *And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”*”

And I want to remind you, “*Son of David*” is a title that would have, that is equal to saying, Messiah. Okay? So by referring to him as the Son of David, they are referring to him as the Messiah. You need to know that.

But “*The crowd (were told, verse 31) rebuked them, telling them to be silent, (and they probably didn't say it nearly that nicely) but they cried out all the more, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”*”

Now remember, Jesus is walking with this huge group of people, right? There's a lot of excitement as Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem.

And yet it says in verse 32, *“And stopping,…”* Do you know how difficult it is to stop an entire crowd or mob of people that are moving forward? And yet Jesus stopped because He heard the cry of two men.

And it says, *“Jesus called them and said, “What do you want me to do for you?”* ³³ *They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”* (they're asking Him for a miracle) ³⁴ *And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.”*

And I love this story. I have to tell you I love this story because I want to be like these two guys. I really do. Apart from the blind part. Thank you very much. But I do.

I see some character traits in these guys that are not only incredible but exemplary. In the sense that even though I can't, they couldn't see Jesus. They were blind, but they heard that Jesus was passing by.

And so they begin to yell, excuse me, at the top of their lungs, *“Son of David.”* They're calling out to Him and even when the crowd did everything in their power to get these guys to shut up, and to discourage them from continuing to call out to the Lord, they pressed on. And that's the part that I want to be like. I want to be the kind of a person that keeps pressing on even when discouragement threatens to set in.

It's not uncommon at all for people to come to me as a pastor and say, pastor Paul I've been praying about something, but I didn't get an answer. So what do you think I should do? And I know what they're saying.

What they're saying is I prayed, I set a timer in my head for when God should answer me. And the timer went off and I hadn't gotten an answer, so I gave up. That's what they're saying. I gave up. Now, what should I do? Sometimes I just want to slap people. What should you do?

Well, first of all, you shouldn't have a timer. Don't set an expectation of God should answer me in this amount of time. And secondly, don't give in to disappointment and give up. Keep pressing in, keep pressing through.

That's the example that these guys are giving in this short story. This is what I want to adopt in my life. I want to say, no, I'm not going to give in to disappointment. I'm not going to set a timer in my mind when I think God should answer and when He doesn't, then I'm going to get mad and say, well,

God didn't answer my prayer. But you know what? People do it all the time. All the time.

And then they come to me for answers? Are you joking? When you gave up on God? Listen, I got nothing. I got nothing for you except to say, all right, go back to the place of prayer, break your timer into a million pieces, get down on your knees, and keep pressing in, and calling on His name.

That's my advice. There you go. I just saved you a whole lot of trouble. That's what we're called to do you guys, is to keep pressing in. Jesus even told parables, about this very thing, encouraging people not to give in and give up.

The thing that just really blesses me about this story is when it says, “*they cried out all the more.*” When they didn't get an immediate response, when the people were discouraging them from even talking, and raising their voices, “*they cried out all the more.*”

I'll just tell you right now, if you come to me and say, I've been praying about something and I haven't gotten an answer, here's my advice, cry out all the more.

I never said, and God never promised you that prayer was going to be easy, or that you should get a quick answer. He just said, pray. Press in. Keep crying out. Keep calling on the Name of the Lord.

Well, how long am I supposed to pray? I don't know a lifetime. If that's what it takes? A lifetime, what else you got going on?

Pray and keep praying. And don't stop until you get an answer. Press in until you break through.