



The last will be first and the first will be last.

Sermon for October 24 2021
Matthew 20:1-16

Today's passage will be from Matthew 20:1-16.

While you hear it read in Urdu, please read it in your own native language.

1 "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, 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 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.

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."

Thank you, Sohail.

Let us pray.

Father God, I pray that our hearts would be open to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven.

I pray that what I say will be pleasing to you and a blessing to your people.

I pray that we would not only be hearers of the word, but also doers of the word.

Amen

Before I was married, and before I lived in China, I went with a friend to New York City.

We decided to have lunch in a little place in Chinatown.

I grew up in the state of North Dakota, very close to Canada.

There was no spicy food in North Dakota.

The grocery stores only had mild salsa.

But I liked spicy food.

Or I thought I liked spicy food!

Anyway, while we were eating in Chinatown my friend said, "Matt, you should try this little red pepper."

Well, I tried that red pepper, and I was miserable for the next hour.

I was sweating and my mouth was screaming.

It took a great force of will to finish the rest of my lunch.

What is the point of my little story?

Those of you who are familiar with Chinese food know what I am talking about.

In Chinese food, some red peppers are not to be eaten.

They are fried with a bunch of other food and given to you together.

It is a big wonderful plate full of flavor (see the picture).

To eat it, you pick out the other food with your chopsticks and leave the red peppers alone.

The peppers give flavor to everything else but aren't to be eaten themselves.

So for some kinds of food, you need to know important information before you eat it.

In the same way, Jesus tells stories to teach us.

But His stories are much more important than avoiding spicy food.

His stories are called parables.

Today we are going to look at one of these parables.

It is the one that was just read for us.

I hope you followed along in your Bible!

But before we get into the details of the story, I need to say a few things about how to understand parables in general.

This will help you when you read other parables.

First, Jesus didn't use parables because they were a really good teaching method.

He used parables because they can do two things.

This comes from Matthew 13:1-23.

Some people hear the parables of Jesus and understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

They can truly know God from these parables.

Other people hear the parables of Jesus, and their hearts are closed. They become more opposed to God than they were before.

In Matthew 13:14-15 Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and says that they will "hear but not understand."

They will "see but never perceive."

So, before you read a parable, ask God to open your heart so that you will know the secrets of the kingdom of God!

Second, parables almost always have one key point.

In this parable, Jesus says it in Matthew 20:16—

"The last will be first and the first will be last."

The rest of this sermon will try to unpack what that means for us.

Third, parables compare things of this world to things of this earth.

Therefore they give us true principles but not exact things.

We don't need to worry about paying workers in Roman coins!

Fourth, you need to understand some things about the historical context.

This parable mentions the early morning, the 3rd hour, the 6th hour, the 9th hour, and the 11th hour.

What times are these?

These people didn't have watches like we do.

The early morning was when the sun came up.

The 3rd hour was about 9am.

The 6th hour was about noon.

The 9th hour about 3pm.

The 11th hour about 5pm.

For clarity I will refer to the modern times and not the ancient ones.

The last important thing you need to know about understanding parables is to look at the passages around the parable.

You actually need to do this every time you read the Bible.

How does the passage I'm reading fit in with the passages around it?

In Matthew 19, Jesus told a parable with the same main idea: "many who are first will be last, and the last first."

In Matthew 20, after our parable about the vineyard, Jesus predicts that he will die on the cross.

Then his disciples fight over who gets to be the boss of the other disciples.

They were not seeing the people who were last as important.

They all wanted to be first!

Now let's get to our story.

Here is a picture which will help you see what is happening.

(See picture.)

Our story begins with: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this.

A master of a house needed workers for his vineyard.

He went out early in the morning.

He hired men to work for a denarius."

That was the normal wage for a worker for a day.

Let's stop for a second here.

Do you know what it is like to go out in the early morning hoping to find work?

I don't, but I know people who do.

This is a very difficult thing to do.

In China, people looking for work often bring a tool that they can use.

I remember seeing people standing by the road holding a paint brush in the air.

While these workers wait, they have nothing.

They are not providing for their families.

They are not doing anything productive.

We wish that this did not happen!

One of the feelings people have in this situation is shame.

They feel shame because they don't have a good job.

The feeling of shame happens for a lot of other reasons too.

Sometimes we feel shame when we do something bad.

We want to cover our face.

Sometimes we feel shame and it is not our fault.

Sometimes it is a little of both.

This idea of shame is very important.

When we think about our relationship with God, we often feel that we will feel shame when we meet with God.

Now let's continue our story.

In the late morning, three hours later, the master went to the marketplace.

Other workers were there, but they didn't have work.

The master said, "you can work in my vineyard, and I will give you what is right."

The workers went to work in the master's vineyard.

The master went out at noon and the same thing happened.

The master went out in the afternoon and the same thing happened again.

In the late afternoon, the master again went to the marketplace.

Workers were still there, but they didn't have work.

Let's pause again.

If it was sad to not have work in the early morning, how much shame did the other workers feel not having a job all day?

In the late afternoon, the master asked the workers, "Why did you stand here all day?"

They said, "Because no one has hired us!"

The master said to those workers, "You can work in my vineyard."

When evening came, the master said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages.

First pay the people who came last, then pay the people who worked longer."

There are some interesting details in this story.

Notice how when the master gives them work, they are no longer ashamed.

They are no longer living without purpose.

And notice also how the master goes there by himself.

He blesses these workers directly.

The workers who started in the late afternoon were paid first.

They received one denarius.

The workers who started in the early morning thought that they would get more.

But each of them also received one denarius.

After they received their wages, they complained to the master of the house.

They said: "the workers who came in the late afternoon only worked for one hour.

We have worked all day in the hot sun.

Why did you pay them the same as us?"

The master replied, "Friend, I did nothing bad to you.

Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

Take your wages and go.

I decided to pay the last workers the same as you.

Am I not allowed to do what I want with my possessions?
Are you angry with me because I am generous?"

Now that we've walked through the story, let's think about the one key point.

Matthew 20:16 says: "The last will be first and the first will be last."

What does this mean?

Well, let's talk about who the people in this story represent.

We'll skip the foreman.

He didn't seem important to me and none of the books I read about this passage said much about him.

Let's think about the workers.

They represent people like you.

People like me.

The first thing to notice is that they all start the story in a place of weakness and shame.

They have no jobs and they are all waiting at the marketplace for someone to hire them.

This is a good representation of how we look before God.

We bring nothing to God.

We cannot obey Him perfectly.

God is perfect, we are not.

God is strong, we are weak.

God commands us to obey Him, and we go our own way.

When we think hard about this, shame is one of the most common feelings.

The second thing to notice about the workers is that the first group are selfish.

They weren't angry because they were paid a low wage.

They weren't angry because they didn't receive what was promised.

They were angry because they didn't receive more than others!

This is a huge problem for all of us.

Here in America, we live in one of the wealthiest societies in all of history.

But we are never satisfied.

We want more and more.

We especially want more than our neighbors.

As an example I'll present the price of used cars.

Why are used cars usually inexpensive in the US, but more expensive in other countries?

Because Americans rarely use a car until it falls apart.

Americans buy new cars so they can look better to their neighbors.

But the problem runs deeper.

I sometimes boast about my old car.

I want to think I'm a better person than those who buy new cars.

And this is just one example.

I challenge you to examine your heart and ask yourself, "am I content to have less than my neighbor but as much as I need?"

When I am honest with myself, I often want things not because I need them.

I want to feel better than other people.

The third thing to notice about the workers is that some of them have real faith.

In Matthew 20:4, at around 9am, the master tells the workers to "go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you."

They don't even know how much they will be paid.

They are glad to have the shame of their unemployment gone.

But the workers at 5pm aren't told anything about payment.

The master says, "you go into my vineyard too."

This is the kind of faith that God blesses.

These are people who don't think about what might be earned.

They go to the master and trust that He is good and will take care of them.

As I'm sure you can see, the master represents God.

And this story tells us some very important things about God.

God is powerful.

He controls everything in the story.

God controls everything in all of creation.

Nothing happens except through him and by his will.

God is kind.

He wants to take away our shame.

God is powerful and God is kind.

But God is also generous.

Generosity is a truly great thing, especially when it comes from one as powerful as God!

This idea of God being powerful, kind, and generous finds its fullest expression in the cross.

Notice how the cross is the symbol of our faith.

The death of Jesus on that cross is the most generous thing that God has ever done.

Jesus was of course not just a man but God in the flesh.

In the book of Matthew, right after this parable, Jesus will predict his death and resurrection.

This is the ultimate expression of the last being first.

Jesus died and he was brought low and last.

He rose again and He was brought high and first.

This ties into the idea of shame that we've been talking about today.

When Jesus died on the cross, a lot of things happened.

But one important thing is that Jesus experienced extreme shame.

He was naked.

He was nailed to the cross and would not leave.

People laughed at Jesus.

They spit on him.

He was wearing a crown of thorns.

But it wasn't the shame of people that was the worst.

The worst was that God shamed him.

Remember what he said just before he died on the cross?

Here is Matthew 27:46—

"My God my God, why have you forsaken me?"

God left Jesus.

God shamed Jesus.

Why did he endure that shame?

Jesus is all powerful.

Jesus is the second person of the Trinity.

Jesus is God!

He could have quit at any time!

But he endured that shame so that you and I would not have to.

We deserve to be shamed and not Jesus.

We deserve shame because we constantly want more than we need so that we can have more than others.

We are not the kind of people that deserve God's honor.

But Jesus took the shame that we deserve.

He took it so that we could be honored in God's eyes.

This is just another way to say that Jesus died to save you from your sins.

Sin brings shame.

Jesus brings honor.

What do we do with this?

Well, the most important thing is that you can, and indeed you must, accept God's generosity on his terms.

You can be part of God's kingdom, but you don't work your way there.

You don't negotiate.

You don't say to God, "I'll be really good so that you'll accept me."

No, you should run to God in the same way that those last workers went into the vineyard after being called.

Come to Jesus, and he will take your shame and make you honored before God.

Jesus does not welcome you because of anything you have done.

It is because Jesus is powerful, kind, and generous.

After we accept God's generosity, then what?

Why does this matter to us?

I would like to leave you with three words: gratitude, humility, and dependence.

We must be people who actively practice gratitude.

Gratitude means saying thank you a lot, and really meaning it.

This is a radical idea in America.

Not many people in this country are truly grateful.

Many Americans expect to get everything they want.

When they have those things they think it is because they are clever or strong.

The English word for this is "entitlement."

Americans feel entitled to get many more things than they need.

And there is never an end to the things that they think they deserve.

But gratitude breaks that terrible way of living.

Gratitude can give us great joy.

It opens our eyes to see that every good gift comes from God.

He will take care of us, even if we have less than others.

I would like to encourage you to express gratitude to God and others for at least 10 things every day this week.

Say these things out loud to God.

Say some of them out loud to each other.

And next week tell me how different things are in your heart.

We must be people who see humility as a strength.

Humility is the opposite of proud.

To be humble is considered foolish and weak in modern America.

Watch any sporting event and you will see people showing how proud they are of themselves. And if you ask them after the game, they will probably talk about how good they are!

But God tells us that the last will be first, and the first will be last. That's why God provides opportunities for us to practice humility. He wants us to be strong in His way, and not the world's way.

When someone assumes something bad about you because your skin is black, or brown, or white; or because you earn less money than they do; or because you don't speak English with the same accent; be grateful to God!

When these things happen, remember that God is giving you the opportunity to be strengthened in humility.

Humility is indeed a rare strength.

A truly humble person is a gift to any friendship, family, or team.

Look for opportunities to bless your family, your work, and your friends with humility this week.

Try to shock people by loving them when the world would give you excuses to hate them.

Finally, and most importantly: we should be people who are dependent on God.

This week, you and I will fail to practice gratitude.

You and I will fail to be strong in humility.

But remember that God is powerful, kind, and generous.

He will give you these things if you ask for them.

Just before today's story, Jesus says this in Matthew 19:26 — "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Brothers and sisters, I implore you to trust God this week for gratitude and humility.

He is indeed a generous God who answers His children.

And that brings us to the end of this sermon.

Here is the big idea:

God is powerful, kind, and generous.

If you are part of his kingdom, you must accept his generosity on his terms.

We must depend on God's power to live as grateful, humble, and joyful people.

And we will be blessed when we do.

Let us pray.

Lord God, I pray that we all would be transformed by your Word, in the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we act.

I pray that we would go forth in joy, in humility, and in gratitude, dependent on your strength.
I pray this in the powerful name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.