

How Much Pay • Matthew 20:1 – 16

The summer after ninth grade I had my first full-time summer job. I worked as a stock boy in the large McCrory's 5 & 10¢ store on Broad Street in Newark, New Jersey. Half the job was getting there and back. I had to take two buses and a subway, leaving early in the morning and not returning until well after the rush hour at night. I worked long hours, learned a lot and was paid the enormous salary of \$1.00 an hour. At the end of the summer I went back to school convinced that next year I had to get a job that was closer to home.

My father was a friend of the president of the McCrory chain of stores across the United States and the president's son-in-law was the manager of a closer store in East Orange, New Jersey. My father spoke to his friend who in turn spoke to his son-in-law and he agreed to hire me for the summer. This time it was only about a half-hour bus trip away and I began the

summer thinking myself to be something of a hot commodity in the stock boy market since I had worked in a far larger store with a far greater inventory. To my disappointment I was given the most menial of tasks. In fact, the first week that I worked there I was assigned the task of washing the twelve-foot high walls of the ladies' room. Those of you who have been fifteen-year-old boys can understand the humiliation of having to go and knock on the door and call in to find out if anyone was in there. When the coast was clear I would prop the door open, bring in the ladder, buckets and sponges, climb up on the ladder — only to have a lady walk in and then have to climb down the ladder and wait out in the hall. When she came out I would go back in and start again. But that wasn't the worst of it. My pay for the second summer was reduced to the minimum wage of 85¢ an hour and I, a veteran with experience, with tenure, with longevity, with value to the company, was lowered fifteen cents an hour. Even after all these years, I ask you, is that fair?

Jesus said that what I experienced should help me to understand something about the kingdom of heaven. Listen to the words of the parable in Matthew 20:1-16:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and to them he said, "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you." So they went. Going out

again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. 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?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages beginning with the last, up to the first. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us

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who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" So the last will be first, and the first last.

In this parable Jesus teaches, "The kingdom of heaven is like a householder (or landowner) who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

Some say that this is the most irritating of Jesus' parables. It rubs us the wrong way. We intuitively dislike what Jesus says and wonder what he was thinking about and why he said what he said. As troublesome as it is, it has some good news in it — for if we can understand this parable and what it teaches, we can better understand God and his rule of our lives. Let's try to understand it.

Our first reaction to Matthew 20:1-12 is that it is seemingly unjust. We come to this parable with legalistic logic and a sense of outraged justice.

First, let's catch up on the background. The parable is set in an agricultural society in which the farmer or landowner would have his own children and wife and a certain number of permanently hired hands, servants — maybe even slaves whom he actually owned — all of which would have been sufficient for most of the farm tasks through the year. But at harvest time, particularly when rains were in the offing, it became crucial to hire

additional help to reap the harvest before it was ruined. A farmer would go and hire temporary help much the same as happens today in many of the agricultural parts of our country. Those who live and work on the farm are able to provide for the things that need to be done in spring, maybe even in summer, but at harvest time migrant workers are hired for a day or for a week to meet the short term need.

In those days they had labor markets. Those who wanted to be employed would go down to the labor market and wait and those who wanted employees would go and hire the workers they needed. It's not a great deal different than the union halls or employment services today, where people also are hired on a daily basis.

These temporary employees were often the least secure in society. Even slaves had more security. Certainly the temporary laborer had the advantage of being a free man, but the slave had the advantage of security. The slave knew where he would sleep, that he would eat and even though he did not make the choices for himself, at least he had the basic necessities of life provided. If the economy took a downturn the slave would be kept, but it was altogether possible that the temporary laborer would have no employment, would have no income and may starve to death or at least be on the brink of not being able to provide for his family.

In this particular parable, the householder went to the labor market first thing in the morning to hire workers. A typical workday would go from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. six days a week. He struck a deal with the workers that he would pay them one denarius a day. A denarius was considered a good fair wage for twelve hours of work at that time. However once the 6 a.m. crew had settled in to work, he went back to the labor market at 9 o'clock and found some others who were available and hired them. They agreed to come and work for him although there were only nine hours left in the workday. In this particular case, he simply said that he would pay them whatever was right or fair but they did not negotiate a specific wage in advance. Then he went back at noon and hired more workers to work for six hours, again leaving open the wage that would be paid. You kind of wonder why he didn't hire the right number first thing in the morning if he knew what needed to be done that day. When he came back at 9 o'clock and at 6 o'clock he was risking hiring rejects from other farms or late sleepers, maybe even lazy. But what is most amazing of all is that he went back to the labor market at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, only an hour before quitting time and hired whoever was left. He asked them why they were there and they explained that they had not been hired; so he offered them a job for one hour, again leaving open the wage that would be paid.

Now our legalistic logic says that wages should relate to hours. Those that worked twelve hours should obviously get the most. The workers that put in nine hours should get proportionately less. The workers of six hours ought to get half of what the workers who started at 6 a.m. got and the workers who started at five o'clock should get very little.

I think that when we read this parable, we intuitively identify with those in the 6 a.m. crew rather than the 5 p.m. crew. We think of the hot weather in the Middle East and imagine working a twelve-hour day in scorching sun and terrible heat. We are amazed, not that the 5 p.m. guys got so much, but that the 6 a.m. guys didn't get more. It's simple logic and we are irritated by what Jesus says in this parable. It just doesn't make sense. It's just not right.

Hold on to your outrage and sense of injustice for a few more minutes! Think of that outrage and let it linger a bit in your emotions. Think of how you would feel or how you do feel if you work a 12 hour-day and others who work less get paid an equal amount. Hang onto that feeling for that is precisely what Jesus wants as a part of his teaching. He is trying to show us the difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth. The more we are irritated and the more we sense injustice, the more likely we are to see our own legalistic logic.

The workers thought the landowner unjust not only because of their legalistic logic, but also because of their selfish greed. They expected more and you can see it in the scene.

Old Testament law required that laborers be paid at the end of each day. Leviticus 19:13 says, "The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning." The law required that the laborer be paid each day for the twelve hours or whatever he worked. The practice at the time was also to pay the laborers in reverse order from last to first. Perhaps this was so that the latecomers didn't see how much the early persons actually got paid.

Well, whatever the case, it's not hard to imagine what happened. All the members of the 6 a.m. crew are lined up watching what's going on. Amazingly, the householder or landowner himself is present for the paying of the wages on this day. That would not have been typical. Usually this would have been delegated to the steward and the owner of the farm wouldn't have been there so there was something new and different in the wind.

The people who worked just an hour came up to the steward with the farmer standing nearby and received their remuneration. To everyone's amazement, it was a denarius. They were paid a good wage for twelve hours work even though they hadn't come to work until 5

o'clock.

Now the initial response to this by the 6 a.m. crew had to be one of extraordinary delight because they did what you'd do, what I'd do. They quickly started calculating. A denarius a day was good pay, but this farmer was paying a denarius an hour — twelve denari for the day! They couldn't wait until they got their pay because they realized the extraordinary amount that apparently they were soon to be paid. While one denarius had seemed sufficient and fair when the day began, it seemed like little when the wages were actually being paid. Their greed escalated as they observed all that was happening.

It is something that has happened to many of us. I know that I have had jobs where I have been content, satisfied with the wage that I was being paid, only to discover that someone else with an equal or, worse yet, lower level job was being paid more. How quickly satisfaction can turn to bitterness and resentment! What once seemed fair is instantly turned to seeming injustice.

Somehow for these laborers it was more than ordinary greed. It was a particularly selfish greed, for they found no delight in the good fortune of others. They cared only for themselves. They could only have been satisfied if they got more or the others got less.

As we seek to understand this seeming injustice, we need to see the progression from the laborers' legalistic logic as they calculated what they should have received to their selfish greed and then to their grumbling and ingratitude. They spoke rather rudely to the boss.

If you're a very detailed student of scripture, you may have noticed that when dialogue is recorded in the New Testament most of the time there is some form of personal address that precedes the dialogue such as "Sir" or "Lord" or "Master" or "Rabbi" or whatever the appropriate title is. Certainly that would have been a requirement of their culture at the time, but that is not what happened here. Instead, they simply blurt out, "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." They showed no appreciation at all for the fact that they had been hired in the first place instead of going hungry without work.

Could there have been a better way? Would it not be possible for a spokesperson for the 6 a.m. crew to have said instead, "We're really grateful to have work today. It's possible that we might not have gotten hired at all. But our hearts go out to those who came late because we can imagine what it would be like for some-

one who started at five o'clock in the afternoon to be paid only 1/12th of a denarius, which isn't enough to feed himself much less to feed his family. How horrible it would be for him to go home under those circumstances. How marvelous and how generous of our boss to give full pay to these needy men so they can be able to adequately provide for their families.

I can hear you saying, "Come on now! That's absurd! This is the real world. Nobody responds like that. You've got to watch out for number one."

That's precisely the point! The kingdom of heaven is different. Jesus is teaching us that citizens of the kingdom of heaven think differently, speak differently, and relate to one another differently. In the kingdom of heaven the best thing is not to be number one or "top of the pile." In the kingdom of heaven the last will be first and the first will be last.

It scares me how much we have adapted to the kingdom of earth rules. So much so that these kingdom of heaven rules seem to be insane. We have been so ingrained by the earth way of doing things that we can hardly imagine making it by heaven's way of doing things.

Think for a moment in terms of that which we have

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that is good. I actually keep a journal where I periodically jot down lists of the blessings that God has given me. I have life when others have died. I have salvation when others are lost and know nothing

about Jesus Christ. Most of us have more than 90% of the world's population. Yet we are prone to wonder why we can't live longer, why we can't have better health, why we can't have the marriage, the job, the house, the car, the body, the position of someone else. We make all of these comparisons to the point that we're not grateful for all that we do have, which is extraordinary. We are ungrateful and succumb to grumbling ingratitude just like those in the 6 a.m. crew of the parable.

Now I want us to switch from the earthly kingdom perspective of the seeming injustice in verses 1 through 12 to the heavenly kingdom perspective of the landowner as sovereignly gracious in verses 13 through 16.

The landowner responds by keeping his commitments. In fact, he even begins by addressing his employee critic as a friend. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. . . ." In other words, the boss, the landowner, did what he agreed to do. He kept his end of the deal. He paid as agreed.

Now it doesn't take a great deal of insight to understand that by comparison in this parable God is the land-

owner and Jesus is telling us that God keeps his word. When he strikes a deal with us he will do his part. When he enters into a covenant relationship with us he proves himself to be a faithful covenant keeper. The promises he makes to us will come true. The Bible is invariably reliable. God is absolutely trustworthy.

Not only does the landowner of the parable keep commitments but he also shares his resources. He generously gives to those who have not earned or deserved it. Now even if all the rest of this has somehow slipped by you, I hope that you will listen carefully to what is here being taught in a striking lesson about God and the kingdom of heaven.

The primary principle of the heaven's kingdom is grace, not justice. Let me run that by you again. God is here teaching us that the primary principle by which he rules in the kingdom of heaven is grace, not justice.

That is not to imply that God is unjust. What the landowner did in the parable was absolutely fair and right and just; he kept his deal. It was perfectly right for him to pay the 6 a.m. crew a denarius. It was a just and fair wage. It was according to contract and it was good. But God operates by grace. He cares for the hurting. He provides for the latecomer. He gives more than we deserve.

If we grab on to this we begin to understand God better than we have ever understood him before. If God treated us all with fairness and justice, if he gave us what we deserve, we'd all end up in hell. If God just did what was right we'd all be goners for sure. But God goes far beyond justice and gives us that which we have not earned. He pours out his blessing, his grace, upon us.

You see, the ones with whom we ought identify in the parable are not the members of the 6 a.m. crew but the members of the 5 p.m. crew! God wants us to see ourselves as those who have shown up late for work — the ones who have come last. He wants us to understand that we are the ones who have not done an adequate job, we haven't done all that could be done, and there's absolutely no way for us to turn the hands of the clock back. We do not deserve a denarius if we have worked for only an hour. We do not deserve God's grace. But God gives us the maximum even when we haven't done the minimum. He is a God who rewards us by his grace and not by our labors. He gives to us on the basis, not of justice, but of goodness. He gives to us that which we could never earn or deserve because his primary principle is grace.

There are lots of different applications to the truths of this parable but I think there is none greater than salvation itself. We're here being taught that he will give full salvation even to those who do not deserve it. He will give us a proper place in heaven even if we come to faith in Jesus Christ on our deathbed. In fact, we'll get

the same heaven as the person who labored a lifetime in God's vineyard. But don't be amazed that some don't get more. Rather let us be amazed by God's grace that any get his generous gift.

Now I know that there are some people who may think this a dangerous teaching. It may communicate that someone may waste an entire life, live unrighteously and at the last minute turn to God and accept Jesus Christ as Savior. It may be understood that salvation has absolutely nothing to do with how good we are. It may be thought to communicate that no matter how hard we work, that's not the basis upon which relationship to God is determined, and it may be thought that we can commit the worst of sins, that God will just forgive them almost like he's giving away freebies at a carnival.

Dangerous? Perhaps. But that is precisely what Jesus is teaching in this parable and in the rest of the New Testament. God is a God of grace. It may not fit our earthly logic. It may not fit our selfish greed. It may not be consistent with our grumbling ingratitude, but that's the way it is in the kingdom of heaven. Admission to God's heaven is not based upon what we have done or what we have not done. It is totally based upon his goodness and his grace.

All of which leads us to an invitation which comes from this gracious God to accept his goodness and his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Even if you're old; even if life's journey is almost at the end; even if what you have done so far is terrible; even if you're late; even if you don't deserve it. The God who sovereignly does whatever he chooses has chosen to offer free salvation in Jesus Christ and eternity in heaven to all who will accept his grace.

Tell him now. I invite you to confess to God that you are a sinner who does not deserve even a denarius much less heaven. Tell him that you accept his salvation through Jesus Christ.

Father, forgive us for thinking that we could ever be worthy of you. Accept our deep gratitude that you are who you are, the God of grace and generosity, who gives to us forgiveness of sin and life eternal that we could never deserve or earn. Father, we praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.

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