

Matthew 19

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 December 2006

Preacher: Finlay Mackenzie

[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the passage we read in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 19 and 20, page 987.

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.

Now this was a story, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a story Jesus told to illustrate the way the kingdom of God works, which is of course quite different from the way human organizations operate.

Now the whole notion of merit before God is something that is really destructive.

The notion of merit, accumulating merit before God is really destructive of grace and faith and humility and fellowship.

[1 : 06] Because in God's economy, the last come first and the first come last. Now a parable has been defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Maybe we got that definition earlier in Sunday school, I'm not sure. But in a parable, things in the spiritual world are compared with events in the physical world.

Here, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a landowner taking on new workers for his vineyard. And Jesus says, this is how God operates.

This is how the kingdom of God works, which is not at all according to human ideas. Now Jesus' parables were not fables intended to teach a moral such like the Aesop's fables or such.

Such like morals such as that one good turn deserves another or that you don't count your chickens until they're hatched. You know, stories that teach morals like that.

[2 : 10] Okay, you're free to agree or disagree. Jesus taught with authority and people knew it. They couldn't deny it or escape the force of his teaching. This particular parable grew out of what Jesus has just said to the rich young man in chapter 19.

Last verse of chapter 19. Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early.

And that was how, that was the point he was making in that parable. Jesus' parables have a clear and authoritative lesson to teach us. It's usually one main lesson.

So, the workers in the vineyard, what does this parable have to say to us? Well, the landowner goes out to hire workers early in the day. The day began then, in that particular culture, at 6 a.m.

6 o'clock in the morning. So, he goes out at 6 and he gets his workers. They agree on a wage and they go off to work. We may note in passing that a denarius was a silver Roman coin.

[3 : 22] It was the recognized daily wage. The recognized wage for a day's work. It was not a stingy wage. It was a good wage for a day's work. And we should also notice that these men were good workers.

You know, they were out early. They were ready to work. They were keen. They were willing. Wanted to be put to work. They were out at the crack of dawn. Well, at 9 a.m., the third hour, he goes out to hire more men.

Now, no judgment is implied on these ones, men who only turned up after three hours. No judgment is implied of them. And so, he goes out again at midday and at 3 p.m.

And hires more. Again, no judgment should be made of these men for only making themselves available when the day was half done or nearly over. No judgment implied.

They were willing. They were glad to be asked. He says, why do you stand here all the day idle? Because no one has hired us. They wanted to be hired. They're willing to work. So, he puts them to work. At 5 p.m., with only one hour to go, there is still work to be done.

[4 : 38] And so, he goes out and he hires more. We might even be inclined to judge the owner for this. Say, what was the point in going to work when there's only an hour left? No point sending them out then.

But the owner is a keen, he's a good landowner. He wants to get the work done efficiently in his vineyard. And so, he puts more men to work, even for it's only for the last hour.

So, when the end of the day came, and it was pay time, they were almost surprised. Verse 8. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the ones last hired and going on to the first.

Last come, first served. Strange. Annoying, perhaps, to some. The first one, as you can imagine them, possibly, possibly, thinking to themselves, why are we being kept waiting here?

We've been here since 6 o'clock in the morning, working all day. Now we're not even going to get our pay until these people who've only worked one hour have been paid. Might have been annoyed like that.

[5 : 54] Well, let me encourage you, if you ever feel hard done by, especially if you feel hard done by in the church, those who work hard and work well often get extra responsibilities, extra burdens to carry, inconveniences loaded upon them.

It often happens. But if you can manage to appreciate the graciousness of the Lord, your Master, you will find joy in it. The rewards are well worth the trouble.

Well, they all received a wage for a day's work. Even those who only worked for an hour. However, those who had worked all day, then when they saw what the last ones got, they grumbled, expecting to receive more.

They'd agreed, their wage. Then they thought, well, he's going to pay them that, he should pay us more. On a human level, perhaps we might sympathise with their raised hopes.

But we must remember that this is not about the way, this is not about the human level, things that happen on the human level. It was the agreed wage. It was a fair wage, a good wage.

[7 : 23] There was no exploitation. It was most unusual, unheard of, in fact, because it clashed with normal business practice. But the point is, it's an illustration of God's ways with us.

God's ways with man. So let's look at Jesus' teaching. And let's get the overall picture. The landowner is God.

The workers are those living in this world who accept God's kingship. That is, who accept his kingdom. Those who have God as their king and who obey him.

They follow the Lord Jesus Christ and they live a new life, a converted life, a life of prayer and dependence on grace. The focus of the parable is on God's generosity and his right to show it in the way he wants to.

And Jesus shows here that God's love, God's generosity is not divided into neat portions according to our merits.

[8 : 33] Let's look back at chapter 19 a little more fully. Let's read the story that led to all of this at verse 16.

Chapter 19, verse 16. The rich young man. Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied, there is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments. Which one's the man inquired?

Jesus replied, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother and love your neighbor as yourself.

All these I have kept, said the young man. What do I still lack? Jesus answered, if you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor.

[9 : 31] And you will come and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth.

Jesus said to the disciples, I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

The disciples were astonished and said, who then can be saved? With man, Jesus said, this is impossible, but not with God. Peter said, we've left everything to follow you, what will there be for us? Jesus said, I tell you, at the renewal when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, those who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, you who have followed me.

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father and mother, so on, for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last and who are last will be first. See, Jesus' parable was sparked off by the incident with the rich young man.

[10 : 39] He was a good guy. He was upright. He was sincere. He was a quality person. You might say he would be first. He would be one of the first. He had lots of merits.

Problem was, he was breaking the very first commandment. No, he didn't seem to realize it. He actually had the wrong God.

Look at what Jesus says to him in verse 21. If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.

Jesus puts his finger there on what was wrong in that young man's life. His wealth, his lifestyle and all the benefits and fun and advantages that went along with it.

That was where his heart really lay. And not in humbly serving God. Because he couldn't take it. He went away sad.

[11 : 45] And Jesus said, sell what you have and come and follow me. He had the wrong God. He was actually breaking the first commandment. And you would say on the human level he was one of the best.

See, God has his own way of dealing with people. And it's not according to human qualities. Not according to the merits we can build up or heap up. By our own goodness, our own efforts to be good.

To be good people. God does not deal with us either on the basis of strict justice. We should be very thankful for that. Because if he were to, none of us would see the kingdom of God at all.

We should be very thankful that he has not rewarded us according to our desserts. In Psalm 130, the psalmist makes this point. He says, Oh Lord, if you kept a record of sins.

Oh Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared. That is the way God works. He works by grace and forgiveness.

[12 : 47] Because that's what we need. Forgiveness, not rewards. God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice. So you see, Jesus is teaching us here that we have to let God be God.

And we have to shun the temptation to create God in our own image. To create the kind of God we imagine he should be. Although that's our natural instinct. So looking a little more closely at Jesus' teaching in this parable.

Jesus teaches us firstly about God's character. Jesus teaches us here firstly that God is generous. Overwhelmingly generous.

He also teaches us that God is just. There is no unfairness in God. He teaches us that God is sovereign. He's the judge of us, not we of him.

He has the power. He has the right to mete out rewards and punishments. He has the power and the right to assign our destiny. He's God.

[13 : 57] God does not conform to human ideas. The last shall be first. What is great in human estimation? Great talents.

Great wealth. Heroic service to a great cause. Fine leadership qualities. Or business acumen meriting lucrative remuneration.

No, it's children who inherit the kingdom. And childlike people. Jesus said in another place, Unless you are converted and become like little children, you will not see the kingdom of God.

It's the last who are first. So Jesus teaches us about God's character. He's generous, just, sovereign, and he doesn't conform to human ideas.

Jesus secondly teaches us here about God's way of saving man. And it's very important to notice that the kingdom of God is about God saving man, not man saving himself.

[15 : 07] God works according to certain principles, which he has revealed in his word, the Bible. God is king and judge in this world.

That's how it is. And it is as such that God saves us. He'll not bargain with us. We have nothing to bargain with anyway. God saves us as king and judge.

And we are accountable to God for what we do, for the work we do, what we do with our lives. We are accountable, we are answerable to God. Not just to one another, but to God basically.

And also, God will examine our lives at the end. These truths all have a bearing on God's way of saving man, God's way of bringing man into his kingdom.

God is the judge. We are accountable. God will examine our lives at the end. There will be a judgment. We will all stand. We will all appear, says Paul, before the judgment seat of Christ.

[16 : 14] And then, also, we need to accept the kingship of God. We need to enter the kingdom of God.

How do we do that? We're not in it by nature. We need to enter it. We enter it along the humbling road of repentance, confessing of sin, and trusting in a saviour who had to die for us.

Trusting in his blood. Not that there's anything magical in his blood, but trusting that he died. His blood is the evidence of his death. And it was to die that he came.

He had to die to set us free from our sins. Not just stand and preach to us. And following him is about having faith in his death as the atoning sacrifice that satisfies God on our behalf.

You see, coming to God, having this kind of attitude, these are not things that will get you noticed among the great and the good.

[17 : 21] But in God's sight, it's what counts. It's God's kingdom we're talking about. And then God calls us to work for him.

He calls us to repent of our sins and put our faith in his Son, and he then calls us to work for him. To believe him for salvation, and then put our lives at his disposal.

Faith first, then works. Accepting his rule, his kingdom, that's working for him. You have to let God save you, in his own way, through grace.

So Jesus is teaching us here about God's way of saving man, bringing man into his kingdom. And then thirdly, Jesus teaches us about man's response to God.

The first workers misjudged the landowner, and those who had worked fewer hours as well.

[18 : 23] But particularly they misjudged the landowner. And this is just like man. We want to stand in judgment of God. I suppose that's why there's secular humanistic philosophy, why it has come to pervade so much of public life today.

And pervade so much of ordinary people's thinking. See, we want to say, we like to say things like, God is unfair. I hear this quite often.

God is unfair. Why does God allow evil? And so often the good get a hard time. Why does God allow it? Why did God allow the Holocaust? Why does God allow these evil people to do these things?

God stands at the bar of my judgment. That's what natural man says. It's our natural instinct to say, God is not fair. Who is the judge?

Is it God or is it man? We like to say, we hear people say, God has no rights. Or they imply that God has no rights. They say, when we construct a philosophy based on human rights, then we'll have a much better world, a much more just world.

[19 : 42] The problem is that a philosophy of human rights, without accountability to a transcendent lawgiver, is a recipe for conflict.

And those able to shout loudest, or those able to manipulate the media most effectively, or those able to pay for the best lawyers maybe, they're the ones who will win.

The weak will go to the wall. Because there's no accountability to an ultimate judge. Only to man. And the institutions man sets up.

We like to say, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Maybe that's true in real life. But when applied to God, it's like telling the prophets to be silent when they bring good news.

The landowner responded to one of the workers, one of the first workers, in verse 13. He said, Friend, I am not being unfair to you.

[20 : 57] Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Jesus does not tell us whether the grumblers accepted the landlord's explanation.

The parable ends there on a rather sad note. There are those who respond badly to the grace of God in the gospel. Now then, how should we apply this to ourselves?

How should I apply this to myself? Yourself? I would like to say something to new Christians and then to experienced Christians and then to those we may call not yet Christians.

First of all, to new Christians, how the parable, what the parable says to you. Among other things, I think it says this, that we should, you should praise God for his generous grace.

Don't ever lose sight of grace. The fact that God saves us for free out of the depths of our unworthiness just because he is determined to save.

[22 : 20] not for anything we've done to deserve it. Don't ever lose sight of grace because if you do lose sight of God's grace, you'll turn into a bitter, judgmental person.

And secondly, be humble and thankful and live for God. Serve in the vineyard.

Serve humbly in the vineyard. Don't use grace as a license to sin or a license to live self-centeredly. You can say, oh my, sins are forgiven, it's wonderful, now I'm free, I can do what I like.

Paul says, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. We died to sin with Christ. It's a contradiction of the new life that you have in Christ.

That's what sin is. So, serve him. Obey him. Don't use grace as a license to sin. Live for God. And in connection with this, if you've been given a responsibility in the church or if you've been given some responsibility outside of your paid employment, do it to the best of your ability.

[23 : 36] Don't grudge or grumble. Do it. Do it well. Do it thoughtfully. Think about the needs of those you're serving. Do it willingly.

Someone has said, the best kind of ability is availability. So, be humble and thankful and live for God.

Now, if I can say something to more experienced Christians, Christians who've been serving for many years. Remember, you have not earned God's goodness.

You received his forgiveness free because Jesus paid with his life. so be humble and thankful and encourage others.

Encourage others. Don't scold them. Don't belittle them. Don't belittle or scold those who you think are not doing as much as they should. Instead, encourage them. And don't grudge others their blessings.

[24 : 42] You know, we can sometimes be afraid that others may gain at our expense. We will lose out if they are benefited. You know, this deeply dishonours the Lord. Psalm 84 says, no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

No good thing will he withhold. And Paul says, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Don't grudge others their blessings. Now, I often think that we're better at weeping with those who weep. It's good to weep with those who weep. But we're also called to rejoice with those who rejoice and I think sometimes we're not so good at that.

Maybe you wanted to be top student. Somebody else beat you to it. Maybe somebody else got a position that you wanted. You felt you deserved it more.

We're called to rejoice with those who rejoice. And so we need to practice and seek grace. And we need to seek grace to welcome those who maybe only come into the kingdom at the eleventh hour.

[25 : 55] Who maybe wasted all their lives on wine women and song or whatever you might like to call it. But we're saved in their old age. We need to welcome them and not grudge them their blessings.

Christians. And finally, if I can say something to not yet Christians. First is, don't try to be the judge of God.

And the second is, remember, there's more to life than earthly success or wealth. There's more to life than fulfilling all the righteousness that society approves.

Like saving energy, not polluting the planet, working for human rights and fair trade. All this is very good. But there's more to it.

We are accountable to a transcendent lawgiver. And ultimately, it's with him we must deal. We're accountable to God. And the saviour, who you need, is offering you, his priceless gift of forgiveness and acceptance with God and everlasting life.

[27 : 13] For free. It's free to faith. It's an offer. There are conditions, of course. One is, he will not bargain with you. You have to accept it humbly as his gift, by faith, out of the riches of his grace.

You can apply. Amen. I'll leave these thoughts with you.