

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT20)

The Relationship Between God's Grace and Rewards in the Kingdom (20:1-16)

The chapter division between chapter 19 and 20 is unfortunate because chapter 20 is just a continuation of Jesus' teaching of His disciples in 19:28-30. In the last verses of chapter 19, Jesus has responded to the disciples question regarding their reward in the kingdom considering all that they have sacrificed to follow Christ. If it is impossible for the rich man to enter the kingdom on the basis of his merits (remember in Jesus' day, the prevalent thought was that material blessings implied God's favor), then the disciples wondered if they would have any reward at all considering all that they have sacrificed. Jesus answered their question in 19:28-30 and continues by reinforcing the answer with a parable in 20:1-16.

In this parable, Jesus reinforces the point that the notion that the rich, the powerful, the great, and the prominent will continue as such in the kingdom is contrary to God's grace. The parable begins with a typical scene and introduces atypical elements for shock effect upon the listeners. Jesus leads the hearers along in the flow of the parable to demonstrate that God's grace is completely removed from all principles of human merit found in a laissez faire economy. Those who approach God in childlike trust (verse 4 & 7 – "whatever is right") will be advanced beyond those who enjoy prominence now (19:23, 30) based upon the fact that God is omniscient and gracious. The point is not that all are equal before God and all kingdom work is equal. Nor is Jesus trying to teach free enterprise or establish principles for resolving management/employee disputes.

In verses 1-2, the owner of the vineyard agrees to pay the workers a denarius – the normal wage for a foot soldier or a day laborer. These workers would have started about 6 a.m. Note that the other four groups agreed to "whatever is right." The third hour would have been about 9 a.m. and the eleventh hour would have been about 5 p.m.

The principle in the world is that the worker who works the most (assuming the same job) receives the most pay. This is certainly just and the wise owner would not have many workers if he violated this principle. But in the kingdom, the principle of God's grace prevails. Some of these workers (Jews in context to whom the kingdom is being presented) protested (v. 12) and the owner (God) is said to respond with the question – "Is your eye evil because I am good." The evil eye is an idiom referring to jealousy (Deut 15:9; 1 Sam 18:9).

Jesus Predicts His Death and Resurrection (20:17-19)

Jesus has taught His disciples about His death on previous occasions (16:21-23; 17:9, 22-23); however this is the first mention of the mode of His death and the Gentiles part in it. Can you imagine being Jesus at this point in His ministry? How would you handle it if you knew that God's plan for you included enduring such an injustice? Would you rebel against the Father's plan because it wasn't fair to you? Would you have a perspective of your life and human history that was greater than your own interests? To one degree or another, we face these same questions every day when much less significant injustices come our way.

Kingdom Principle: Greatness is Serving (20:20-28)

Despite Jesus' repeated predictions of His passion, two disciples and their mother are still thinking of position in the kingdom. Jesus has predicted His death and, when two of His disciples ask for preferential treatment, he asks them if they are prepared to face similar suffering and death (5:10-12; 10:37-39). This kingdom is the Messianic kingdom of Christ on earth that will be parlayed into eternity. Kingdom and the church are never equated in Matthew's Gospel. James,

John and their mother are asking for the privilege of sharing in the authority and preeminence of Jesus when his kingdom is fully consummated – something that they think is near at hand without the Cross or any interadvent period. The disciples have not fully grasped the significance of Jesus’ teaching regarding His death; however, they have certainly grasped the kingdom motif prevalent in Jesus’ teaching. They probably thought that Jesus was using hyperbole (exaggeration) when referring to the means of His death. After all, anyone who could still the storm and raise the dead could certainly defeat anyone who would try to challenge Him.

Many of the better Greek manuscripts omit the phrase “and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” in verses 22 and 23. Regardless, the phrase “drink my cup and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” refers to suffering and death similar to Jesus. James became the first apostolic martyr (Acts 12:2) and John suffered exile to the island of Patmos (Re 1:9).

The other disciples no doubt wanted equal treatment with James and John. [Principle: Sometimes an interest in egalitarianism is nothing more than a veneer which serves to mask a jealousy motivated by self-interest]. The Greek phrase translated in the NKJV “lord it over” is $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha\iota$ and should be translated “exercise authority over.” Jesus’ is not trying to criticize Gentile authority structures. He is simply trying to contrast greatness in the kingdom with greatness on earth. Greatness in the kingdom is based upon servant status in time. This same principle is true in the Church Age as was true in the Age of Israel. Verse 28 is an allusion to the suffering servant Messiah predicted in Isaiah 53.

Two Blind Men Receive Their Sight (20:29-34)

The most significant point to note about this healing is the contrast with an earlier healing of blind men in 9:27-31. There, they are told to keep silent and the healing was on the basis of their faith. Here in 20:29-34, they manifest faith by using the title “Son of David.” They are not commanded to keep silent since the point in Jesus’ ministry has been reached where His rejection is inevitable.