

The Gospel of Matthew


“The Last Shall be First”
Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
 And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.
 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place;
 and to those he said, ‘You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went.
 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long.’
 They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into the vineyard.’
 And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’
 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.
 And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,
 saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’
 But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?’

‘Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to the last man the same as to you.
 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’
 Thus the last shall be first, and the first, last.”
 Matthew 20:1-16



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Main Point of the Parable:

- Not about the equality of all rewards but about the nature of God and His generosity as the basis of any reward



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Atypical Elements:

1. The Compassion of the Landowner

- he hires workers at the eleventh hour not because of his need but their need
- “no one has hired us” – they are the “leftovers” of the laborers

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Atypical Elements:

2. Equivalent Pay for the Laborers

- a full day’s wage was given to those who only worked one hour
- this is intended to provoke within us a sense of unfairness

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Principles:

1. The reward is based on grace not merit

- God’s gifts are distributed, not because they are earned, but because He is generous
- kingdom rewards depend on God’s sovereign, free grace

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Principles:

2. Grace replaces grumbling with gratitude

- because we relate to God by grace not merit, He is never “unfair” toward us
- envy of others and resentment toward God are signs of a merit-based theology

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In the kingdom of heaven there is no place for entitlement or envy...we are all debtors to God’s grace