

# Mysteries of the Kingdom - Matthew 20:1-16

## The Parable of the Householder

In 1989 it had been a long day on Capitol Hill for Senator John Stennis. He was going home to relax. He parked his car and walked to his front door. Two people came out of the darkness, robbed him, and shot him twice. The news spread quickly - Senator Stennis, the chairman of the powerful Armed Forces Committee, had been shot. He was on the operating table nearly seven hours. Driving home that same evening was another politician. When he heard about the shooting, he turned around and went to the hospital. He noticed the staff was swamped and couldn't keep up with incoming calls. He sat down at the switchboard and voluntarily went to work. He took calls until daylight, then got up to leave the next morning. He was asked by another operator who he was. "I'm Mark Hatfield. Happy to help out." Then Senator Mark Hatfield unobtrusively walked out. The press could hardly handle that story - a conservative Republican usually didn't give a liberal Democrat a tip of the hat, let alone spend hours doing a menial task and be happy to help out.

But that is exactly what Hatfield did. Why? Because there was something in it for him? NO! It was simply because he had the right attitude in service. This illustration is not meant as a political statement. The shoe could have just as well been on the other foot and the truth would be the same. It is just meant to illustrate what service is all about. This passage teaches us about having a right attitude in service. It is a kingdom attitude that should be evident in all those belonging to God. Unfortunately, though, it is often conspicuously absent! As we study the parable of the Householder, notice this important lesson on service.

Notice first then the **context of the parable**. This parable is connected directly with the last four verses of the previous chapter. The parable provides an answer for Peter's question in 19:27: "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" It was a question born out of experience - one perhaps you have even wondered about.

Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter, the rich young ruler comes to Jesus. He asks a question that many are asking: "what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" Jesus then brings up the commandments. Was He saying we can be saved by keeping the Law? NO! Jesus was not bringing this up to show young man how to be saved. Rather, He brought it up to show him he NEEDED to be saved (which was the intention of the Law all along)! There was no way he could keep them perfectly, even though he thought he did: "All these things I have kept" (Matthew 19:20). But in reality he had not. Jesus knew that, and was about to demonstrate it to him.

The 10<sup>th</sup> commandment says, "You shall not covet!" This young man had great wealth that he obviously coveted. When asking Jesus "what lack I yet?" (v.20), Jesus went right to the heart of his problem: sell your possessions, give them to the poor, and come follow Me! Have you ever been put on the spot? That is exactly what Jesus did to this man here. His response would show what he was truly made of. Jesus knew he had a problem with the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. Now others would know, too. Notice his response: "he went away grieved for he was one who owned much property" (v. 22).

It has been well said that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. You can appear outwardly righteous: going to church, giving money, helping others, teaching a Bible

Study, praying, etc. This young man certainly seemed to have it all together. Outwardly, he followed the commandments. But who can judge covetousness – it is an attitude of the heart. Well, Jesus can - and He did. He hit the nail on the head here. And as a result, the young man went away sorrowful.

But what does all of this about the rich young ruler have to do with our parable. Well, in the context of our parable, the disciples were present when Jesus spoke with the rich young ruler. They saw the encounter, and most certainly realized the contrast between the young man's wealth and their poverty. So impetuous Peter speaks up and reminds Jesus of their sacrifice. "Lord, we've left it all and followed you," he reminds Jesus. But then he gets to the heart of what he is really asking: "what are we going to get out of it?"

Jesus gave them a marvelous promise: "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life" (vv. 28-29). He reminded them of what we need to be reminded: we are NOT making sacrifices – we are making investments. Not all the dividends will be received in this life - but they will be received.

And then Jesus begins the parable. Notice Matthew 19:30: "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first." This is really the beginning of the parable as it is the same statement in 20:16. The statements serve as parentheses for the parable. What does the parable teach us?

Well, notice next the **confusion of the parable**. As we have seen before, the classic understanding may not be correct understanding. What is the classic way to interpret this? Whether you get saved young or get saved late does not matter because both produce the same result. Both go to heaven. That sounds nice, and in fact, it is true. But it is not what the parable is about. The penny is NOT salvation! Nobody works for salvation. There are others who will say the parable is about rewards in heaven, not about salvation. Yet scripture says we will not all receive the same reward: ". . . but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8).

Many people recognize the inherent difficulties in these interpretations. So they devise ingenious ways to deal with them. For example, they speak of the quality of work. They say that those who started early did not work well. They took long coffee breaks, a 2 ½ hour lunch, and talked on the job. On the other hand, those hired late worked hard. Thus, in the end, it was equal pay for equal work. Such might sound ingenious but there is nothing in the parable to indicate such a situation at all. We must be very careful not to read something in to make an interpretation work.

Another ingenious way to deal with the difficulty of the parable relates to difference in coins. It is claimed that those who were hired late received a different kind of penny. Some received a gold one, others a silver, still others a bronze. Each had different value, but the net effect is they were all paid fairly based upon work. Again, the text does not support this at all. In fact, it supports just the opposite. The Greek says those coming at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour received a denarion (i.e. denarius) – the same wage the first workers received. Again, we cannot read something in to make an interpretation fit. So this parable is neither about salvation nor receiving rewards. What is it then about?

Notice then the **clarity of the parable**. I believe this parable is emphasizing to us a right attitude in service. Remember the context mentioned earlier revolved around Peter's

question in 19:27. Yet, we should not serve God because we want to receive an expected reward. Neither should we insist on knowing what we will get. God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve! The attitude that says “what shall we have therefore” is the attitude that mars discipleship with discontent. All who enter into God’s service must do so confident that their labor will not be in vain.

In 1878 William Booth’s Salvation Army was beginning to make a mark. Men and women from all over the world began to enlist. One man, who had once dreamed of becoming a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to enlist. His name was Samuel Brengle. He left a fine pastorate to join the Salvation Army ranks. General Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. In order to instill humility in Brengle, he set him to work cleaning the boots of other trainees. Discouraged, Brengle said to himself, “Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?” And then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, unlettered fishermen. “Lord,” he whispered, “you washed their feet; I will black their shoes.”

This is the lesson Jesus was trying to teach Peter and the disciples. It is the lesson we need to learn today. As laborers in the vineyard, we must always remember: it is motive that gives character to our service. Acceptable service is determined not by its duration but by its spirit. What did Paul speak of in Eph. 6:6? “. . . doing the will of God from the heart.” If we serve God only for the benefits, we miss the best blessing He has for us. NO - instead we must do God’s will from the heart.

Verse ten uses a little word we often overlook in describing the early laborers. The KJV is “supposed,” or “thought” in the NASB. We should never “suppose” in God’s service. That is what this parable warned Peter about: *how do you know you’ll have anything?* is basically what Jesus was saying!

Unfortunately, these early workers are so much like many today. Instead of rejoicing at what the others received they were jealous and complained. They said things like: it seems the same people do all the work; I wish more people would get involved and share the load; why do only 20% of us do 80% of the work! Such attitudes really reveal the true character of our hearts - selfish (and that includes me). Friends, whenever we find a complaining servant, we find one not yet fully yielded to the master’s will!

So the first shall be last and the last first. Jesus both begins and ends with that statement. And it is a fitting ending for us as well. But even here is a very misunderstood statement of our Lord! Some see this as saying that those who start serving God early will end up last and vice versa. But notice, Jesus does not say “all the first will be last and all the last will be first.” Rather, He says MANY. It is not necessary to start early and finish last OR start last and finish first. In fact neither is best! The truly desirable thing is to start early and continue working with all the power you have. NOT for reward, but out of sheer delight at serving your Master!

Beware of overconfidence when it comes to service and the rewards you will receive. Those who are first in their own eyes may end up last. Likewise, do not get discouraged in your service to God. any who consider themselves “unprofitable” or last may end up first. I think the challenge for us from God’s Word is: do not wait until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour to start serving God! Begin now. Serve now, and keep at it until the end. And at the end, do not ask “what am I owed for all my service?” Rather say, “what a joy it has been to serve such a loving and gracious Lord.”