

# Matthew 20:8-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-20/matthew-208-16/>

*Jesus finishes the second half of the parable of the Vineyard laborers. He describes how the landowner generously pays the late arriving workers a denarius, but when he pays the agreed upon denarius to the full-day workers, they are envious and bitter. Jesus reminds the disciples that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.*

There is no apparent parallel Gospel account of this parable, however its final point is paralleled in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30.

Jesus continued telling the second half parable of *the vineyard laborers*. The first half of the parable was about the vineyard's landowner hiring *laborers* to work in *his vineyard* at harvest time. *He* hired five crews of workers throughout *the day*, starting at the very early morning, all the way until about five o'clock. The first crew agreed to be paid a *denarius*, or a full day's wages. The subsequent crews agreed to be paid "whatever is right."

At the end of *the work day*, when evening came, the owner of the vineyard called his foreman. The foreman was the overseer of the harvest and the laborers. He was a full-time employee and possibly a family member or son of the owner. If the owner represents God, the Father; and the vineyard represents His kingdom; the foreman could represent God, the Son. The evening represents the moment of judgment that comes after this age ends (2 Corinthians 5:10). It is the start of "the regeneration" that Jesus just described to His disciples (Matthew 19:28).

The owner summoned His foreman because it was time to pay the laborers their wages for the work they had done that day. Wages are rewards for deeds. In this life, we generally exchange work for wages. The owner instructed the foreman to begin with the last group first. His instruction, beginning with the last group first, is a clever insertion of the parallel proverb that bookends this parable.

## **Beginning bookend: Matthew 19:30**

"But many who are first will be last; and the last, first."

## **Ending bookend: Matthew 20:16**

"So the last shall be first, and the first last."

This proverb is the main point of this parable. The parable tells us what Jesus means in using this proverb.

The last crew to be hired began to work at the eleventh hour, which would have been about five o'clock. They only worked for one hour of the day. Each one of them received a full day's wage. This was more than "whatever is right"(Matthew 20:4). It was extremely generous of the

*vineyard owner. Each got a denarius, which was the same amount that the first, early-morning laborers agreed with the vineyard owner was fair. Jesus and/or Matthew do not say how much wages the laborers who began at the third, sixth, and ninth hour received. Their reaction is also not recorded. This is likely because the main point of the parable is to compare the first with the last.*

*When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more because they had worked a full day, while the others only worked part of a day. But this expectation was not met. When the foreman came to pay them, each of them also received a denarius and no more. This disappointed and embittered them. Jesus says they grumbled at the landowner when they received the wages they had agreed to. Apparently, one of the early morning wage laborers became a spokesperson for the crew and approached the owner to express the disappointment among the first group.*

He complained to the owner of the vineyard. His complaint was based on two counts. First, he said that the first crew had worked far longer than the last crew. And the spokesperson was right. The first group worked twelve hours while the last group worked only one hour. And second, he said that the first group worked under harder conditions than the last group. His group worked during the scorching heat of the day, while the last group had only worked during the cool of the late afternoon. This too, was likely true. Because of these factors, it was not fair according to the spokesperson, that the first crew should be paid equal wages as the last crew. Their charge against the landowner was that he was not being fair or just.

The owner answered the spokesperson's grumbling accusation with respect and kindness. He addressed him with the endearing term: *Friend*. He explained to him, *I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? (They had agreed to this amount.) The owner told him to Take what is yours and go. In other words, "Receive your wages and be content. You have received what you hoped to receive. What are you complaining about?"*

The owner asked him a rhetorical question. *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Of course, it was lawful for the owner to do with his own money whatever he wished to do with it. This including giving it to other people for whatever reason the owner wished to give it. Then the owner surmised the real reason that the first group was grumbling against him. He asked them, Or is your eye envious because I am generous? They were not mad that they got what they agreed to. The real reason the first crew was upset was that the last crew received more than what they would likely have agreed to work for, had they bargained for a wage.*

The parable ends with the owner's insightful speculation about the cause of the grumbling being rooted in envy. Jesus then repeats the mirror image of the opening proverb. *So, the last shall be first, and the first last.*

That ends Jesus's parable about the vineyard laborers. What did Jesus want His disciples to grasp or see from it?

One point of this parable seems to be to not assume that someone's position in the kingdom of heaven is based upon their station or influence in this life. This would connect back to the

episode just previous to this parable, where the disciples asked how anyone could enter the kingdom of heaven if the highly impressive and pious young ruler was lacking. Many who are considered *first* in this life are in reality *last* in the kingdom. And many who are regarded as *last* in this life are in reality *first* in the kingdom. Jesus told this parable to help His disciples realize this truth. This is an application of the beginning bookend proverb: “But many who are first will be last, and the last, first” (Matthew 19:30).

Having riches, authority, influence, power, a good reputation among men amounts to nothing in God’s kingdom. These do not impress God. What God cares about is faithfully obeying Him by humbly loving and serving others from the heart. Anyone can do this, even those who are poor in material prosperity or who have little influence and or following. That’s why Jesus told Peter that everyone, including those who are least or *last* in influence, power, riches, etc. can become *first* in His kingdom if they will follow the Messiah (Matthew 19:29).

The disciples perhaps wrongly assumed that someone like the rich, pious ruler would be a shoo-in to enter the kingdom. And when Jesus told them that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, they were astonished (Matthew 19:24-25). They imagined that if someone as important as the rich young ruler could not enter the kingdom, then there was no way someone as lowly as them would be able to enter the kingdom. In their eyes he would be *the first* to enter. Jesus told this parable to set a proper paradigm for greatness.

The kingdom of heaven operates on a completely different value system than the kingdoms of this earth. That is why to seek to become *first* in one, is to become *last* in the other (Matthew 6:24; 10:39; 16:25). To blend this thought with another of Jesus’s teachings, “What does it profit a man, if he is *first* among the world, but whose soul (“psuche”) is *last*?” (Matthew 16:26).

To become *first* in this life often requires loving the world and obeying its system. The race to become *first* in this life is a vicious competition that destroys lives and social harmony.

But this is not God’s way. To become *first* in His kingdom requires loving Christ and obeying His good command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Becoming *first* in the kingdom is a melody where we all play our part in God’s harmonious symphony. The better we love and serve one another, the better it is not only for us, but for everyone in His kingdom.

A second point of the parable is an application of the closing mirrored-bookend of the parable “So the last shall be first, and the first last.” This could mean that those who come to faith late in life can still gain great rewards. Perhaps also those who are faithful later in this age can gain great rewards. It could be that the first workers represent Israel, who had a specific covenant, or bargain with God. They were promised specific blessings for specific obedience related to the Promised Land, as in Deuteronomy 30:15-30. But the Gentiles who came later and were grafted in (Romans 11:17) had a new covenant, written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16). This could mean that Gentiles who came later, and who have a spiritual covenant rather than a specific covenant reward related to the Promised Land will be treated extremely generously if they are faithful in serving.

This second point, that the last shall be first, also connects back to the prior episode of the “rich young ruler.” Jesus had stated that “with God all things are possible.” The second point would emphasize God’s generosity. *The landowner* in the parable of the vineyard workers was overly *generous* with the late-comers willing to work in his vineyard, and trust his generosity. He was fair with those who negotiated a bargain, but overly generous with those who trusted Him to be just.

The rich young ruler was probably like many negotiators who desire to know what they have to do in order to obligate God to bless them. God is just. He will honor His promises. So in that sense we can depend on God to do what He promises. But there is something much greater. God is incredibly *generous*. If we trust Him, and do what we can with what we have, there is a really good chance we will get rewards that are much better than what we would have bargained for.

The Apostle Paul says as much in his first letter to Corinth:

“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,  
And which have not entered the heart of man,  
All that God has prepared for those who love Him.”  
(1 Corinthians 2:9)

In this sense, this is an incredibly encouraging parable. Those who came late might be like those who wasted much of their lives not following God’s ways. But if they are faithful, and trust in God’s *generosity*, He might reward them as though they had been faithful for many years. Will that make those who labored long *envious*? Likely not. In the next life, we will have our flesh stripped away. So it is more likely that we will recognize whatever God grants us in terms of rewards is overly-*generous*, and a result of His mercy.

However, Jesus did tell of someone who bragged on their ministry résumé, expecting great reward. That person was summarily dismissed. It seems that to the extent we expect to obligate God, we are actually being self-serving, so will only gain the fleeting rewards of this world, rather than the enduring rewards of heaven. (See commentary on Matthew 7:21-23).

Jesus desires for everyone to *be first* in His kingdom, just as He desires for everyone to be great. In the context of the kingdom, the usages of these two terms are quite synonymous. God created everyone to be *first*, but only those who follow Him fulfill their destiny and become great. Only those who choose to set aside the “firsts” of this world, and trade them for “lasts” of this world will be *first* in the kingdom. This promise is available to all, including those who are “last.”

Within a few days of this conversation Jesus again instructed His disciples how to *be first*.

“and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.”  
(Matthew 20:27)

Being a “slave” is to *be last* in this world. But if we serve the best interest of others, we are doing what makes us *first* in the kingdom of God. If we seek to *be first* among the kingdoms of this earth, and insist that others respect our right to *be first*, we may attain our desire; but living this

way is we are almost certain to *be last* when Jesus's kingdom comes. To blend another of Jesus's teachings, What does it profit a man, if he is *first* among the world, but whose life ("psuche") is *last* in the ways of the kingdom of God? (Matthew 16:26).

The main point of this parable indicates that a man's greatness in God's kingdom is not based upon how men esteem him on earth. This interpretation aligns with the four criteria of the parable's meaning that we indicated earlier. It concerned the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 20:1). It depicted the mirrored bookending proverb of *first* and *last* (Matthew 19:30; 20:16). It illustrated Christ's teaching to the disciples about how everyone can *be first* (Matthew 19:29). And it showed the disciples how even though the rich, powerful ruler may be impressive in this life, this did not mean he would necessarily *be first* in the kingdom (Matthew 19:24).

If the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-24) or the Pharisees (Matthew 21:43-45) are possible pictures of the first being last; then the Roman centurion of great faith (Matthew 8:5-13), John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11), or the woman who anointed Jesus's feet (Matthew 26:6-13) might be examples of the last who will be first. It could also be that believers who come later in time are elevated over believers from the first century. The things of which we can be certain are that a) God will decide, it is He who will judge, b) His judgments are true, and c) He is merciful, and is desirous of rewarding those who are faithful (1 Corinthians 4:5; Psalm 7:11a; Revelation 3:21, 22:12).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>8</sup> "When evening came, 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.' <sup>9</sup> When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, <sup>12</sup> 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.' <sup>13</sup> 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? <sup>14</sup> Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. <sup>15</sup> 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?' <sup>16</sup> So the last shall be first, and the first last."**