

Matthew 20:1-16 | Kent Stiles

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[0:00] See, my wife got me all flustered this morning, thinking I should do it back there.! That's why I do it up here. You know, sometimes a few more seconds of silence isn't the worst thing.

So, well, welcome back. To me, at least. I wasn't here last week. There's some fires going on in California, and it kept me at home, which is not where I'd want to be on a Sunday.

I will say it was nice. I got a call from Brad the following morning, and he was one who was empathetic as he was putting in his mere 70 hours in the brown truck. So we just laughed about how, you know, sometimes those weeks go.

But, Tom, I did see your message. It was quite good. So thank you for sharing. If you want to open up your Bibles to the book of Matthew, we're going to continue our study this week, and we're coming to a new chapter, chapter 20.

We're going to look at chapter 20 in verses 1 through 16 with a few verses in chapter 19 for context. And so this morning what we're going to look at primarily is the parable of the vineyard, the workers in the vineyard.

[1:19] So I'm going to start in Matthew chapter 20, read down through 16. We'll get started. So starting in verse 1. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. He went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. And he said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.

So they went. Again, he went out about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, and he did likewise. And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing idle. And he said to them, Why have you been standing idle here all day?

They said to him, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive. So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his servant, Call the laborers and give them their wages, because with the last, beginning with the last to the first.

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more, and they likewise received each a denarius.

[2:28] And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, These last men have worked only an hour, and you made them equal to us, and have borne the burden and the heat of the day.

But he answered one of them, and he said, Friend, I am not doing you wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours. Go on your way.

I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things, or is your eye evil because I am good?

So the last will be first, and the first will be last, for many will be called, but few chosen. Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for opportunity to get together.

Lord, we thank you for safety, making the way here. Lord, we thank you for just each person that has the ability to meet at the fellowship here, Lord, as we get to look into your word.

[3:23] We get to glean from it what you have to say, Lord. And Lord, we just thank you, as we're going to see this morning, just how gracious and good you are. Just pray that we wouldn't forget that, and that would

always be in the forefront.

We ask that you would open our eyes and ears over the next 30 or so minutes, that the message would be clear. We ask this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. You know, oftentimes when you read this passage, there's a word that comes to mind for most people, and that's the word fair.

And I would ask you today, how many people like to be treated fairly? I like to be treated fairly, right? Now, let me ask you though, if you had the choice of being treated fairly, or being treated generously, how many of you would rather be the recipient of generosity?

So we all love to be treated generously, yet how quickly our gratitude can deteriorate when we see someone else blessed more abundantly than ourselves.

As parents, did you ever hear your kids say the phrase, that's not fair? Yeah? No? Yeah?

[4:29] No? You know, I grew up in a family where I'm the youngest of 13. Many of you know that. I feel like I was disciplined just like everybody else. I've got two brothers who are here.

I would suppose to you that they probably did not get disciplined exactly the same. Now, you may wonder why one would have been disciplined more than the other.

You'd have to ask them that, or who got disciplined more? And one might say, my dad was not fair in the usage of his tool, that being his leather belt.

Okay? He gave to one, maybe more than to another. Yet, you know what? I don't think they probably ever were upset when my dad said, you know what? I'm going to let you off this time.

I'm going to be generous to you. Now, I have heard stories, and when you grow up in houses with a lot of boys, there is some enjoyment in watching somebody else get spanked. Okay, so it's not always wanting to see the other person be generous, but you do sometimes enjoy someone else's struggles.

[5:36] But you hear that phrase as parents, that's not fair. And if you imagine like a family going out to breakfast, and they are, have any of you guys ever seen the movie, I know Kevin has, but Seven Brides for Seven Brothers?

Do you guys remember the scene where, you know, the lead guy brings Millie home to cook, and all the brothers are sitting at the table, and I'm laughing just thinking about it, and she serves the food, and they just go like ravenous dogs at this food, and then it turns into a wild bar scene almost, and they flip the tables over, and they all get kicked out.

You know, that's what I think about when I think about these families with fairness. You know, when you're from a big family, you eat fast, because that's how you get seconds, right? So, this family's out to have lunch, and you can imagine it's a pancake lunch, and the very first thing that you do is you eye the other person's plate to make sure that everybody got a fair share.

And so when somebody has pancakes that are slightly smaller than what's on the other person's plate, automatically we say, hey, that's not fair, and yet what the person is missing is that if they just raised their eyes about 10, 12 inches, they would see this platter in the middle of the table that has an abundant stack of pancakes, more than that family could ever eat in a meal.

And so in the view of this surplus, the issue is no longer one of justice or fairness, but one of unnecessary comparison or envy. Now let's say you go to Carondelet Park.

[7:11] It's a hot summer day. You've got five gallons of ice cream, and you put a sign up that says, free ice cream. Well, in no time, you have this line of kids that are lined up, and you give each of them a scoop of ice cream, and they're happy, they're smiling, they have the ice cream on their face, but occasionally you see a really cute kid, and you say, you know what?

Don't tell anybody, and you give them maybe a second scoop on top, right? Maybe Kevin gives an extra sucker to some of the kids back there in his office. I'm not just saying. Maybe that happens.

And when the children, what happens? Hey, glad to see you got that second scoop of ice cream.

Good for you. No. They protest, and they say, that's not fair. And when they say that, why is that, for the person who brings the ice cream, why does that not sit right with you?

Because although you have not given equal portions, you've not been unjust, have you? You've given exactly what you promised, free ice cream.

And the one protesting that you are not fair, they've overlooked your generosity, having just given him a large scoop of ice cream that ultimately he doesn't deserve.

[8:30] And so gratitude, again, is swallowed up with envy. And what I hope you're going to see from Matthew's gospel account here is that because God gives what he promises, he always gives more than we deserve.

And there's no place for comparison, no place for envy or entitlement in the kingdom of heaven, but only gratitude for undeserved grace. And so I'd like to tell you, I was telling my wife this morning, as I was just wrapping up, preparing for this, sometimes I come to a passage or a message, I don't know those guys, you guys that speak, sometimes I come very confident what I'm going to speak on, very strong in what my position is, and then there's sometimes where I come like, man, I'm still not quite sure if what I'm saying is exactly the way what was to be interpreted from this.

Doesn't that make you feel really confident sitting there for the next 20 minutes? You know, if you went into your calculus class and the guy's like, I didn't go past algebra, but I'm going to try.

Hopefully that's not what happens today.

I can assure you that the main thrust and point of this is biblical, and it's true, and it's what I wanted to get across, but some of the intermediates, I think leave a little room for interpretation, but we're going to try our best.

You know, today's passage of scripture, it's really a response to the preceding verses that we looked at last week. You may recall, last week we looked at the rich young ruler, and if you guys remember, with the rich young ruler, he comes to Jesus and he says, what must I do to what?

[10:01] Inherit eternal life, right? And Jesus says, now Jesus obviously knows everything about this guy, he knows more about this guy than this guy knows about himself. So he says, you have to keep the commands, A, B, C.

And he says, I've kept them all from my youth. Now who really thinks he kept them all from his youth? Right? Maybe he wasn't an adulterer. I don't know. Maybe he hadn't killed anybody.

Those of you that have kids, do you think he honored his parents every step of the way? You know what? I mean, I've got four, and they didn't make it past the changing table as far as honoring their parents.

So I don't think he made that one. Do you think he loved his neighbor as himself? I would suspect that if he loved his neighbor as himself, he probably wouldn't have near the riches he had. Not that riches are bad, but my guess is if he loved his neighbor like he loved himself, he would want to just lay upon his neighbor the riches the way that he would want to himself.

So I don't think he met those criteria, but in his mind, he says he did. So then Jesus says to him, okay, well, if you want to, then go sell all your possessions, give to the poor, and then come and follow me.

[11:13] And I think we know what it says. It says he walked away sorrowful because it says he had much, and that was where he struggled. And so Peter is standing behind here, and Peter's great, right, because Peter always says what we want to ask, but no one ever really has the heart to.

I think there's even a passage, and I can't remember where it's at. It may be with transfiguration. I'm not sure, but it says Peter, who had nothing to say, asked such and such, right?

And at times you just say, you know what, keep your mouth, that would help us a lot, many of us, myself included, but Peter fortunately asked the question. He's kind of like the guy in the Zoom call when you're at a meeting at work, and everybody wants to ask this question, and you're like, don't ask the question.

It's like, I don't care. I'm going to ask the question. That's Peter. So he's taking note of Jesus' answer here, and he sees this man walk away, and he asks in verse 27, he says, Lord, we've left everything to follow you.

So he just tells the rich man, leave it all to the poor, come follow me. And Peter says, that's me. I've left it all. I've left everything to follow you. What then will it be for us?

[12:22] And this is what Jesus says in verse 28 to 30. Let me flip back there. Jesus probably, I think we, in hindsight, he could have responded many different ways here, right?

He could have rebuked Peter. He could have ridiculed Peter. He could have said, you just don't get it. You know, what a really dumb question to ask, you know, but that's not what he does. You know, he's full of grace and mercy.

And so Jesus says to him, surely I say to you that in the regeneration, when the son of man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on the 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel and everyone who, and everyone who has left his house or his brother or sister or father or mother or wife or child or lands for my name's sake shall receive a hundredfold inherit eternal life.

But many who are last, many who are first will be last and the last will be first. So he says, Peter, you got nothing to worry about. Though the disciples may appear to be last in this world, giving up their comforts to follow Christ, giving up their securities to follow him, they are promoted, they are promises to this place of leadership when Jesus establishes his future reign over the earth.

And everyone who follows Jesus, it says, will receive blessing and surpasses any earthly sacrifice and ultimately will inherit eternal life. And so, the first thing we learn is that no one's earthly sacrifice to follow Christ will be shortchanged by the generosity or the bounty of God's grace.

[14:02] No one, so nothing you do here is going to be, is going to outpace or outchange what God has in the form of his abundant grace. Whatever sacrifice is required of you, it's eventually going to be multiplied in blessing by a hundred times over.

Some of those blessings are spiritual blessings we'll see here in this lifetime. Some we won't, but in the end, eternal life will be make every sacrifice minuscule.

I think sometimes we don't quite comprehend what that will be like to be in heaven, to have no sense of time, to be with the Lord, to be with him forever. What we do here, it will be minuscule in comparison to that.

And that eternity in heaven is far more than enough to compensate for any earthly loss. Ultimately, God will be no man's debtor.

His generosity is so extravagant and his grace is so undeserved that no man's sacrifice can diminish the lavish mercy of God. And so when Jesus says the first shall be last and the last shall be first, he indicates that the kingdom of heaven functions according to different values.

[15:16] You see, in this world, the rich young ruler, he seemed to have the first advantage. And the disciples who were renounced, they had renounced the earthly assets, they had followed Christ, they seemed to be the last.

But in the kingdom of heaven, those with childlike trust and dependence on God will be received and blessed regardless of their earthly status. And the last becomes first.

And because the kingdom of heaven, we know it can't be earned by human effort or merit, the first and the last in essence are put on equal standing because they both enter heaven only by undeserved grace.

No man stands above another when both stand on grace. and so we have to uproot any sense that we deserve anything from God or that we can earn the right of God's blessing.

The rich young ruler, he thought he could earn his way into heaven. Peter thought his earthly sacrifice could earn him advanced heavenly compensation. While God is faithful and just to give the rewards he promised, even rewards are received by grace.

[16:29] Now the Bible, it teaches that there will be varying rewards in heaven and how we live our life on earth. Yet it's important to realize that even rewards are the result of grace.

that no one can stand reconciled before God to receive reward apart from the grace that flows from the cross. That no man can do any good from a transformed heart that has not been transformed by grace.

And so heaven's joy will be accentuated not by our works or by our sacrifice but rather heaven's joy will be accentuated by that clear-eyed perspective that I don't deserve any of this.

That one second, that one sight, that one breath in heaven that it's only by grace. Only undeserved grace. And that should be the perspective and the mantra of every believer that I don't deserve anything good from God.

That every good thing is a gift of grace. And that's the safest place to keep your heart from envy and keep it in a sense of gratitude and entitlement.

[17:52] The defiling joy assassinating attitudes of envy and gratitude and entitlement, they sprout from the belief that I deserve something better in life. But when I realized that the only thing I deserved was God's wrath for my sin and yet that God lavishes upon me his undeserved grace to have all that heaven offers for eternity, my heart is fortified by deep appreciation and gratitude and joy.

and Jesus wants Peter to clearly understand that the undeserved grace by which we enter the kingdom of heaven leaves no room for comparison or envy. And so he tells us this parable in chapter 20, he says, no one enters the kingdom of heaven more or less deserving than another because we cannot earn what can only be given to us by grace.

really quickly here, let me summarize this parable because on the surface it's pretty straightforward. As most of you know, parables are a story, we don't derive doctrine from them, many people will say they're an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Sometimes we see, I think there's roughly 35 parables in the New Testament, we see sometimes the Lord will give a parable like this and he won't give immediately following the meaning, other times he'll give a parable and immediately he'll give the meaning.

Think about the parable of the sower with the seed, he gives a parable, he gives the meaning. Here he gives a parable, he doesn't give the meaning right away, so we're left up to some degree to determine what it means.

[19:37] And so you have this guy who owns a vineyard and it says he goes out, now you own a vineyard, you only have a crop part of the year, once a year, so you don't want to employ full-time staff all year, that's not cost-effective, so he goes out, he has to get people to work in the vineyard, and so he goes down to an area which we wouldn't really recognize this in St.

Louis as much, but if you were to go to Texas, for example, there are areas of town that the day labor, and there probably are some in St. Louis that I just don't know about, but there are areas of town where the day laborers would hang out, and essentially they would hang out there and their goal was to get someone to come through, offer them work for the day, and they would go and they'd do that job and they would get paid, and this would be a day-to-day thing, and so in some ways it was really the lowest form of labor in that even a slave knew where their meal was going to come the next day because they were employed by the slave master.

The day laborer is like the lowest on the totem pole, so every day they have to go out looking for food that would ultimately feed them that day. In fact, if you look in Scripture, there's a lot of rules and law against, you know, in the sense of like don't work them past a certain time, pay them that same day because they have to go out and get food, etc., etc., so we have a guy going out and he hires a group of people, it doesn't say how many, to work in his vineyard, and they agree on a price, one denarius, one denarius would be typically a day's wage in that time, but really it's even more than a day's wage for them because it'd be a day's wage for like a skilled person, and these guys would by no means fall under that category, so it was a generous day's wage, and so they agree upon it, and they go, and this would have been around six in the morning, that's when the day starts, six in the morning, and then it says he goes out in the third hour, which would be 9 a.m., more people are, there's people standing out there still, he says go work in the vineyard, in this particular case, so you'll notice, he doesn't make any agreement with them, he doesn't say I'll pay you a denarius, he says you go, you work, I'll pay you what's right, so obviously you would think these people trusted him for some reason that he was going to pay them a fair wage.

He goes out at the sixth hour, he goes out at the ninth hour, does the same thing, he goes out eventually at the eleventh hour, so eleventh hour is five o'clock, he's going out to hire people who are going to work for one hour, and he says go, and I'll pay you a fair wage, so they go, they work, the end of the day comes at six o'clock, he tells his foreman, hey, go get the people from the vineyard, line them up, pay them, but pay them starting with, if you had done this, if you were a manager, this at least from my perspective, who would you pay first?

I would pay the guy that was there the longest, right, I mean, he was there longest, you know, he's been waiting, he deserves to be paid first, but that's not what God, that's not what happens here with the vineyard owner, he takes the last, he pays them, he gives them a denarius, he gives the guy that's been there nine hours a denarius, and they're, I'm sure they're plenty pleased, a full day's

work, they only worked an hour or three hours, the guy who started at noon, the guy who started at nine, ultimately then we get to the guy who started at six o'clock, and I got to believe these guys at six o'clock are probably thinking, you know what, a little extra bonus coming my way, I mean, he paid these guys one, he's certainly going to pay us more, but scripture tells us that he goes to pay them, and what does he pay them?

[22:57] One denarius, and what's their response? You're a good vineyard owner, thank you, no, it's their heart comes out, it says they grumbled against him, and they said, essentially, we've been here all day, but the one who's been here for only an hour, you're paying the same thing.

Now, as a business owner, I mean, I would, I'd be, you know, pretty frustrated, and that's the response here, right? Hey, I can give to whom would I want to give, did I not lawfully agree with you to pay you one denarius, am I shortchanging you?

No, I paid you what we agreed to, and if I want to have more generosity, if I want to give more to these people here, that's my prerogative. It's not your business, and it's not yours to, it's not you to say, and I got to tell you, when I read this parable, I'll be honest, oftentimes I find myself reacting more and relating more to the guy who was hired at six o'clock, right?

That's not fair. You paid him one, the guy who came at noon, he should get .75. The guy who came, the guy who came at one, he should get less. It doesn't seem fair that a guy who worked one hour should be paid the same as the guy who worked all day.

Not because of the land owner being unjust, he did what is promised, but it's unfair in these men's eyes because he is generous, and because he's compassionate.

[24:28] And so the reason the landowner keeps going back, he hires more of these workers, it's not because he didn't accurately calculate how much help he needed. He knew what's needed to work the vineyard.

It's that he's bringing more workers because the workers need him. The laborers, they were at the bottom again of the economic scale, and he was compassionate, and he was giving, and he was going back again and again.

And I think we know this story here, it's not about grapes, right? It's about grace.

And it's about the mercy of a living God. It's about the grace of one who owns the vineyard, who in his mercy gives benefits to people that haven't ever earned.

So in this parable, the vineyard owner, he represents God, sovereign and free. To extend his grace to anyone that he wills. He's not obligated to treat one man the same as another.

[25:33] And the point of this parable is that God is not only just doing what he's promised, but exceedingly generous. Extending his life, giving mercy beyond what is deserved.

And God's generosity, it exceeds justice. It exceeds, you know, really when we think about this group, who are the only ones that got justice in this parable?

The ones who came at six, right? Because they agreed to an amount. Now, I don't know what those guys' hearts were. One thing is careful. When we read parables, I know what their hearts were when he paid them.

We know that. I don't know if they worked as hard as the other guys. I don't know if they put in head to the grindstone for 12 hours. They very well may. The parable doesn't say that. So I try not to, when you read some commentators, they'll go off on a tangent where these guys, they're the typical union guys.

They negotiated a denarius and they said, hey, I've just got to make it to six. We don't know that. They may have been very hard. Nothing against union guys, by the way. My dad was in the union for a long time.

[26:47] But, you know, they draw these conclusions that I don't think you can from what the text says. It doesn't say that. But we do know what their heart was at the end because it does tell us that.

And so the point, again, is that God's generosity exceeds justice. He made a contract with these firsts and this is what they got. The rest of them, he could have given them. It just says whatever was fair.

But he exceedingly gave grace to excess. And so he keeps going back again and again and again. And that's a picture of God's benevolence.

That his excessive payment of those who worked only a few hours was an act of mercy to provide that day's meal. And so those who were grumpy, those who were jealous, those who grumble do so out of jealousy, rather than injustice.

You know, in fact, again, those who worked all day, had he not hired them, they would have gone hungry as well. I'm going to wrap up here fairly shortly.

[27:51] I'm just going to go forward here, a couple paragraphs here. You know, I think one of the beautiful realities when we look at this with of heaven is that though there will be varying degrees of rewards, we see that in scripture, each person's joy will be full and unhindered.

That all believers, they get all of heaven and the fullness of joy because their delight is not at that time in the heavenly rewards or rank or status, but in the presence of their father and of Jesus, their supreme treasure.

I can't imagine what that's going to be like. I think in some ways the Lord may not want us to imagine completely what that's like because I think we would all be running to a cliff to make it to that place, right?

It's that great. But we'll understand when we're on the other side of glory. And so as we consider Jesus teaching, it's essential for us to own the mindset of heaven. Now as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and first we've got to put on a heart of deeply informed gratitude.

And ironically, gratitude begins with the constant awareness that you and I don't deserve any of these good gifts that come from God. And that when you experience the generous bounty of God's gift, you rejoice with profound gratitude.

[29:11] I've got to ask myself, do I act that way? Do I get up on a daily basis and say, Lord, all good things come from you. I don't deserve any of them and I'm extremely grateful for those. And so we're to live with profuse gratitude for every good gift, both big and small, both temporal and eternal.

And we keep in mind that God was not obligated, he wasn't obligated to create me or to create you or to redeem you or to redeem me any more than the landowner was, even any more than the landowner was obligated to choose a particular worker.

And thus every good thing in this life and the next, it's a gift of undeserved grace. And I think it's true that we have not understood the gospel until we understand that we are saved by grace and by grace alone.

Not by grace plus merit, not by faith plus works, not by Christ's righteousness plus something that I've done, but by grace alone. If the musicians want to come up, I'm going to finish here with a, it was an assignment or something that was referenced in a message I heard by R.C. Sproul.

And he essentially said this, he said, before you go to bed tonight, you want to take a few moments, because really that's all that it should take, and you want to take a piece of paper and you put a line down the middle. And on the right side, take out a pencil.

[30:38] And on that right side, at the top of it, write the phrase, God owes me dot dot dot. And this should really be the easiest assignment that you should ever do.

It should be finished with such rapidity that you make your head spin, because if you think about it, he owes you what? Nothing. That page is blank.

He owes you nothing. That all I have before God is to merit, and if we want to talk about that, then all he owes me is wrath. If we talk about justice, he owes me punishment for the many ways in which I offended him.

But as far as the gifts that he gives us today, freely, he owes me nothing. Now, on the contrary, because you've got so much time on your hands, now that you've completed this assignment, if you want to go to the other side of the page, draw a line, and say on that column, write down all of the things that you owe God, then I can assure you, you'll be up all day tonight.

He said, you'll be up all day tomorrow. You'll be up all day for the next week, and there's not enough days left in your life to fill that side of the ledger. Because everything we have comes from him.

[31:55] Not because we earned it, because he mercifully has provided it for us. And if there's any sentiment that has no part in the Christian heart, it is the sentiment that God owes me something.

And so as we come before the Lord this morning, no one is more or less deserving than another. And so I would implore you that we would come before the Lord thankful for his goodness, thankful for his kindness, thankful for his never-ending faithfulness, and we come together celebrating his undeserved mercy, his undeserved grace, and his lavish generosity.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. Lord, we thank you for your goodness. We thank you for you looking upon us undeserving, Lord. Think about that picture of that paper and the right side of the column, Lord.

All the things that you owe us on the merit of what we've done, Lord, and that page is blank. Lord, all we're owed is wrath, Lord, for justice, Lord.

[33:10] But that wrath was paid on the cross with the death of your son, Lord. And thinking about that other half of the paper, Lord, what do we owe you, Lord? And we owe you everything. Lord, you are a good God.

Who are we to ask how you would bestow your blessings, how you would treat one other, Lord?

Lord, you are more than fair. You are generous beyond all comprehension.

We thank you, Lord. We thank you for being such a good, good God. We thank you for these things in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.