

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

No Latitude For Attitude

Written By

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Ever needed an attitude adjustment in how you treat other people? More importantly, ever had God rebuff you in order to move you along the path toward spiritual maturity and holiness? I've been there and done that, unfortunately on more than one occasion.

One year when my batting in High School wasn't as stellar as it was the previous year, I actually prayed this prayer during a game as I stood at the ready in left field: "Lord, as a devoted Christian on this non-Christian team, I need you to help me in my current batting slump. Perhaps you could help me and allow me to get a couple of hits at my next few times up to the plate."

You can guess how that went. The baseball might as well have been the size of a marble. Couldn't hit it no matter how hard I tried. You'll never guess the conversation I had with God toward the end of the game out in my position.

"Lord, since you didn't answer that prayer, which was no big deal for you, and since you've allowed me to be in this battling slump for longer than I'd like, why don't you just leave me alone, you know, get out of my life."

Can you say, "Spiritually immature?" Boy did I need a spiritual attitude adjustment and God lovingly obliged over the next few weeks in a variety of ways.

Long before I hit the planet with my occasional selfish bent on my spiritual understanding of God and His ways, Peter had his own issues, at times. I'm sure you have yours, as well, right? One of the most prideful things he ever said was articulated just after the rich,

young ruler walked into a Christless eternity because he wouldn't give up his wealth to follow Jesus.

27 Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

The boldness, the selfishness, and the gleeful greed of this theological question does more than raise an eyebrow or two. It drops your jaw to the floor and sucks the air out of your lungs. "Peter, how could you ask that question?"

What is most interesting, as we have studied, is our Lord lovingly and graciously answered the question, giving Peter and all saints some amazing insight in the spiritual rewards awaiting those who have followed hard after Him during our earthly pilgrimage. And just in case you still have a hard time swallowing the concept of spiritual rewards for the quality of your service to Christ, you just might need to re-read some key New Testament texts dealing with the subject (Matthew 5:3-12; 6:1, 4, 6, 18; 7:11; 10:41-42; 13:12, 43; 19:28-29; 25:20-21, 23, 24).

Yes, Jesus answered Peter's question because it was valid; however, sensing the presence of pride in the heart of Peter, as well as that of the disciples, realizing the question betrayed a penchant for serving the Messiah for what one could get out of Him, and understanding the reality that these particular saints were looking for self-elevation instead of self-degradation and humility, Jesus gave them *The Parable of the Laborers In The Vineyard* in Matthew 20:1-16. It is most unfortunate our chapter divisions, which are not inspired, cut this particular chapter off from Christ's closing words of chapter 19:

30 But many who are first will be last; and the last, first (Matthew 19).

These words occur at the close of the parable in question; namely, verse 16

16 So the last shall be first, and the first last (Matthew 20).

As you can see, Jesus reversed the word in order to drive home His warning to the disciples about making sure they had a godly, humble attitude toward their sacrifices for following Him. His warning, of course, is applicable to all disciples of all time. Failure to follow Him for the right reasons, failure to make sure your motives for giving up much to be devoted to Him and His cause are pure and holy, failure to keep your ego in check as you serve Him will cost you when rewards are handed out at the establishment of the eschatological kingdom. No doubt, there is a word here for all of us, especially if God's hand of blessing is upon the sacrifices we've made in His name. Sin is so subtle, is it not? It can turn even our best efforts for Christ into wood, hay, and stubble. Might we all, young and old in the faith alike, therefore, sit up and take note of the Lord's tremendous teaching in this timely parable.

Covering sixteen verses in one study might seem like a miracle to you, yet it is not an impossible task if we move through them in a logical, progressive two-fold format. Verses 1 through 16 give us *The Passage*, which naturally leads to *The Principles*, or points of personal application derived from the chapter in question. Turning our attention now to the parable, let us state up front the main idea of the story:

Service To Christ Has No Latitude For A Sinful Attitude (Matthew 20:1-16)

To show Peter and the other disciples the true condition of their hearts, Jesus told a parabolic story they would all be familiar with growing up in the agriculturally rich Galilean region. To help you understand the Lord's pedagogical method here, I suggest we first consider the layout of the passage, and then we'll turn our attention the lessons of the text.

The Layout Of The Passage (Matthew 20:1-16)

The Word (Matthew 20:1-7). This word introduces us to the colorful and highly graphic story of a rich Jewish landowner who desperately needed day laborers to help him get his gorgeous, plump grapes harvested as soon as possible:

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

From the outset, Jesus identified this story as one bathed in the messianic kingdom motif, a concept all the disciples were well-aware of from their understanding of the Old Testament, especially the writings of the prophets. Throughout His teaching, Jesus took great care in using common stories to metaphorically relate concepts about His kingdom (Matthew 13:31, 33, 45, 44, 47). Here the coming Davidic Empire with the Messiah as the King (Isaiah 9:6) is likened unto the wealthy vineyard owner in need of laborers at harvest time.

The story presents us with five different groups of laborers:

- Group 1. These men started "early in the morning," which in Jewish time reckoning of the day pointed to daybreak, the time when the day began
- Group 2. These workers started at the third hour, or 9:00 a.m. (Interestingly enough, the crucifixion, which Christ will speak of in the next periscope, viz., Matthew 20:17-19, commenced at this time, cf. Mark 15:25).
- Group 3. The sixth hour, or high noon, is when these men went to work. (Again, we can't help but note how the sun became dark at noon on the day of Christ's crucifixion.)

- Group 4. The ninth hour, or 3 p.m., is when these men were fortunate enough to get employed for the day. (Additionally, we can't help but note that Christ died at this time on that fate-filled Friday, cf. Mark 15:33ff; Luke 23:44ff).
- Group 5. The eleventh hour, or 4 p.m. is when the last group of men seeking a job for the day were hired by the wealthy vineyard owner.
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Note that all the men were, as Barclay observes: "the lowest class of workers, and life for them was always desperately precarious. Slaves and servants were regarded as being at least to some extent attached to the family; they were within the group; their fortunes would vary with the fortunes of the family, but they would never be in any imminent danger of starvation in normal times. It was very different with the hired day-labourers. They were not attached to any group; they were entirely at the mercy of chance employment; they were always living on the semi-starvation line."¹ None, therefore, could really think of themselves better than the others for they were all beggars of sorts.

What is different about the various groups is what they agreed to work for.

- Group 1 had a sweet contract of one denarius, or what a Roman soldier's daily pay rate was in the day.
- Groups 2-4 agreed to work for whatever pay the vineyard owner deemed fair and prudent for them. They were just glad, I'm sure, to have some kind of income.
- Group 5 didn't agree to any pay whatsoever. Even though the workday was almost over at 4 p.m., they were really happy to have any kind of a job with any kind of pay, even if it amounted to very little. Truly desperate people will do desperate things to survive, won't they? I've been in the labor pools in seminary as I waited for Allied Van Lines to call me on a weekend with some tough, but much needed, work.

At this point in the story, I'm sure the disciples were all smiles. No doubt, they identified with the men who received employment first. They, of all the others, could potentially have bragging rights because a whole denarius would be there's at sundown, or 6 p.m. Those workers who came later were, most likely, not the fine physical specimens like them, especially, the weaklings who didn't get hired until the day was almost over. You know how this goes. Go back to High School in your mind. When the tough athletic types formed flag football teams in gym class, they would always pick the bigger, faster, more muscular guys first from the pool of potential players. The weaklings, the less intense, the running challenged players were always picked last. Remember, nobody wanted to be part of that group. How inferior.

Interesting, isn't it? Men look upon the outer man, while God looks upon the inner man and his motivations, especially when it comes to spiritual rewards. God is also all about getting the attention of His laborers so they can grow spiritually and receive a full eschatological reward. He turned up the heat on the disciples with the next movement of the story.

The Wages (Matthew 8-10). According to the Mosaic Law, Jews were commanded to pay a man for services rendered by the end of a given day (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:15). Hence, the story reads most naturally ...

¹William Barclay, *Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1975): 223.

8 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.'

Hold it right there. The wealthy vineyard owner did not move as expected. Quite the opposite. Instead of paying the men who had been in the heat all day harvesting his crop, he purposefully had his foreman assemble all the workers with the goal of paying the men who came last, first. Huh? Has this businessman lost his mind? Not really. Since the vineyard concept is heavily steeped in Old Testament imagery denoting God as the vineyard owner and a vineyard as depicting His chosen people, Israel (Isaiah 5), we would be safe to say this "businessman" knew exactly what He was doing at the end of the day. And what shocking thing did He have his foreman do? Read on:

9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

Everyone, from as best we can tell, made a denarius, even those who came at the end of the day. Amazing. What grace! What complete generosity! What a reversal of expectations! And because all the workers were paid in reverse order, the workers who started at daybreak had to sit and watch all of this unfold as they nursed blisters and sunburn. Seeing all this money floating around got them all excited:

10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; ...

Let's analyze this. Why did they think they would get more? That's easy to answer: because they drew the logical conclusion that if the wealthy man gave everyone who worked less more than they deserved, then they, of all people, should, by definition, receive more than a denarius. Things did not turn out well for these presumptuous, prideful, selfish workers. The contrastive word "but" tells us this much:

... but each of them also received a denarius.

Why only a denarius? That is their entire verbal contract called for with the vineyard owner. They had made sure of that in the wee hours of the morning before the sun came up. They were working for the pay, not for the joy of the job. No way. It was all about a certain dollar amount to these men.

How did they respond when the foreman dropped one denarius into their calloused, blistered hand? Not well. I call their reaction ...

The Waffling (Matthew 11-14). Oh, they waffled, and you would have too had you been in the hot sun all day battling bugs and cottonmouth:

11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 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.'

What was their beef? They felt the vineyard owner had treated them unfairly. They were the first into the vineyard and had made all the personal sacrifices to bring in the harvest. Really,

the bulk of the labor and the future profit rested, for the most part, on their broad shoulders. And all they received was a measly denarius. “Unfair! Unfair!” became their mantra.

Was their beef legitimate? No.

13 “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? 14 ‘Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.

The denarius the break-of-dawn workers received was completely fair based on their verbal contractual arrangement. Only their pride and greed caused them to think the owner somehow owed them more. He did not owe them any more than He agreed to pay them, and their reaction to His unexpected generosity to the “lesser workers” merely served to isolate the impure motives of these men. They were pridefully presumptuous, unlike the other men who were humbly thankful to even be working for a shorter amount of time.

Wishing to further educate these agitated workers, the landowner gives the ...

The Word (Matthew 15-16). Two well-aimed questions looking for a positive answer took the grumbling break-of-dawn day laborers to task:

15 ‘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?’

Yes, it is lawful for a businessman to pay his workers whatever he wants to pay him. Wouldn't you like a boss like this? Translated, he can do with his money whatever he wants, so to accuse him of being unfair is unfair. He paid a fair wage to the first group, and decided to be extremely generous with the other four groups, especially the last group, the group nobody wanted to hire during the day. And, yes, the eye of the first group was envious. Ah, now we are getting somewhere, aren't we? The first group, who thought their sacrifice should be met with lavish financial rewards from a wealthy landowner who parted with his cash with no problem to all the lesser workers, had a deep-seated spiritual issue called jealousy ... and, really, pride based on their unique position as the first into the field.

Ominously, the vineyard owner spoke words reminiscent of those of Jesus to His twelve day laborers He called the disciples:

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

The word “so” is a trip word, denoting the climax of the story. It is, therefore, the main practical point Christ wanted to drive home to Peter and the other disciples. We should now study it under the second title ...

The Lessons Of The Passage

All parables are limited in their theological foci, and this one is no exception. Ostensibly, this means we should not venture force every facet of the story to produce some type of theological meaning and application. To do so is to push the parable beyond its original scope and purpose.

That said we can now focus our attention on the main purpose of the Lord's instruction in this story. Once we finish this analysis of the primary application Christ intended, we can venture to offer a few additional secondary applications which seem to arise from a study of the plot.

Lesson One: There is no latitude for attitude. The disciples, who were the first ones called to follow the Messiah in a pedagogical and personal setting, should have been the last ones to relish and bask in their fortune. Additionally, they should have been the last ones clamoring for what they would get out of following the Messiah, or who would sit on what throne.

Think of it.

For thousands of years countless godly people looked for the Messiah's glorious arrival, for millennia prophets had foretold His arrival and now He was here in the flesh. What a privilege for these twelve common Jewish men from Galilee of all places, the geographical setting the religious elite in Jerusalem felt was something akin to the outer court of the temple, a place of disdain and insignificance. At the dawn of the offer of the kingdom, after four hundred years of prophetic darkness between the testaments, this group of predominately social outcasts for the most part, this group of the academically challenged, this band of brothers with their own personal issues and sometimes shocking quirks ... they were given the privilege to be the first to work as harvesters in the Lord's fruitful vineyard.

How did they fare? What does the parabolic Lord's story say about them? They were too quickly self-centered instead of being selfless. Their motivation for service focused more on what they would get out of the experience of being the first in the field, and less on the sheer wonder of getting to work for the Messiah himself. Further, their initial question and its dissection in the Lord's story demonstrates they thought a bit too highly of themselves and their position. *They* (place heavy emphasis upon this word) were *the* (emphasize this as well) disciples, and because of this unique status they expected to be honored and elevated, really paid handsomely at the final revelation of the eschatological kingdom.

Oh, how easily our unique position in Christ can cause us to fall into the same sinful trap of the disciples. How easily we, too, can think we are above the spiritually unenlightened and uneducated. And the more we grow and mature in the faith, and the more blessings the wealthy owner of the vineyard showers down upon us because of His generous Spirit, the more we can be tempted to think we are, well, all that ... a cut above the others who have not done the work for God we have done, who have not sacrificed like we have sacrificed, and who have not had their hand on the Master's plough as long as we have. Yes, too readily can we, who have been first in the field, be tempted to think more of ourselves and less of those who have just come into the field to harvest with us. May God help us come clean if we have a condescending spirit. May God cause us to embrace humility and shun pride in all of its cunning, crafty forms. May God move us to see value in all of those who come into His field, and may that view so captivate us we will have no time to consider ourselves. May God wake us up to the sobering fact that many saints will not receive a full spiritual reward because of a bad inner attitude in their service for Christ, while only a slim minority will find they did, in fact, serve Him with the correct inner motivations (Matthew 19:30).

As a new, young church planter I was invited to a denominational gathering one day. I had a great time meeting all the pastors in our area; however, one pastor was most memorable. When the event was over he, the pastor of a mega-church, and I the pastor of some forty people who met in school, wound up at the exit door at the same time. I put out my hand to greet him and was shocked when he made a snide remark about me as a new pastor. Guess he had not read this parable.

So, what about it? How's your attitude? Hopefully, it is one of deep, abiding gratitude that Jesus, the vineyard owner, has called you, the formerly spiritually destitute day laborer, to work for Him until He calls you home.

Lesson Two: Be happy when Jesus blesses others more than you. Did you get that? You might need to read it one more time and allow it sink into your soul. When you are working hard for Christ and you have been at it for years and there are minimal results, from the world's perspective, it is tempting to look at another saint who has God's blessing all over them and to be slightly envious. It is carnally natural to mutter under your spiritual breath: "Lord, why are you blessing them so greatly when I have served you so sacrificially and so faithfully? What gives?" Believe me, as a former church planter, I have traveled down this road too many times. Seems like no matter how hard I worked for Christ, the blessings always seemed to be poured upon a peer, or two, or three, or, well, I am sure you get the picture. How easily we, like the first workers, question the vineyard owner, Jesus. How easily we, like the first workers, get offended at His gracious generosity shown to other workers in His fine field.

Wrap your mind and heart around this facet of the parabolic application by focusing on this personal story.



My father, Al, died at 76 years of age from brain cancer. He followed and served Jesus faithfully since childhood. He served as an Elder/Deacon Chairman many times, worked on countless committees, served as teacher in the children's department at church for years, helped the disadvantaged, shared his faith to countless folks, provided room and board for needy young people, gave wisdom and guidance to countless people, gave sacrificially of his tithes and offerings, and so forth. He was the quintessential saint, a real man to follow.

Liz's father, David, from Jewish extraction, had no room in his life for Jesus, especially after his three tours in Vietnam as a Navy medic in a surgical tent. He never went to church, never prayed (as far as I know), never read the Bible, and opposed people, like me, praying over meals in his home. After I led Liz to trusting in Christ as her Savior, she then decided to get baptized. The year? 1979. He didn't attend and made the rest of her day after the glorious event very unpleasant. When he contracted cancer in 1993 and then eventually succumbed to the disease on Memorial Day in the same year (oddly, and sovereignly enough, this is the day our daughter, Amanda, had her twin girls ... isn't Christ amazing?!), he made the most amazing move. He asked his wife to get a chaplain. Wondering why he would ask her to do that, she still fulfilled his request. Three days before he died, Dave, the hardened skeptic, embraced Jesus as his personal Savior and Lord.

The two men couldn't have been more different, spiritually speaking; however, when God hands out rewards in the kingdom age He will lavish His gracious rewards on both of them. Isn't He good? Knowing my father, I'm sure he will celebrate with Dave on that unique, memorable, and highly emotional day.

In light of this, I must say, "Lord, make us individually and corporately a people who cheer your lavish love as it is poured out on other saints, even if we think their labor is not on par with ours. Lord, help us to see that all labor in your field is equally valid and you can reward

your workers as you see fit, but might we rest in the fact that your reward will always be far beyond what we could ever imagine.”

Be honest. Are you envious of another saint? If so, I think you know what you need to do. Confess that carnality to Christ and make it a point to let them know just how much you appreciate and celebrate with them the blessing of the vineyard owner in their life.

Lesson Three: The vineyard owner expects us to work ... so get in the field. Translated, you were not saved to sit on the sidelines and watch everyone else work. You were saved to bring glory to Christ by how you labor in the vineyard, and He will lovingly surprise you with rewards one day you did not anticipate. So, get into the field. Get to harvesting. Get to work advancing His kingdom. Get to work bringing souls in from your own personal harvest. Get to work making sure His local vineyard, His church, has the workers it needs to function to His glory. And what is most amazing about all this is this: Christ’s eschatological reward is lavished upon all his workers, whether they have been in his field a long time or have just become part of the crew. Hence, whether you have worked for Him for fifty years or five weeks, His reward for your efforts, should He call you home, will be off the charts. Is He not good? Indeed.

Do you ever watch *Undercover Boss*? It is a great show. The premise is creative: A boss of a large, wealthy company gets in a disguise and goes and works for the common laborers in his business. What he typically sees and hears saddens him at times, and educates and illumines him at other times as to how to grow an even more effective business.

The close of each episode is most moving. One by one the owner, now not in disguise, calls all the faithful workers into his office to reveal himself to them. Then one by one he lavishes unexpected gifts on them for their hard work and service to his company. There are always a lot of tears, warm embraces, and smiles as lives of faithful, devoted workers who have sacrificed much for the big, impersonal conglomerate are changed forever by the costly gifts bestowed upon them by their thankful CEO.

Metaphorically and spiritually speaking, this show, in some ways, is but a small taste of our rendezvous with Jesus one day. When He reveals Himself to us I can’t help but wonder what He’ll say and do in light of our efforts. One sure fire way to make sure this day is a day filled with joyful tears, warm embraces, smiles and eschatological kingdom reward is to make sure we gave no latitude for a bad attitude.