

BE ENCOURAGED BUT STAY HUMBLE MATTHEW 20:1-16

Me, Myself and I - Years ago in college I had to take a business class called interpersonal communications. The professor who also wrote the text book for the class, was convinced that a healthy self-esteem was critical. Wars were fought over the lack of self-esteem. Broken marriages, faulty parenting, addictions and many more of society's issues were blamed on the lack of a thinking highly of yourself. There are also messages out there about the need to love yourself more, the need to forgive yourself, how to get what **you** want out of life, how to promote yourself, and how to think better of yourself. Modern culture is so incredibly focused on the elevation of self, that right now, you can self-determine to be a man, a woman, an it, or some other strange designation, and society demands that it is respected as reality. Self is so important these days, billions of dollars are spent on self-help books, self-help consulting, self-satisfying sermons about wealth or success, and self-focused politics. Millions of babies are killed each year to protect self-interests. God warns us in 2 Timothy that in the last days people will be lovers of self. Not only is this human nature but it will get worse and worse till the Lord's return. Self-exaltation was a problem prior to mankind entering sin. Isaiah 14 quotes Satan saying; " I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God, I will sit on the mount of assembly, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High. Then we see mankind enter sin and follow suit with self-exaltation. We see Jesus rebuking the self-promoting scribes and Pharisees calling them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, fools, and blind. He states in Luke 14: "but when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, friend, move up higher. For everyone that exalts himself, will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted." According to Jesus, exaltation of self does not end well. We also need to consider the effects of self on those following the Lord. In many places in the gospels, we see the disciples arguing with one another about who is currently the greatest and who will be the greatest. In Luke 22 A dispute also arose among the disciples, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, James and John ask their mom to petition Jesus to see if they could sit on either side of Jesus in His kingdom. As you can see this extreme desire for personal glory is present in radical believers too, that leads us to today passage.

Matthew 20:1-16 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

Context is everything. Opening up to chapter 20 of Matthew without knowing what happened previously would leave you with a lot of questions. Let's talk briefly about the end of chapter 19. The rich young ruler asks about obtaining eternal life and is told to sell and give away all and follow Jesus and he would receive treasure in heaven. In this story we see these topics: eternal life, treasure in heaven, kingdom of heaven. Peter and the other disciples heard this entire conversation and began wondering, what about them. Peter says, "we have left everything and followed you, what will we have?" Peter was intrigued by Jesus' promise of treasures in heaven. Jesus answers truthfully and plainly without exaggeration. In the new world you 12 apostles will rule from 12 thrones and all who have forsaken homes, relationships, and country for my sake will receive a hundredfold and eternal life. Jesus's answer to Peter is so encouraging! Peter has an incredible vision for forsaking all, following Jesus, treasures in heaven and eternal life. But, Peter and the others also wrestle with self, with a desire to be great in this life and the next. The old nature re-asserting itself. If I do x,y,z then I will get what I want, and I want a lot! This sinful attitude lurks in all of us and must be dealt with. Pride, and selfish ambition will cause many surprises when we receive our eternal inheritance. Immediately after Jesus explains these super encouraging promises, He says but, but many who are first will be last, and the last first. Can you see the look on Peter's face going from I will be great, I am going to have my own throne, to I may be last? I could imagine Peter coming up with many more questions, but Jesus uses this parable in chapter 20 to further illustrate the problem with self particularly for those genuinely following Jesus. Please note that Jesus is talking to disciples, His followers which included the apostles, His message, be encouraged for your reward in the kingdom, but stay humble.

Kingdom of Heaven / vs 1. Looking at chapter 20 now, Jesus starts right up with the topic on hand, the Kingdom of heaven which is synonymous with the kingdom of God. Jesus still has Peter's attention as He further explains His admonition about the first being last. As Jesus opens this parable with the master going to hire laborers, Peter could easily remember Jesus walking by and inviting Peter and Andrew to come follow Him to become fishers of men. A very simple agreement: follow Jesus and get more followers. There does not seem to be any self-ambition other than a desire to follow this amazing teacher. While Peter and Andrew forsake their fishing, it takes some time for them to start finagling to make their way to the top. Many of us get saved and enjoy such simple and sweet fellowship with Jesus. After some time and growth and ministry opportunities, we begin to see pride start messing things up. We are encouraged in light of our salvation, but pride creeps in and so do our demands.

First Come First Serve / vs 2. In verse two Jesus begins to contrast the first group of laborers with the rest of the day's hire. Look at the wording, "After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for a full day of work". After some sort of bartering, this first group struck a deal with the master. They set the terms of the agreement. One full day of work in the vineyard = one denarius. I believe they did not trust the master's goodness or generosity. Their service had strict conditions which had to be agreed upon before they would lift a finger. I could imagine this group being extra smart, extra diligent, self-determined, and self-confident. The kind of people that are highly motivated, strategizing how to be at the right place at the right time to get what they want, and they would not settle for less. You can hear them saying "God helps those that help themselves". "If I show up early, front of the line, I **will** get my day's wage."

Whatever Is Right / vs 3-7. Now in verses 3-7 Jesus will shift the attention of the disciples to the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th place laborers. One could imagine, these were the people that were spiritually not up early enough, did not listen for the master's call carefully enough, and were just standing idle in the marketplace accomplishing nothing for the kingdom. Moreover, these people did something very

unique in their service agreement, they settled for the master's commitment to pay them whatever is right. Their thoughts were focused more on the master's reputation and his generosity. They were grateful to be employed trusting the outcome, trusting the wage with the good master. His opinion of what was right to pay was enough for them. They also had to acknowledge they were without work, without hope of income until the master found them. They were grateful to have been called into service, a call that would provide for their need. These laborers were so encouraged to have income and were humbled that the master called them.

Paycheck / vs 8-10. In verses 8-10 we see the day come to an end and it is time to get paid. The landowner instructs the foreman to pay them their wages starting with the last. Jesus is really drilling down now on the disciples with His upside-down Kingdom parable. The foreman is told to start with the last. The first come- first serve crew would be so insulted. He starts with the last and makes them equal with the first. This would have been a huge blow to their pride. It should have instead revealed the master's kindness. All the groups hired after the first would have been shocked that they were paid equally. Was there a mistake with who came first? Should I double check with the foreman? "I came in for one hour, in the cool of the day, and you pay me a whole denarius!" What a gracious and generous master! None of the laborers got paid less than they deserved. Ultimately, all the laborer's needs were met, and the master's generous character was marvelously revealed. He does not want to do just what is fair or just but what is incredibly generous, above what we ask or think. What master in all of Israel would pay a denarius for one hour of menial labor? Jesus would.

Justice! / vs 11-12. Now when the first laborers were finally called, they thought they would receive more than a denarius.

They too saw the master's generosity and expected to gain more from it. As soon as they realized their pay was the same, the flesh reared up. Jealousy, pride, envy, completely took over their hearts. "How dare you make them equal to us after all that we have done!!" "Are you not just?!" In reality, they should have asked, "Will you not satisfy our greedy self-exalting hearts?" If I were the master, I would have been so disappointed and even insulted. I would have been tempted to give them a pay-cut or to tell them never come back. Keep in mind, Jesus is addressing His disciples who He loves so much and has committed to teaching them His ways in spite of their error and sin.

Friendly Correction / vs 13-15. The master answers the grumbling laborer with the most incredible word, FRIEND. He starts this gentle and logical correction with a reminder that he is friendly and that he desires friendship. This was not the harsh response that we see in the Matthew 18 parable of the man whose giant debt had been forgiven but he would not forgive his debtor. His master said, "You wicked servant! And sent him to jail. Not so in this parable. Oh, the love of Jesus that is so longsuffering and kind. Even in our sin He patiently instructs us away from selfishness and into His glorious grace. The master reminds him that he has kept his end of the bargain. He kept his word. In essence he shows them **their** contract; one day of work = one denarius. Why are you upset? In verse 15 he reveals his lordship, his sovereignty, which he is not subject to anyone. He ultimately strikes the biggest chord with this question; do you begrudge my generosity? Do you not see that my generous nature has been and will be available to you? Will you not celebrate with those that came in at the last hour? Will you not rejoice with them that received more than they earned? Will you not continue to serve me trusting I am good? This is the gospel. All of us who have received the free gift of salvation have received a mountain of grace. Regardless of when we met the Lord or what we may suffer or enjoy in this life.

God's generosity preaches to us believers daily in the air we breathe, the relationships we have, and any peace, any comfort or joy we are able to walk in. Until we more deeply understand how **all** of our lives are by His grace, that we have more good than we deserve, we will continue begrudging God for His generosity to others.

Let Go of Self / vs 16. So, "the last will be first, and the first last." This statement is almost identical to the last verse of chapter 19. Chapter 19's statement begins with but and starts out with those who are first. Jesus ends chapter 19 with focused correction; "you that are always trying to be first". In Chapter 20 it begins with so and starts with the last. To me, this speaks more to Jesus speaking kindly to Peter and the others; "so, now do you see how you are acting? Do you see how your desire to be great is backwards?" Jesus was instructing His disciples to keep following, to keep expecting wondrous things in heaven, to believe His promises, **but** to guard against selfish motives and ungratefulness. Many of us are still asking, what does it look like to be last so we can be first in heaven? What really helped me understand this phrase is to look at other passages in the gospels which reveal the depth of this statement. Here are a few verses:

Matthew 23:11-12 The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Be last by humbling yourself and serve.

Mark 9:35 And He sat down and called the twelve. And He said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Be last by considering yourself the least of the saints and by serving all.

Matthew 20:26-28 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Be last by serving and laying down your life for others.

Saints, will you join me in celebrating just how encouraging God's kingdom promises are. We **are** promised eternal life, Jesus **is** coming back for us, Jesus **is** preparing places in heaven for us, there **will be** treasures stored up, crowns which will be cast at His feet, we will be in His presence, no more tears, no more death, no mourning, nor crying or pain. The former things will pass away and things will be made new. **This is great news!** We have done nothing to deserve His grace, His gift, and eternal life. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Will you also join me in asking him to reveal pride and selfishness in our hearts, and to cleanse us?

May we serve Him in humility because He is worthy, and may we lay down our lives for others as He laid His down for us.