



# *The King's Ransom*

Matthew 20:28

---

Text

Matthew 20:1-16

Topic

Jesus tells a parable in which the owner of a vineyard purposely pays the day laborers he hired in reverse order to reveal his generosity

Title

*"Pay It Backward"*

## Introduction

It was a three-car race for the undisputed Piston Cup champion. Lightning McQueen was going to win... Until he saw that Chick Hicks had clipped the King, sending him into a horrific end-over-end crash - a terrible way to end his storied career.

Barely able to stop before crossing the finish line for the win, McQueen let Chick Hicks cross as the winner while he went back to help the King. He pushed the crippled racer across the finish line, taking last place.

1 of 16

Matthew 20:1-16

*"Pay It Backward"*

It's a modern day parable of Jesus' statement, "the last shall be first, and the first last." He may have officially finished last, but McQueen was first with everyone for his sacrifice.

"The last shall be first" was one of Jesus' favorite sayings. It occurs here and in Mark 10:31 and in Luke 13:30, each time in a different context.

It's occurrence in Matthew is interesting because Jesus said, in the last verse of chapter nineteen, "many who are first will be last, and the last first," then in verse sixteen of chapter twenty, reversing the order, He said, "so the last will be first, and the first last."

In between, Jesus told the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The owner of the vineyard hires laborers to work in his field during the harvest at various times during the day and pays those he hired last just as much as he pays those he hired at first.

**We are those laborers, at work in the Lord's field, the world.** We might sometimes be first, sometimes be last; but either way we ought to approach the work in the spirit of our Lord's generosity - what we call grace.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Serve With Grace When You Are One Of The First, and #2 Serve With Grace When You Are One Of The Last.

#1    Serve With Grace  
      When You're One Of The First

Let's read through the parable, make some comments about it, then get into its application to our lives.

Mat 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.  
Mat 20:2 Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

A Jewish workday was twelve hours, starting at 6:00AM. They worked six days a week.

At the start of the long workday, the owner went to find laborers for his harvest. Hired laborers in ancient Israel were the lowest class of workers. They were unskilled, untrained, and they were unemployed except for a day at a time.

Life for a day laborer was somewhat desperate and precarious because if they didn't work, they didn't eat, and neither did their families.

Slaves and servants had steady jobs. Even though they might have been poor, they could share in many of the blessings of a stable household. The day laborers were much worse off.

The vineyard owner went to the marketplace where the day laborers congregated. "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard."

You've probably heard that a denarius was a days wage. It was - but not for a day laborer. It was standard pay for a skilled employee. It was standard pay for a Roman soldier. It was more than a day laborer could expect to receive. Way more.

Mat 20:3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

Mat 20:4 and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.

Mat 20:5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

Mat 20:6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'

Mat 20:7 They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'

These other laborers, hired throughout the day, may have arrived from another village, where they were not hired. They weren't lazy; they just had not yet been hired for the day.

They probably knew what the owner had paid those earlier guys if they had been there from the beginning. The word would have circulated that his hires were going to work for a denarius a day, a very generous wage. They were therefore willing, without negotiating, to take whatever this very generous man would give them.

Mat 20:8 "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.'

Mat 20:9 And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

A denarius a day was generous; but a denarius an hour was incredible. He was giving them more than a decent, day laborers daily wage for a single hour of work in the relative cool of the day. These last workers probably had to try just to work up a sweat.

Mat 20:10 But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

Mat 20:11 And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner,

Mat 20:12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'

Mat 20:13 But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?

Mat 20:14 Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.

Mat 20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'

The "heat of the day" means *the burner of the day*. It had been a scorcher with the hot east wind burning the flesh, parching the lips, and hoarsing the throat.

With hoarse voices, and through parched lips, those sunburned workers grumbled. With unassailable logic, the owner pointed out he had done nothing wrong. He had been more than fair with them. What was it to them if he wanted to be generous?

A parable is told to illustrate something. In this case, it was to illustrate the oft repeated saying of Jesus. The parable was preceded by, "many who are first will be last, and the last first." It is concluded by,

Mat 20:16 So the last will be first, and the first last...

All of the workers were the recipients of tremendous generosity and had no cause whatsoever to complain. The first workers were treated as if they were no better than the last workers; the last workers were treated as well as the first workers.

This is what the parable is **not** about:

1. It's **not** about eternal life, because eternal life is the free gift of God, and no one works for it.
2. It's **not** about eternal rewards, either, because the passages in the Bible that discuss your eternal rewards make it clear that some *will* have more than others.

The parable **is** about our serving The Lord as citizens of the kingdom of Heaven.

While we wait for His return to establish the literal, physical kingdom of Heaven on earth, we are sent out into the world - into the field - to be His harvest workers.

Obviously, with The Lord gone some two thousand years, some workers came first, while others - like us - are coming later. At some point there will be a last worker - the guy or gal who receives Christ and then is immediately raptured at the return of The Lord for His church.

Just as obviously, workers are scattered all over the earth, in every possible social and economic situation - making all of our service very different. Those who suffer persecution we might describe as bearing the heat of the day while others who enjoy a relatively comfy life never work up a sweat, so to speak.

But no matter the time or the place, serving The Lord takes place because of, and in the sphere of, His grace.

Grace was the currency of the vineyard owner in the parable and it is God's currency as we serve in the spiritual fields of this world.

What Jesus shows us in this parable is that He is generous to a fault. He gives to all more than they could hope to earn or deserve.

For example, though we serve with the expectation of a reward, our service is already owed to The Lord on account of His free and abundant grace which saved us.

One of our favorite verses is Romans 12:1,

Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

We offer ourselves as living sacrifices because it is "reasonable" to do so. It only makes sense to serve The Lord in light of His saving grace.

As we serve Him, He empowers us by His grace. We do not serve Him in our own strength, or by our own wisdom.

Every opportunity to serve Him is set before us by His grace, as He opens doors or shuts them.

If we have what would be deemed 'success' in serving Him, that, too, is by grace.

If we suffer for Him on account of our serving, we are sustained by His grace.

We cannot claim any contribution in serving The Lord except our availability. And, even then, we understand that if we were to not make ourselves available, God's work would press forward without us.

I should serve with grace, therefore, if and when I am one of the first.

Who, or when, am I "first?" Let's start with the context of the parable. Peter and the other disciples were, you might say, first. They were the first to leave everything and follow Jesus. They were promised first positions in the coming kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

They, along with little over one hundred others, would be first to receive the promise of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

They'd also be among the first to be martyred for preaching the Gospel.

If I'm Peter, listening to this parable, I should get from it that I ought to revel in God's grace to me, a lowly fisherman, to be used by Him. With no training, other than exposure to Jesus, he would become a world leader in the future kingdom.

He ought to rejoice at God's grace in the lives of all those that come after him - no matter if they give all or relatively little. If Jesus wants to be gracious to the last, then who am I to have an evil eye and grumble about it?



Also in the context of the parable, you could say that Israel was first in God's plan. He chose them to represent Him. They had the Scriptures, the prophets, and many other spiritual blessings. But they would reject Jesus as Messiah and the Gospel would go out to all - Jew and Gentile. The Gentile, who was last, would become first in this current dispensation of God's grace while the kingdom is postponed.

In fact, the Gospel going out to the Gentiles was a huge stumblingblock to the Jews. There are three entire chapters in the New Testament - Romans nine, ten, and eleven - that explain how and why Gentiles are currently first.

What about us? How are we first?

One application is obvious, and that is that we tend to have an attitude that God should deal with us on the basis of tenure and seniority. Those things might be important factors in your employment, but they have no place in your serving The Lord.

Have you ever thought that you were doing most of the work, while others, or another, slacked off? I've heard it said that, in churches, 90% of the work is done by 10% of the people. I don't think it's true of us, but, if it were, is that something to have an evil eye towards, and to grumble about?

If I'm understanding The Lord, I **want** to be first and bear the heat of the day. I should see myself having an advantage over those who are last because I get to enjoy God's grace more than they can. If my serving is unto Him, then I want to be hired at 6:00AM and work until 6:00PM, trusting in God's generosity to me and enjoying it in the lives of those who come after me.

I might secretly hope, on the one hand, that I'm the only hire, so I can experience all the grace.

But I simultaneously hope The Lord will raise-up other workers - not because I need the help, but so that they, too, can experience His grace. I don't want folks to serve because there is work to be done so much as, if they don't serve, they are missing out on God's grace.

Here is another thought on the first being the last. We must concentrate our spiritual efforts on finishing well. Anyone can start well. In fact, in a marathon, or a long distance race, even an average runner can take the early lead.

So many fall by the wayside, the victims of, rather than the victors over, the devil's temptations of their flesh using the things of the world. They are 'last' in the sense of ruining their lives, as well as ruining or at least harming the lives of others.

Maybe you've been saved twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. You can't coast to the finish line. You should be getting stronger, spiritually, taking longer strides, pushing yourself harder than ever before. When you do, you'll find grace in abundance.

Yet another application is being careful that, having begun in the Spirit, you do not seek to continue in the flesh. It's easy enough to do as a certain measure of pride in your competence or seeming maturity can creep in, and you begin to trust in your own wisdom, or the wisdom of men, rather than the wisdom of God.

Then, too, we can go from first to last if we leave our first love for Jesus. The church at Ephesus, written to in the Book of the Revelation, was pounding out good works and standing on good doctrine. But Jesus had something against them, that they had left their first love. He was now last in their lives.

One more sobering thought. When Jesus said these words, and told this parable, Judas was among the twelve apostles. He was among the first but would fall and become not just *last*, but *lost*.

You may not be saved. You may merely think you are among the first when, in the end, The Lord will have to say, "I never knew you; depart from Me."

Be certain that you are born-again, born from above, and a child of God.

How do you know if you're serving in grace, without grumbling?  
Charles Swindoll wrote,

Grace is given with no expectations, no conditions, no constraints, and no record. Grace is not genuine unless it can be abused by the person receiving it.

Get out there early and bear the heat of the day. Work tirelessly, without grumbling, for the sheer joy of being used by God. Finish strong, keeping yourself in first-love with Jesus.

## #2 Serve With Grace When You're One Of The Last

Do we still use the phrase, *No brainer*? It would seem, on the surface, that if you're one of the "last," you'd be all about grace.

Being last, though, has its challenges. For example, when your sphere of ministry or spiritual influence is small, even after months or years or decades of serving Jesus, you can feel last in a very depressed sort of way.

It is then that you must remember the grace of God is abundant to you - just as abundant as to anyone else. You cannot compare yourself to others, or measure by the standards of men.

If we did, many if not most of the persons in the Bible would be considered last.

Jeremiah always comes to mind when we suggest a quality minister and ministry that seemed a dismal failure. Talk about a messenger that went unheeded - for four decades.

Do you think it was any comfort to Jeremiah to be proven right by the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple? Yet we applaud him as a persevering hero of the faith.

I don't want to leave this point too soon. Money and membership, square footage and staff, are ways we tend to judge the success of a ministry. God must be blessing if they are growing and building; God must be judging if they are not.

We cannot succumb to the judgement of men. Only God's judgment is valid and He says we can have His grace in abundance despite size and stature.

What if you are afflicted? There's a whole group of professing believers who hold to the aberrant teaching that sickness and suffering are signs you lack faith and are not in the will of God.

We know that is not true; that our light affliction is but for a moment and is working for us an eternal weight of glory.

But we still feel last - abandoned by others, and even by Jesus, when our lives are dominated by suffering. Put on the shelf, so to speak.

The apostle Paul reveled in his afflictions specifically because they kept him in touch with the abundant grace of God. So should we when we feel they make us last.

What about ability? Don't you sometimes feel last because you don't seem to have the abilities, or talents, that others have? It can seem as though *anyone* is better able than you to present the Gospel, or to serve The Lord.

We need to believe that ministry - genuine ministry - is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of The Lord. The things we think are so valuable can become hindrances to walking in the Spirit.

When God wanted to reach the nation of Ethiopia with the Gospel, he sent a simple, ordinary but Spirit-filled disciple to sit along the road. Philip went up, by the prompting of the Spirit, to the Ethiopian Eunuch as he was returning home. A conversation ensued in which the Eunuch - one of the most powerful men in the Ethiopian government - was saved and baptized.

Would we have sent Philip? I daresay it would have been hard for us to do so, simply because we think that those who are last in abilities cannot be used on such a high level. Yet if we operate in the grace of God, *any* believer will do at *any* time, because it's all The Lord anyway.

Then there is the problem of your growing weary in well doing. You faint, spiritually speaking, as you become overwhelmed in the work. You want to throw in the towel; you say to yourself, "I can't take any more."

Ever feel that way - feel last from the sheer weariness? Grace is yours in abundance at those times.

You may be among the last. But you can be faithful, can you not? It is required in servants that they be faithful - *not* that they be successful or talented or healthy or any other such measurement.

The last can be as blessed as the first since we are dealing with the grace of God.

You can be first in some things, and last in others. In all cases, as you work in the Lord's field, it is all of grace, and He has it in abundance.

Jesus ended His lesson by saying, "for many are called, but few chosen." One resource I consulted had this to say:

It is easy to misunderstand the word "many" in the New Testament, because it has slightly different meanings in Greek and in English. In both languages, it refers to a large group. In English, "many" is restrictive, but **in Greek it is inclusive**. In other words, if I say "many of the people came," in English, it implies that most of them did not. If I said the equivalent of "many of the people came," in Greek, it would imply that practically everyone did.

In this case, we are dealing with a Greek usage that divides the whole into two unequal parts, which are called "the many" and "the few." In Greek, "the many" and "the few" **add up to everyone.**

This concluding phrase is a sort of altar call. At least, that's what we might call it. Having established that, among those who are saved, the first and the last are both recipients of, and should operate in, the sphere of grace, *it is important to determine if you are among the saved.*

In other words, there's no use trying to figure out if you are among the first or the last if you are not born-again.

Instead of determining if you are first or last, you must determine if you are many or few.

The "many," the whole world, is called:

1Jn 2:2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the **whole world.**

Joh 12:32 And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself."

Jesus Christ died for everyone, *but not everyone will be saved.* Only the "few." There is one condition: whoever **believes.**

1Ti 4:10 For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of **all men,** especially of those who **believe.**

The few are those from the many who believe - they believe Jesus Christ is the sinless, Son of God; God in human flesh; Who died as their Substitute in order to save them from their sin.

You are saved by grace when it operates on your heart to free your will to believe in Jesus. Then you are to continue serving God in His grace, by His grace.

In some things you may be first, in others, last. But in all things, and at all times, walk in grace.