
LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 20:1-34

To understand the generosity of the Father's heart, and to determine what makes someone great in the kingdom of God.

Totally Prepared?

As a student, there is nothing quite like the feeling of showing up to a class and finding out you have to take a pop quiz. "What if I fail? What if I'm not prepared?" These are standard questions you begin to ask yourself. You begin to consider how well you've been paying attention. "Did I take enough notes? Should I have re-read



the chapter we are studying? Could I have paid more attention?" I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics during my undergraduate studies, and as you can imagine, languages are not something you just cruise through. You have to *really* study. So tests for me were always pretty stress free, because I had either really prepared and I knew for certain I would do well, or I hadn't prepared well and I knew for certain I wouldn't do well. There was no guessing how I would end up faring. It was all about preparation.

After Jesus had been crucified, the Gospels all seem to indicate that the disciples were shocked, and yet once again in Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus tell the disciples very plainly about His imminent death, burial and resurrection (Matt. 20:17-19). This is the fourth time He has told them of His journey to the cross (the other instances are in Matthew 16:21; 17:12, 22-23). This is an important reality. Jesus' death should not have been a surprise. He told them on multiple occasions what was going to happen. He was *preparing* them, and yet, they weren't ready. This speaks to not only Jesus' awareness of the Father's divine plan to crucify Him, but also the reality that our own desires and inclinations seem to outweigh what we've been told by others, including God Himself.

The First Shall Be Last

Beginning in the last chapter, Jesus gives a parable that reveals some profound truths about the Father's heart. In order to understand the parable, however, one must look at the verses that concluded chapter 19.

THE PRECURSOR (19:27-30)

In Matthew 19:27-30, Jesus makes a couple of statements regarding the order of things in the end of the age in God's kingdom. For one, He recognizes the heightened status of the twelve disciples. Jesus says that they will, "sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). There has been little doubt that the choosing of the twelve disciples mirrors the twelve tribes of Israel, since Matthew is so keen on highlighting Old Testament allusions. Here those speculations are confirmed, as Jesus makes the connection. It is not totally clear what is meant by His statement, and an exact answer is not necessary. The point is that the disciples will have a role that is privileged and authoritative in the coming age because of their commitment to follow Him. Jesus moves beyond the disciples to the followers that will come after them who have, "left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake" (Matt. 19:29). These are not people who have minimized their life for the sake of simplicity. Jesus never calls us to make useless sacrifices. The things that are given up are not the emphasis of His statement, but rather, why they are being given up. Christians will be called not merely to give up their own comforts, but to do so for the cause of Christ. In that type of sacrifice, they will be rewarded. In doing so, they will appear as lowly individuals, destitute and impoverished, and yet this is the group that represents followers of Jesus. Conversely, those who do not give up their belongings to follow Him are seen in this world as those who have much and are perhaps even successful. These represent non-believers. However, Jesus reminds us: "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first" (Matt. 19:30).

THE PARABLE (20:1-16)

On the coattails of that statement, Jesus tells a parable that illustrates a different angle to the first and last regarding a landowner of a vineyard and day laborers. The practices of the parable are suspect from a business standpoint but illustrate a deeper reality. The landowner hires laborers at various points throughout the day for an agreed upon price of one denarius for the day, a normal wage for that time. However, he continues to hire help up to the eleventh hour, nearly the end of the working period. When all is done it is time for payment to be disbursed at the end of the day, for that is the custom set by the Old Testament law (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15). The landowner, though, decides to pay all of the workers the same amount despite the fact that they all worked for different amounts of time. The first groups are reasonably upset by this because they worked a full day in the heat and were paid as much as the guys who showed up for the last hour. However, the landowner reminds the workers that they have received the wages they agreed upon and should be happy about their payout. In this parable, literally, the last ones to work were the first ones paid, and the first ones to work were the last one paid.

MAKING THE APPLICATION

What is to be made of this parable? What is Jesus trying to communicate? Many suggestions have been made. One is that this is referring to deathbed conversions. Someone who makes a profession of faith before they die receives the same salvation that one receives when they come to faith early in life. The only difference is, the one who came to faith early lived out their faith and likely suffered more for it. Another suggestion is that perhaps this is referring to Gentile believers who come into God's redemptive history much later than the Israelites did. Yet another suggestion is that these are believers who come to faith in the tribulation. While all of these suggestions find some decent cohesion, there is perhaps a simpler explanation with a slightly different focus. The focus of this parable is not the laborers but the landowner. It is revealing something regarding the landowner's heart. In this parable, the landowner represents the Father. The parable simply shows us that God's heart is generous, and scandalously so. When we see God grant salvation to someone who has not labored as much as we have, our response should be one of joy and gratitude that God is mighty to save. When we look at what we have been given in comparison to others as unfairly, our eyes have darkened and become selfish (Matt. 6:23). So, while in the statement in 19:30 the first represent unbelievers and the last represent believers, here, the first and the last are both believers who have come to faith at different points and walked out their faith in different levels.

The Best Seats in the House

After the parable regarding who is first and who is last, the mother of the Sons of Zebedee (James and John) stunningly shows how she didn't really understand what Jesus meant, and that is revealed in the request she makes: "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left" (Matt. 20:21). Jesus asks them if they are able to drink the cup He is about to drink, a reference indicating God's wrath and suffering (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17). They respond positively, indicating they still really don't understand what Jesus is saying. He is, in effect, asking them if they are prepared to suffer and even possibly die for Jesus (a fate James ends up succumbing to according to Acts 12:2, but that John likely did not, at least according to church history). In the end, these seats are not ones granted by the Son, but the Father.

This whole encounter does not sit well with the remaining ten disciples, and so Jesus calls them together. Here, again, he turns the worldly idea of authority and greatness upside down. He reminds them of how the Gentiles appropriate their power: "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them" (Matt. 20:25). However, it will not be that way in the kingdom. How does one become great in the kingdom of God? "Become a servant" (Matt. 20:26). To strive for greatness in the worldly sense will only lead to slavery. If anyone has the right to be served and lord power over others, it is Jesus. Jesus is the Divine Son, fully God clothed in flesh (John 1:1; 14), and Creator of all things (Col. 1:15-18). And yet, what does He say? "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). The whole idea of authority, power, greatness, and prestige are turned upside down in the kingdom of God, and the testimony of the early church indicates that eventually this was understood well and lived out. Prior to the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, however, the disciples struggled to understand.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 20:1-7. In your own words, summarize the first part of this parable. Identify the different groups of workers and other characters in this parable, and what each of them are doing.

2. Read Matthew 20:8-16. In your own words, summarize the second part of this parable. What is the problem? Why are some of the laborers upset? What reason is given by the landowner for his actions? Who do the different laborers represent (Hint: see above)?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 20:17-19. Where was Jesus going? Who was He speaking to? What was He saying?
2. Read Matthew 20:20-23. Who came to question Jesus? What was the request? What was Jesus' response? Who did Jesus turn to and question? What was their response?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 20:24-28. Who is identified in this passage? What is the problem? What does Jesus teach the group in response to the issue that has arisen?
2. How does Jesus exemplify what He says in verse 28: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many?" What about His life illustrates this reversal of greatness?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 20:29-34. Identify all of the characters in this passage. In your own words, summarize the passage. Write down any key words or phrases that are confusing to you, and look them up.
2. What do the two men call Jesus in this passage, and what is significant about that title? Where else have we seen that title in Matthew's Gospel (Hint: Session 1)?

Week 24 Discussion: How May I Serve You?

In Matthew 20, we learn that the sign of greatness in God's kingdom is servanthood. Jesus said, "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." If Jesus, the Son of God, is a servant, we have no excuse to not be. Serving others is an act of humility and love, and can be a powerful witness to the Gospel. Discuss as a group service, and the effects it has on others.

1. Icebreaker: How important do you think acts of service are to other people, both inside and outside the church? Why do you think that? Give examples if possible.
2. What is the most memorable or impactful act of service you have ever performed? What led you to do it? What was the result of it? How did it make you feel?
3. What is the most memorable or impactful act of service you have ever received? Why was it so impactful? How did it make you feel?
4. What are some practical ways the church can serve the community?
5. What are some practical ways Christians can serve others?
6. Should Christians only serve lost people, or should other Christians also be served? Why or why not? What do other texts in the New Testament indicate?

Takeaways:

1. The Father's heart is scandalously generous and grace-giving, and it is sometimes hard to receive.
2. Servanthood is the highest mark of greatness in the kingdom of God.

PRAYER REQUESTS: