

Matthew 20:1-16

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[0 : 00] And good morning, and welcome to St. Silas on YouTube. My name is James, and I'm on the staff team here at St. Silas, and I'll give us a bit of a steer through this passage this morning. And if you've joined us for the very first time, we've just started a series over the summer looking at the Gospel of Matthew, so you're in the right place, and it's a good time to join us.

But as we start, let me pray. Loving Heavenly Father, thank you for this opportunity to meet together, to look at your word, to speak to and encourage one another.

Please help us to understand more clearly who you are and what you have done for us through your Son. Amen. And by way of introduction, I wonder if you're aware of one of the unwritten laws of the universe, that some people, no matter where they end up in life, always seem to land on their feet.

So I had a couple of friends. I'm going to call them Bob and Sue, who came over from South Africa to the United Kingdom. And Bob, when he came over, he went for a job interview.

And he landed it. And it was at the Cadbury's factory, making Mars bars. And then Sue thought she had applied for a job. She was a nurse. And she went for an interview at a very prestigious London hospital, a private hospital.

[1 : 23] And sure enough, she landed it, attending to the stars, with an amazing array of perks. And when they thought they'd look for accommodation, it just so happened that through a friend, through a friend, they managed to find a gig house sitting, a ginormous mansion overlooking Richmond Park in South London.

And by contrast, when I came over to the UK, my first place where I lived was on a bed sit on an estate. And my first job was selling bin bags.

Some people, no matter where they end up in life, always seem to land on their feet. And I wonder how that makes you feel.

See, a number of my mates at the moment on Facebook are looking for jobs. And so my Facebook feed is filled with this job search anxiety. And searching for a job can be quite emotional.

It can be a stretching and gut-wrenching experience. And we might become overly sensitive towards the success of others. We might wonder, why not me?

[2 : 35] Why have I not got a job yet? It seems so unfair. I work just as hard, even harder than them. I'm more deserving of getting a good job.

And as we come to the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew is written for a Jewish audience. And it has three main truths that Matthew wants us to take to heart.

And the first is this, that Jesus is the true and better King David, who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, who's God's promised king forever, and who comes as a suffering servant.

And the second is this, that Jesus is the true and better Moses, who teaches with authority. So throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we have these five big sermons of Jesus that match and model Moses' first five books of the Bible that he wrote.

And for those who don't know, Moses is the most revered and honored of the Jewish Old Testament prophets. And the third point that Matthew wants us to take to heart, that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

[3 : 48] And we don't have to go to a building to meet with God, but that we must go to a person, the Lord Jesus. And that Jesus comes as the suffering servant king is the one of those three that we're going to be spending a bit of time looking at this morning.

And as we come to our passage in Matthew that we've heard read earlier, Matthew so far revealed to us that Jesus is the Messiah, God's king forever.

And he's starting to explain here what kind of kingdom he'll rule over. So let me ask you as we start, what do you think the kingdom of heaven is going to be like?

What are the values that you want to see governing it? What kind of king do you want? And if you're anything like me, I tend to wonder through three different alternatives when I think about what kind of king I want Jesus to be.

The first one is that I want a welfare and justice king. And so I get so preoccupied with doing good things that I forget to ever proclaim king Jesus.

[5 : 09] And the second alternative that I find myself wandering into is that I imagine that Jesus is the dogmatic king. And so I get so caught up on the minutiae and the precise details of what Jesus says, the dogma, that I turn them into a book of rules and I zap anyone who I think has gone out of line of them.

And so I fall into the trap of being self-righteous and unkind towards others. And the third alternative that I find myself often going to is that I look at the Old Testament and New Testament miracles and I imagine that Jesus is a power, a spirit-empowered, relatable king who wants me to be exactly like him in all those areas.

And so I spend all my days running after those, trying to have that relatable experience of Jesus, trying to work myself up spiritually.

And then what I'm doing there is I am forgetting that Jesus is God and utterly different to me and that his miracles reveal who he is.

And the Jews in Jesus' day they were no less different. They wanted a king who would be an earthly, military ruler and who would liberate them from their oppressors, the Romans, and usher in a new golden age where they were in charge.

[6 : 45] And all of these different alternatives of a different king are really expressions of the same desire in our hearts, and my hearts. And that is I want to come to God on my own terms and not on God's terms.

I want to be right with God according to my own rules and not his rules. And what Jesus is teaching us in this parable this morning is that the kingdom of God is the upside down kingdom.

It is the grace driven kingdom that comes as a gift and not a work and whose king comes as a suffering servant.

And so if we want to be a part of this kingdom following Jesus this morning then we must become like our king serving one another and proclaiming our king of grace.

And so I've got three main points that I think will hopefully give us a steer through this passage. The first one is life in this world. And the second one is life in the kingdom.

[7 : 54] And then finally we'll consider life for a life. So life in this world is transactional. What I put in is what I get out.

If I work hard I'll get the rewards. And so when I work hard and I don't get the job that I think I deserve then I say that life is unfair.

And this comes out in the very first word in our passage. So if you've got your Bibles open just pick them up there. For the kingdom of heaven. And the for there is really the because word.

And so Jesus is telling this parable as a way of explaining and answering something that came up last week that we don't really spend any time looking at. And so I wonder if we might open our Bibles again and look back to the very last verse of chapter 19.

Chapter 19 verse 30. But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first. And so this parable is explaining what is meant by that.

[9 : 05] But not only that Jesus is also answering Peter's question that he asked last week. In chapter 19 verse 27 where Peter says we have left everything to follow you.

What then will there be for us? And Peter asks this question because he has seen the rich young ruler leave, walk away from Jesus and walk away from the gospel because he didn't want to give up his wealth.

And so Peter asks this question not as a way of affirming his faith and acknowledging his poverty and inability to save himself. But he wants to know what his reward will be for giving up all the things that he has given up.

And it's this transactional question that drives the passage and the parable. And so let's jump into this parable and we'll look at it a bit more.

And the scene here is really a scene that might be unfamiliar for a couple of us. So by way of example, if you are in South Africa and you go to a hardware store, invariably you'll see a bunch of laborers standing outside the hardware store.

[10:24] And traditionally the person who was doing housework or whatever would drive up the landowner in his bucky, his pickup truck, and he'd pick up his goods that he wanted from the hardware store and he'd come out.

And if he needed help, he'd hire someone from outside the clearing. He'd ask them, what's your job? And they'd say, I'm a good plasterer. Or you'd ask them, what are you good at? And they'd say, I'm good at welding.

And then he would hire folk as many as he needed. And so in our passage, what we see is that the landowner is someone who represents God in our passage.

And then we see that the vineyard traditionally represents the people of God. And so what happens is the landowner drives up to the proverbial hardware store, he walks into town and he sees folk without any work there.

And so he hires someone because he wants some work done on his farm. And he agrees to pay them a denarii, the first person. But then he goes back a little later in the day, maybe he wants to pick up some nails or something like that.

[11:32] And he sees another person loitering there looking for some work. And so he hires them and he agrees to pay them whatever is right. And so throughout the day this goes on.

And eventually five o'clock comes and he still finds folk loitering there outside the hardware store and so he hires them as well. But when it comes time to pay the wage there, and the wage there is speaking about the day's wage, Matthew reverses the normal order that we find for paying people and that the folk who are hired last are paid first.

And when the folk are paid last, they're paid a denarii, a day's wage, enough money to help them survive for the day. And so when the folk who are hired first hear this, their ears prick up and they get excited because they think that they are quids in, that they're going to get some good money here.

But then the surprise comes in verse 11, when they find out that they are paid exactly the same wage as those who were hired last.

And you can imagine the outrage that they may have felt, an indignation, what we've been working and slaving away all day in the sun, and we are paid exactly the same as those guys who've come right at the end last.

[13:01] And I imagine as we're sitting at home and we're listening to this parable, we're nodding our heads in agreement. We feel the same indignation that they might feel.

It's just not fair, is it? And it's only natural to say that. I did such and such, but that person has been given more credit than me.

I've not got the recognition for my hard work that I deserved. I've worked hard at university, I've worked hard at school, I've been practicing really hard at football practice this year, and I wasn't picked for the team.

And I deserve a good job. And it's not fair because the rule in this life is what you put in is what you get out. And that's one of the things that we're taught from very young.

What you put in is what you get out. And that doesn't seem to be what's happened here. And so Peter says, we gave away everything. We put lots in.

[14:07] What will we get out? What will our reward be? And the point of the parable is that in the kingdom of God, it's not about what you give, but about what you get, what you receive.

And your reward is not according to your deservingness, your to your kingdom of heaven. And we saw that last week. For man, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.

Your reward is according to your need. And that's what this parable is about. And so that brings us to our second point, a life in the kingdom.

And the life in the kingdom of heaven is a life lived in God's grace, generosity, and kindness to those who are undeserving.

And I just want to pick up a couple of points here to really bring this to our attention. And the first thing I want us to notice is right in verse one, where we see verse one, the kingdom of heaven is what?

[15 : 16] It's like a landowner. You see, the kingdom of heaven is not a place that can be owned, that can be earned, but it's a person with whom we have a relationship.

And the second thing that we notice comes up is that the first workers agreed to work for a denarius. Verse two, he agreed to pay them a denarius, literally the wage for the day, a day's wage for the day, and he sent them into his vineyard.

And having a day's wage is quite a big thing. In Britain we've got lots of protections for when we don't have a day's wage. But in Israel at that time, and very much like in South Africa, there isn't that welfare state there.

There's no endorsed compulsory pension or that kind of thing. If you don't get your day's wage, you're not going to get food or bread on the table at night, and you're not going to have a place to stay that evening.

If you don't earn, you don't eat. But notice then how the other workers respond. What Matthew says, the landowner says to the other workers, I will pay you what is right, is what he says in verse 4.

[16 : 41] He told them, you also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. and the right thing to do would be to pay someone enough for them to survive for that day.

That is the just thing to do, the kind thing to do. But notice then that also that those who the owner hires later in the day at 5 aren't hired because they're not willing to work, but what do they say? Because no one has hired us. Verse 7, they've been waiting there all day looking for jobs, but no one has wanted to hire them.

They haven't been lazy, they just simply haven't been hired. And if you aren't hired, you're not going to earn your day's wage. And in hiring these folk, the owner here isn't being incompetent.

It's not that he hasn't planned his day's work very well, for what he once done on the vineyard. But he is being overwhelmingly generous in caring for these folk, who would otherwise be stuck without food and shelter and accommodation for the night.

[17 : 59] But look then at how the other workers respond, those hired earlier in the day. Just look in verse 11 then. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

They grumble. You see, rather than being happy for their friends that they found employment and will live to see another day, they grumble that they are not paid more.

And so the owner's comments in verse 15 cuts right to the heart of the issue here. Don't I have the right to do whatever I want with my own money?

And here it is. Or are you envious because I am generous? You see, the workers there who grumble are not concerned with justice but with greed.

And this parable is not about justice in God's kingdom but is a parable about God's overwhelming and totally undeserved generosity to those who are otherwise totally self-absorbed and greedy with self-interest.

[19 : 12] And it brilliantly exposes our hearts. And that brings us to our third point there, life for life. See, the overwhelming grace and generosity of God is shown most clearly at the cross.

You see, as Jesus dies, as the suffering servant, king, who gives his perfect life for our sinful lives, he brings us into that kingdom of grace and generosity.

And this parable that we've looked at this morning, it's the heart of what Matthew is teaching us in this section. And so, if you imagine maybe an orange that you peel right at the heart of this orange, is this parable.

Jesus tells us a parable about God's grace, about his undeserved and amazing grace. And then slightly outside of that, he teaches on the upside down nature of the kingdom.

So, 19 verse 30, we read that the last will be first, and then right at the end of our parable, we read that the last will be first, and the first will be last. But then just outside of that, Matthew teaches us, and this is his point, about how we can get into that undeserved grace that's at the heart of the kingdom.

[20 : 37] And last week we considered in chapter 19, verse 26, and these are really these two parts of the skin of the orange there, 26 and 27, that it is impossible for us to be saved by our own works.

But with God, all things are possible. possible. And then in verse 17 and 19, we'll see how God makes those things possible, and that is through the cross, through Jesus dying on the cross, as Jesus predicts his death for a third time, and tells his disciples that he's going to go to the cross and

die.

With man it's impossible, but with God all things are possible. And so Jesus gives his perfect life for our lives, for thinking that we can be right with God on our own terms, and for making the kingdom of heaven in our image and not in God's image.

Jesus gives his life for when we grumble against God, in verse 11 in our passage, for being envious of God's kindness and blessing on others.

So what kind of kingdom do we want? What kind of church do we want? Do we want a kingdom of works, where what you put in is what you get out, that's marked by grumbling when things don't go away?

[22 : 15] Or do we want a kingdom that is marked by grace and kindness, where God is overwhelmingly generous to those who don't deserve it?

And Jesus is the suffering servant king who dies because of our sinfulness, for when we neglect to tell our friends about him and what he has done for us, how he has died on that cross, for you and for me and for them.

Jesus dies for when we look down on others, when they don't meet our standards, and we say cutting remarks that put them down. And build us up.

And Jesus dies for when we think that the kingdom is all about the now, and building ourselves up to look impressive, and not seeing that it's all about him, and that all those miracles point to him.

And Jesus dies for when we want to be right with God on our own terms, and never allowing him to disagree with us. And the good news and the great joy that Matthew brings us and gives us in this passage is that God's kingdom is the upside-down kingdom, where the ungodly are rewarded, and where those who think that they deserve reward are not.

[23 : 37] Well, what an enormously encouraging passage, and no doubt bits of it would have been quite challenging to some of us, but be heartened. Matthew writes us with confidence that we would be encouraged, and that we're drawn near to our king, who loves us, who sent his son to die for us, and that we can be part of that overwhelmingly generous kingdom.

If anything struck you this morning, do chat to someone about that, and maybe chat to someone in the Zoom groups afterwards, but as we close, let me pray. So, Father, we thank you for this enormous, amazing kingdom of overwhelming generosity.

We thank you that you care for us, and that you call us to be part of your family, despite all the things that we've done wrong and get wrong.

Please be with us, please guide us, please guide us, give us strength as we go out this week to live to your praise and glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.