

**AN EXPLORATION OF MATTHEW 19:23-20:16 Preaching Texts Explored**  
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*“Unto what was Rabbi bar Hiya like? He was like unto a king who hired many laborers of whom one was more industrious than the others. What did the king do? He called him out and walked up and down with him. In the evening the workmen came to be paid. He gave also a full day’s pay to the man who had walked with him. When the other workers saw this they complained and said: We have been working hard all day, and this one who only labored two hours receives as much as we do? The king answered: It is because this one has done more in two hours than you in a whole day.*

*Likewise Rabbi Abun, although he had studied the Torah only until the age of twenty-eight [when he died], he knew it better than a scholar or pious man who would have studied until a hundred.*

*From Jerusalem Talmud, Berakoth 2:8*

**THE TEXT**

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**THE AFTERMATH OF THE STORY OF THE RICH YOUNG RULER**

{23}	A	Then Jesus said to his disciples,	JESUS SAID
	1	"Truly I tell you,	I TELL YOU
	2	it will be hard for a rich person	THE RICH
	3	to enter the kingdom of heaven.	WILL NOT ENTER
{24}	1'	Again I tell you,	I TELL YOU
	2'	it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle	THE RICH
		than for someone who is rich	
	3'	to enter the kingdom of God."	WILL NOT ENTER
{25}	B	When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded	DISCIPLES' SAID
		and said, "Then who can be saved?"	"THEN WHO?"
{26}	C	But Jesus looked at them and said,	MORTALS
		"For mortals it is impossible,	VS. GOD
	C'	but for God all things are possible."	
{27}	B'	Then Peter said in reply,	PETER SAID
		"Look, we have left everything and followed you.	"WHAT OF US?"
		What then will we have?"	
{28}	A'	Jesus said to them,	JESUS SAID
	a	"Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things,	
		you who have followed me	FOLLOWERS
	b	when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory,	THRONE
	b'	will also sit on twelve thrones,	THRONE
		judging the twelve tribes of Israel.	
{29}	a'	And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters	FOLLOWERS
		or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake,	

will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. HUNDREDFOLD

**PARABLE ON INHERITANCE OF THE KINGDOM COME**

{30} A But many who are first will be last, CLASSIC  
and the last will be first. CHIASMUS

**ACT I: HIRING THE LABORERS**

{20:1} B "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner  
who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.  
{2} C After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, AGREE  
he sent them into his vineyard.  
{3} D When he went out about nine o'clock, OTHERS  
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; HIRED  
{4} and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard,  
and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.  
{5} When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock,  
he did the same.  
{6} E And about five o'clock he went out 5 O'CLOCK  
and found others standing around; and he said to them, HIRES  
'Why are you standing here idle all day?'  
{7} They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'  
He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

**ACT II: PAYMENT FOR SERVICES**

{8} F When evening came, AT THE CLOSE  
the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, LABORERS  
'Call the laborers  
CALLED  
F' and give them their pay, RECEIVE PAY  
beginning with the last and then going to the first.' IN REVERSE  
{9} E' When those hired about five o'clock came, 5 O'CLOCK  
each of them received the usual daily wage. HIRES  
{10} Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more;  
but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

**ACT III: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE OWNER AND THE DISGRUNTLED WORKERS**

{11} D' And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,  
{12} saying, 'These last worked only one hour, OTHERS  
and you have made them equal to us RESPOND  
who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'  
{13} C' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong;  
did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? AGREE  
{14} B' Take what belongs to you and go;  
I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.  
{15} Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Or are you envious because I am generous?  
{16} A' So the last will be first,  
and the first will be last."

CLASSIC  
CHIASMUS

### Discussion Guide for Exploring this Text:

#### I EXPLORING THE CONTEXT THAT SETS UP THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS

- A. What is the significance of the context:
1. The Story of the would-be Righteous Man (19:16-22) We know this story> But in Matthew's Gospel, the aftermath becomes a wonderful story itself. So how are we to understand the episode:
    - a. The challenge: "Sell what you possess (or what still possess you), then follow me."
    - b. He came to grief over a BMW, Digital VCR, and his home on Bainbridge Island
  2. We struggle with these statements by Jesus about Wealth getting in the way of faith. WHY?
  3. The Two questions on *Reversal of Expectations*:
    - a. "Who then can be saved?" Why is this a reversal of expectations?
    - b. And "What about us?" Is this a reversal of Expectations?
      - 1). How are we to understand the central assertion about mortals and God
      - 2). What are the implications of the chiastic balancing of vv. 23-24 and vv. 28-29?
      - 3). The would-be righteous man with possessions is unwilling to do what it takes to be a follower-- but Jesus followers are faithful disciples.
- B. The parable that follows says something more about discipleship as it relates to the Kingdom.
1. How do the chiastic "First-Last" sayings fit~flow from the preceding material.
  2. How good is the fit?
    - a. Is this a parable of *Reversal of Expectations*?
    - b. How does your answer relate to the subject of "discipleship" in the Kingdom-come?
- C. The context is thus, a question of "Proper Rewards" which leads to a disturbing parable concerning what constitutes "proper rewards".

#### II WHAT'S THE PROBLEM IN THE PARABLE

- A. Though chiastic in design, there are also 3 acts to this parable—just like a PLAY in 3 Acts
- B. Some cultural issues? Background concerning an Honor-Shame society
1. Readings from Molina *The NT World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* page 27, 28, 32-33, and 44 on living in an Honor-Shame culture. (Study leader must do work on Honor-Shame in Jesus' world to lead this discussion.)
  2. Given this perspective about the significance of honor and shame, how should we understand what happened in the story of the Would-be Righteous man (19:16-22)
  3. What light does this shed on the story of the grumbling workers in this parable?
    - a. How would you expect workers to act in an honor-shame society? E.g., "You have made them equal to us? etc.
    - b. Is the owner acting shamelessly?

#### III DO WE FACE PROBLEMS LIKE THIS TODAY?

- A. Donahue notes, "If the reader too quickly identifies the owner as God and is unwilling to experience the same feelings as those who worked all day, the challenge of the parable loses its

force. Hardly any parable in the Gospels seems to upset the basic structure of an orderly society as does this one. Were this parable normative for economic life, or were it implemented even in church life, chaos would result (what would happen to ‘merit increases’?). The constant complaint of our society about welfare is proof that popular morality operates according to the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ (*The Gospel in Parables* 81)

1. Is Donahue right?
2. In fact, aren’t we more than a little uncomfortable with Jesus’ answer to the rich person as well?
3. *Do we really want this kingdom?*

#### **IV WHAT IS GOD’S WORD OF GRACE TO MATTHEW’S CONGREGATION IN THIS PARABLE?**

- A. Remember, the context of the parable is the subject of “Proper Rewards”
  1. We want rewards to be based on what we have worked to make possible
  2. But remember the central truth of 19:26
- B. Matthew tells a parable of *Reversal of Expectations* to further explain what followers can expect from their commitment to Jesus. This parable is unique to Matthew at this point, It serves to justify the ways of God (with whom all real “reward” lies anyway) in favoring Christian newcomers. Justice in this context means that Christians who have been grafted in are “equal” heirs to the kingdom
- C. Compare Matthew’s use of this parable with the Jewish parable in the Frontispiece of the lesson. Rabbinic interpreters use reversal of expectation work parables-- but in continuity with the Tradition of the Elders and Jewish history. Matthew’s parable represents a discontinuity-- a break in which newcomers are accorded social honor.

#### **V. IS THIS A GOOD WORD OF GRACE FOR US AS WELL?**

- A. The laborers grumble because they have a very clear notion as to what counts as justice and Honor. But, if it was up to us, would an honorable status really be possible through our own efforts?
  1. Either as the rich young man?
  2. Or as workers in the vineyard?
- B. When you really think about it, do we want justice our way or God’s way?
- C. Hope for the “evil eye” of envy in all of us (when the owner questions whether the labor spokesman has an “evil eye” because he is generous). It is so easy to forget that it is based on the work of the owner that we get paid-- not based on our own work.

