

## The Parables of Jesus: Stories About Reward Sunday, 7/21/19

**1** If I asked you what the current issues are around unfair labor practices in Minnesota, what would you say? Our United Methodist Social Principles state that “Every person has the right to a job at a living wage”<sup>1</sup> and apparently many in our state agree. The state of Minnesota recently passed a wage theft law due to the prevalence of employees getting stiffed by their bosses. The Minneapolis City Council recently voted to increase the minimum wage in the city to \$15 per hour. There are countless legislative initiatives that have been turned into law with the goal of protecting workers from being taken advantage of by their bosses, especially vulnerable employees such as part-time, seasonal, and immigrant laborers. But if you think fair employment practices are a modern invention, think again!

Many Jewish labor guidelines were set out in the Bible, such as in Deuteronomy 24:14-15, where we read, “Never take advantage of poor and destitute laborers, whether they are fellow Israelites or foreigners living in your towns. You must pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it. If you don’t, they might cry out to the LORD against you, and it would be counted against you as sin.”<sup>2</sup>

**2** Harvest time, then as now, was a busy time for farmers and it wasn’t unusual to bring in temporary labor to help bring in the harvest quickly, with the typical work day being from 6am to 6pm.<sup>3</sup> Laborers expected to be paid at the end of each day, because many of them were living from day to day on the wages provided.

That’s some of the social context behind the parable and the teaching we heard this morning. Those listening to Jesus, the leader of a new social order, might have expected him to prophetically denounce unfair labor practices like the prophets before him. Instead, Jesus turned their expectations on their heads with a teaching about graceful reward that still causes us to bristle with indignation. Why is it that grace seems like such a good idea when we receive it, but it’s so scandalous when others receive it? The first will be last and the last will be first. What does that really mean, and what does it mean for us, who enjoy countless privileges as citizens of this country compared with the vast majority of people living on this

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<sup>1</sup> [www.umc.org/what-we-believe/economic-community](http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/economic-community)

<sup>2</sup> New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)

<sup>3</sup> Keener, Craig. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. IntersVarsity Press (1993).

planet?

**3** Each week I've been trying to bring you a modern retelling of a parable to help you place it in a current cultural context. Today's modern retelling comes to you in a video. As you watch it, pay attention to the attitudes of the two construction workers sitting on the wall. How are they the same? How are they different? Which of the two really gets the point of the parable? Let's take a look! {[Show DVD "The Workers"- 3:18](#)}

**4** Is there anyone here who hasn't been right there with these two, complaining that someone else got something they didn't deserve? In this case, it was Alan, the guy who showed up last. I love the way the guy on the left moved in his mind from Alan arriving 30 minutes before the end of the work shift to five minutes, and then at the end it became "two minutes and two nails." Why is it that we get indignant instead of joyful when we see grace in the world? Why is it that we want grace for ourselves but not for other people? I love the way the two guys at the end said, "Unbelievable!" "Unbelievable!" and then the light bulb went off for the guy on the right, and he said, "Actually, Amazing!" It really is amazing. Amazing grace. I want to be more like the guy on the right, but all too often I'm the guy sitting on the left.

**5** Today we have another example of Jesus teaching the disciples something, and then adding a parable to reinforce it. The whole incident started earlier in Matthew 19 with the Rich Young Ruler and lessons about the difficulty faced by the rich in trying to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. You might remember, that's where the whole "camel through the eye of a needle" image came in. That teaching would have been a surprise to Jews who expected that wealth would give them an extra edge in gaining God's favor through alms giving.<sup>4</sup> That's why Peter asked Jesus the question he did. "Who then can be saved? We've left everything for you. What's in it for us?" It's easy to write that one off as a question that only Peter could ask, but think about it. It's a fair question. Why should we follow Jesus? What's in it for us?

Jesus answers Peter by explaining the great reversal that will take place on that day when the Kingdom of Heaven finally arrives, as Jesus puts it, "the recreation of the world,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/what-is-the-meaning-of-last-shall-be-first-and-the-first-last/](http://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/what-is-the-meaning-of-last-shall-be-first-and-the-first-last/)

when the Son of Man will rule gloriously.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus in effect says, “Yes, Peter, it is worth it, because even though you’ve left your home, your family, and your job to follow me in this life, there is going to come a time when my Kingdom is finally established, and at that time, those who’ve made sacrifices to follow me are going to be rewarded, especially with the gift of eternal life.” Jesus said similar things elsewhere, like “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”<sup>6</sup> The first will be last and the last will be first. God’s grace will bring about a great reversal, and love will restore what the broken social order has broken.

**6** Jesus elaborates on his surprising teaching about salvation with a parable. Who will be included in this Kingdom of Heaven Jesus can’t stop talking about? In the parable, everyone who came to work was paid, and everyone was paid the same wage. This would have been yet another scandalous teaching for the Jews to hear because they believed that as Jews they had special priority for entrance to God’s Kingdom because they were descendants of Abraham. After being God’s people for so many generations, surely they had earned extra credit! But the parable teaches that the landowner can dole out rewards as he sees fit, and he chooses to generously reward everyone who pitches in, regardless of how late they come to the jobsite. In the case of the disciples, Jesus might have had the Gentiles in mind, the latest group to be grafted into God’s family tree.

The thief on the cross in Luke 23 is a great example of the last worker to arrive at the jobsite, someone coming to a saving faith only moments before their death. The Parable of the Workers in the Field is scandalous if you identify yourself as one of those workers who showed up at 6am and worked a full day. But what if you put yourself in the place of one of those later workers? I didn’t have a living faith in Jesus until I was over 30 years old, and there have been plenty of days along my walk with Jesus when I have wrestled with knowing if I’m really hammering nails for Jesus hard enough or fast enough, or whether I should even be hammering nails! Thank God for the Holy Spirit, who guides me, comforts me, corrects me, and gives me an assurance of my salvation. I know that my present and

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:28, The Message

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:25, NIV (2011)

future are with Jesus, but I'm sure not one of those first workers to arrive, so I'm especially grateful to be getting the same wages.

**7** Let's talk about what this parable doesn't mean, especially with respect to the first being last and the last being first. Jesus isn't teaching that you can in effect buy your salvation by becoming poor and powerless. In other words, becoming destitute is not a guaranteed formula for becoming saved. Not everyone who's last now will be first in the Kingdom. Poverty can be a helpful spiritual discipline, but it's not a means of salvation. Salvation comes through faith in Christ alone. In the same way, Jesus isn't teaching that being rich or powerful means we can't be saved. Not everyone who's first now will automatically be last in the Kingdom. Being rich can make it harder to have the right heart and behaviors to be a faithful Christ follower, but it doesn't disqualify us.

So what does it mean for the first to become last and the last to become first? I think it means that the social pecking orders of this current world will no longer be relevant in the Kingdom of Heaven. We'll probably be surprised by who's saved and who isn't. What we do know is that everyone who chooses to follow Jesus, those who put their faith into action, regardless of their position in this life, and regardless of how late in life they come to faith, will receive the most valuable prize: An eternity in the restored beauty of God's creation, free from sin and free to love God and each other more fully than we can even imagine today. That's good news. That's hopeful news. So the next time you see someone turn away from Jesus, pray for them that they might yet turn around and find faith, because there still may be time for them to earn their wages. And the next time you see someone receive God's favor who doesn't seem to deserve it, curb that frown and instead give thanks to God, who chooses to bless us so freely and richly. Amen.



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