

MODEL FAITH FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE: MATTHEW 19:28–20:14

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I. INTRODUCTION

Of the many powers of faith in Jesus Christ, one of its greatest would be the sway it holds over the prospect of eternal reward. Above the doorway to that “Faith Hall of Fame” lies the motto “he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb 11:6). The famous Parables of the Minas (Luke 19:12-27) and the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) point to faith in the long-absent Noble as the avenue to generous recompense of service. James says baldly that faithlessness destroys all hope of receiving anything, ever, from the Father: “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting...[otherwise he should not] suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (Jas 1:6-7). No doubt faith was the basis of Paul’s assurance of reward also; he *knew* “there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day...” (2 Tim 4.8). Paul reflected, “I know Him whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (2 Tim 1:12). Faith makes reward a reality!

If we may grant the role of faith in assuring our eternal reward, we might approach a difficult passage like Matt 19:28–20:14, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, in better hope of understanding this challenging tale. That this parable is a test to interpreters is evident from the briefest survey of commentaries. Students diverge as to whether this story so much as contemplates reward for work rendered! Related are two other main controversies, namely the rationale for the equality in the day’s wages, and the reversal of the order in the pay line at day’s end. If we can first establish, however, that this parable is in fact a guide to seeking confidently after reward, then perhaps the key of faith may help us unlock the motivational treasures hidden in this famous story.

II. THE *DENARIUS*: TOKEN OF ETERNAL LIFE?

So then, should the interpreter approach the parable as a moral about how Christians should properly serve in hope of reward? Or is it rather, as is sometimes asserted, a reminder about appreciating a free salvation? Despite all the trappings of the marketplace, the exchange of cash for service rendered, and the haggling over the salary, one popular view holds that the *denarius* given at the end of the parable's workday represents the free gift of eternal life. Since given to all alike, no matter the work expended during the "workday," the coin must necessarily correspond to that eternal life all believers will receive equally and freely at the coming of Christ. In anticipation and appreciation for this gift of life, believers naturally will spend the balance of their days in the harvest fields of the Master who saved them, just as the parable pictures them doing.

But unless Jesus departed in this one instance from the clear teaching of the Bible that eternal salvation is "not of work," we shouldn't doubt for a moment that the money exchanged at the end of the workday (20:8) was intended to be compared with Christian reward, and not as an equivalent of eternal life. Consider the following:

- The very word *denarius* suggests compensation for labor rendered (note the NRSV translation "the usual daily wage"). Likewise *misthoō* (the verb used in vv 1, 7 for the "hiring" of laborers and as the substantive for the "hired hands" themselves) and *misthos* (usually translated "wage" ["hire"]) suggest work and its recompense.
- In the immediate backdrop of the parable, Jesus told the rich young ruler he could expect "treasure in heaven" (19:21) in exchange for a stringent self-denial. He told Peter that he should similarly expect a royal appointment to compensate his loyal assistance to Christ.¹

¹ Far from rebuking Peter for an "unspiritual," ungrateful pursuit of reward in service for Himself, Jesus instead highly commends zeal for reward in general and the disciples' zeal in particular (19:28-29). Peter's passion indeed needs tempering, as we will argue below, but tempering with faith, rather than with gratitude.

- In the parable itself, the full-day laborers grumble about the toil and the hot sun, an unlikely argument of workers suing for a free gift. The landowner tacitly acknowledges their point, in fact, that under normal circumstances, they might deserve more money for their harder work, if they didn't have a previous contract with him to the contrary (20:13). He does obviously not respond that their wage was instead a gift, which should be received with gratitude; this would be an insult! (Indeed, if the *denarius* were a gift, the exchange would violate the common-sense principle stated in Rom 4:4: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.")
- From a biblical perspective, of course, we recall that eternal life as a gift is imparted through regeneration, at the moment of belief (e.g., John 3:14-15; 5:24; 10:28; 11:25), rather than following some period of service. But here, the workers toil up to 12 hours before receiving the *denarius*, hardly a fitting illustration for an eternal life initiated (before any work!) in a moment of faith.
- All three Matthean references to eternal life, two of which form the context of this parable (19:16, 29), are to potential *future* rewards, not *present* gifts—always conditioned upon labor. This future eternal life that requires wholehearted devotion to Christ, is never mentioned in connection with belief (but "work" is consistently demanded), and is preceded by service. If by the *denarius* Matthew means to represent a present gift of eternal life, it is a meaning completely outside his own otherwise consistent thought on the topic.

Just as later in Matthew (note 24:45-51 and 25:28), this parable considers the exchange between laborers and their employer as a matter of commerce; this is a parable about rewards. Settling this issue, however, accentuates the second major challenge in the parable. If the wage is to be compared to reward rather than to final salvation, is not then the owner's payout unjust? Why should all workers, no matter their labor, receive the same wage?

III. THE *DENARIUS*: A DENIAL OF DIFFERENTIAL REWARD?

Admittedly, a “rewards” reading of the passage at first glance poses a challenge to the normal principle² of eschatological recompense according to an individual’s works. More labor and harder work should command more compensation; not all should receive an equal reward. But the parable itself anticipates and responds to this objection. As he himself insists (vv 13-15), a landowner is free to exercise his generosity even in this. If the laborers who expected more because of more work desire a just wage, justice they received; the landowner fulfilled the explicit terms of their agreement.³ The landowner acknowledges the normal principle, but he has not violated it. As sovereign of the harvest, he is entitled to be generous with his own goods;⁴ he may “over-compensate” a group who might not seem to deserve a full day’s wage.⁵ Those who wish to dictate the terms of recompense have no right. God is not beholden. God’s sovereign generosity is equally just in reward as in salvation.

Does this parable teach that all Christians will receive the same reward? Clearly not. How well believers serve clearly affects reward. Passages in which servants receive generous recompense for whole-hearted labor during their allotted service opportunity guarantee this! The present parable simply adds the subtlety that laboring in faith is especially blessed by the Rewarder of this service (see full development of this point below).

² In proximity, Matt 16:27; see also Rom 2:6; 1 Cor 3:8; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 2:23; 21:12. In parabolic literature, differential reward is taught in Luke 19:11-26 (Parable of the Minas), where degrees of reward and even non-reward are implied. See also 2 Tim 2:12 and the promise of diverse rewards in Revelation 2-3 to “overcomers” (along with its implication of non-reward to non-overcomers).

³ Matt 20:13-14a. Note the emphasis on “*symphōneō*” (agree), repeated in vv 2, 13.

⁴ Matt 20:14b-15.

⁵ From a strictly business point of view, the “eleventh-hour” laborers’ contribution to bringing in a fragile harvest may have been proportionally more valuable to the landowner than the full-day laborers. “These verses express the typical urgency surrounding the harvest in ancient times”; C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

IV. “LAST FIRST”: ARBITRARY REVERSAL OR HONORARY RECOGNITION?

While acknowledging the principles of differential reward and God’s sovereign generosity, however, the parable has another point in mind. The dominant lesson, as suggested by the *inclusio* (19:30 and 20:16) of the “first/last” paradox,⁶ concerns the *order* of the compensation more than its *equality*; it is more a question of honor of place than of return on labor.⁷ In addition to their higher rate of compensation, the end-of-day laborers receive a higher priority of recognition: the first hired are last compensated, and the last hired are the first paid. Thus the final interpretive question raised by reading the parable as a lesson in reward: why this reversal, especially in light of the additional grief and burden borne by the full-day laborers (v 12)?

A. FAITH RECOGNIZED

The answer of the parable is that the degree of faith exercised, and not the grief endured, is the overarching principle in God’s compensation of his servants. Those who labor in fuller confidence of their Master are first recognized in the day of reckoning. Greater trust in His just reward is justly rewarded with greater honor in the end.

This principle of faith becomes clear in a careful consideration of the payment offers made to the three groups of workers hired during the day. From the perspective of these offers, the greater faith of the later-day workers becomes evident, and hence the justice of their exaltation in the hour of compensation.

⁶ Note however the reversed order of the saying in the second instance. The parable (as emphasized by the *inclusio*) climaxes with the emphasis on the “last” kind of worker hired, the model Jesus intends his hearers to emulate.

⁷ In its historical setting, the parable indeed served the purpose of correcting the apostolic attitude by asserting God’s sovereignty and generosity in reward. Its literary setting in Matthew, however (as indicated by the *inclusio*) means to encourage the readers—no matter our place in the age—that we are at no disadvantage in pursuit of God’s blessing, provided we act in faith.

The following chart summarizes the arrangements:

SUMMARY OF PAYMENT OFFERS		
Workers	Wage Offer	Terms
Full-day	Denarius (20:2)	“Agreement” (implied; 20:2, 13)
Mid-day (3rd, 6th, 9th hour)	“Whatever is right...” <i>(ho ean ē dikaion)</i>	“...I will give you.” (20:4)
11th hour	“Whatever is right...” <i>(ho ean ē dikaion)</i>	“...You will receive.” (20:7)

As is clear from the chart, there is substantial difference between the offers. The only aspect repeated is the promise of a “fair” return to the partial-day workers (italicized in chart). The offers differ in all other respects, suggesting three distinct categories of laborers.

The earliest (full-day) group of vineyard workers, to begin with, is twice said to have “agreed” with the landowner about the day’s wage in advance. They pursued business as usual, likely with the normal round of handshakes or similar pledges of payment. In our culture, these workers are called “contract laborers,” because there is a formal accord, set in advance, controlling the work arrangement.

Whom do these workers represent? The parable’s immediately preceding context naturally suggests an allusion to those servants of Christ who, like the apostle being addressed (19:27), may approach the pursuit of Kingdom reward solely within the framework of commercial conventions. Keying on Jesus’ promise of “treasure in heaven” to the rich young man (19:21), Peter naturally, if somewhat faithlessly, inquired for detail: “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” (19:27). The disciples (Peter customarily serving as spokesman—cf. 15:15; 16:16) desired to know “up front”; they quite reasonably sought specific assurance of the outcome of their service.

After the later workers of the parable received a full-day’s wage, the “agreement” the first group had struck at daybreak serves as the ground for dismissing their expectation of extra compensation. Jesus apparently detects in the disciples’ otherwise wholly commendable zeal for reward the potential for disappointment in seeing others rewarded disproportionately. Their pursuit of confirmation to the point of specifics may result in

reward according to the specifics negotiated; it may not allow room, as faith should, for the Master's generosity or grace. Tempering their zeal, then, is Jesus' concern, as skillfully illustrated in the later workers of the parable, that they not overlook God's willingness to lavish his blessing on the slightest effort expended for Christ!

The main distinctive of these later workers' pay offers is that they include no such assurance as that given to the earlier laborers. Both the mid-day and eleventh-hour groups have only the owner's sense of justice ("whatever may be fair"), rather than an explicit wage offer, on which to depend.⁸ While the earliest workers could count on the social and commercial conventions surrounding a *denarius* wage, these workers were at the mercy of the landowner's integrity.

And whom do these latter groups represent? If Jesus meant the early group to picture the apostles, these later workers would then naturally suggest some ideal that Peter (and Matthew's readers) should ponder. In that there could be no face-to-face assurances (such as the apostles received) for those Christians who were to follow them in the apostolic train, these workers would naturally represent those later believers, none of whom would enjoy the same opportunity for direct negotiation with the Master. Later servants of Christ would be reduced to dependence on the fairness of their Lord in their pursuit of his wage. Both later groups model an implicit recognition of the gracious sovereign justice of the Lord in rewarding everyone according to his deeds; the first group alone fails in this respect.

The chart above, however, implies yet a further distinction between the workers. How is the reader to understand the difference between the terms offered (note bold print in the chart) to the mid-day and eleventh-hour workers? In other words, what is the significance⁹ of the column 3 distinctions between the later workers?

⁸ W. W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1989) describes the new labor relation: "It is important to note that there were actually two kinds of workers hired that day: those who wanted a contract and agreed to work for a penny a day, and those who had no contract and agreed to take whatever the owner thought was right." See also Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: E. Stock, 1909; reprint, Minneapolis: James family Christian Publishing Co., 1978), 273.

⁹ It is unlikely that the distinctions are merely stylistic. In the immediate context of the parable, Matthew has just employed verbatim repetition ("what-

These distinctions, simply stated, further manifest the pattern of diminishing assurance of compensation. In his statement of terms to the mid-day groups, the landowner directly states, "I will give you... [the wage]." But in the eleventh-hour terms, he fully removes himself from the offer that he makes, thus eliminating another formality in the pay arrangement. It is not now that *he* will compensate, but only that the workers "will be compensated," somehow: "Whatever is right, *you will receive.*" Implied by this passivity is the further hint that the wage may rather come through some agent under his (the landowner's) supervision. The late-day workers might be required, not only to trust the owner's indirect promise, but also his "Proxy," requiring yet further confidence in the owner's integrity. (Indeed, as the parable unfolds, a new character, the "paymaster," plays exactly the role intimated in the landowner's passive promise to these workers!)

If we may conclude then that the offers made to the three groups indeed reflect diminishing concrete assurance of payment, we can summarize as follows: if the first group worked for a *contract*, the second was offered only a *commitment*. The last group, however, was asked to rely on no direct personal promise at all. These late-day workers were asked to depend utterly on the *character* of the landowner, even to the extent that the wage might not come through the landowner himself, but from some agent he might employ in distributing the day's rewards.

B. THE DISCIPLES' PARALLEL

That these last workers represent Jesus' ideal is to be expected, given Matthew's previous illustrations of threefold discipleship rankings, always given in a strict order of approval or disapproval (13:4-7; 20-23;¹⁰ 25:22-38). In precisely this fashion, these "last" hired (last in time as well as last in contribution) become "first" in recognition. Recognizing the eleventh-hour workers as the most trusting, their employer leapfrogs them ahead of their coworkers on all counts.

ever is right"); it is unlikely he would depart from doing so without reason. In at least one other Matthean reward parable where parity is a point (25:21, 23), Jesus also repeats terms exactly. In this genre, we must assume significance where distinctions are found.

¹⁰ Note further in Matt 13:8, 23 the threefold refinement among fruit-bearing disciples: "hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold" crop obtained. Cf. threefold distinctions also in Matt 18:15-17; 19:12.

Acknowledging that these men worked in spite of the most-diminished assurance also satisfies the expectation of the parable itself that some personal quality is being illustrated. The relative absence of *economic* merit in this group (whose contribution and even whose industry might easily be questioned)¹¹ is the main surprise element in the reversal of the pay order at day's end. Unless the point of the parable is God's purely capricious (or "sovereign") generosity, rewarding without respect to any worker criteria whatsoever, we should instead anticipate Jesus to be illustrating some *character* merit instead.¹²

On these terms, the landowner's reversal of the workday pay queue is no surprise. The trusting stragglers clearly lend the landowner greater credit, in that their trust helps bring his faithfulness fully to light.¹³ They are confident of recompense without hearing so much as a personal avowal, let alone a deal. Naturally, the landowner in response would honor those workers who trusted him implicitly over those who expected more concrete terms.

Homer Kent's comment on the passage points to the moral: "We must trust Him unreservedly and believe that He will always give what is best."¹⁴ Peter and the like must remember that even apostolic commitment was less to be praised by God than absolute confidence in the justice of His compensation. On these grounds, those who come last,¹⁵

¹¹ "Idlers," a term applied to both the mid-day and 11th-hour workers, is typically pejorative. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, eds. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 104. Further, the exchange in 20:6-7 eliminates all doubt that the 11th-hour workers were chosen for some special economic qualifiers peculiar to themselves. It was not as though these workers had been busy with more productive or more important activities; they were simply idling, unoccupied.

¹² As is typical of Matthean parabolic instruction; cf. 15:10-20; 18:21-35; 21:33-44; 24:45-51; 25:1-13; 25:14-30.

¹³ Cf. the NLT rendering of Rom 4:20: "Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God." *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996)

¹⁴ Cited by Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*.

¹⁵ The "day" pictured by this parable represents the *inter-advent age* (commencing with the apostles and terminating with the Day of reward), rather than the *lifespan* of those who come to the vineyard. Peter and the disciples are

without the concrete assurances provided through physical contact with the Lord,¹⁶ might even surpass their predecessors in recognition. Neither their high calling nor the greater contribution made by the apostles can ever substitute for full confidence in the Caller.

After all, with the coming of Christ, God's servants will necessarily be dealing with His Intermediary, just as the parable suggests; they had better prepare by ramping up their faith! Whether His followers paused at this telling of the parable to consider it, Jesus is teaching that the great Landowner will indeed be passive on the Day of recompense. The Father has indeed committed all reward to his Paymaster, His very Son (cf. John 5:22-30). Characteristically Christian faith is that God promises, but His Agent delivers. Faith looks to the Bema (the Judgment Seat of Christ), as of God (2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10-12). Trust in God is expressed by trust in Him whom He has sent.

The NT elsewhere echoes the challenge to believe in the Father's fair compensation through Christ. The indolence of the "wicked" servant of Matt 25:24-27 is blamed in part on his doubt of the returning Master's character. Christian slaves should serve with absolute confidence in Christ's recompense, no matter any short change they might receive from earthly masters (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-24). Examples could be added. God honors those who serve His Son with the confident expectation that He will reward them fairly at the Bema. Justifying faith receives eternal life as a gift, but full faith in Jesus, Agent of God's just reward, is necessary for a full salvation.

C. CONFIRMING ENIGMA: "MANY CALLED, FEW CHOSEN"

There is still one final evidence of God's special favor promised to those who pursue his reward in robust faith. The final assertion in the

called (as elsewhere in Matt—cf. 13:24-43; 47-50) to envision unexpected developments between themselves and the day of wages.

As such, the latecomers correspond primarily to those who will commence service *historically* later in the age, rather than later *chronologically* in their lifetime. Accordingly, it is the *grief* of their service (i.e., burning heat of the day) to which the early-day workers appeal in hope of additional wages, not the length (20:12). While their sacrifices were necessarily to be greater, as they involved the birth pangs of the age of Christian service, the disciples' labor was to be rewarded, just as that of those who later served Christ, with respect to the spirit of faith in which it was rendered.

¹⁶ Cf. John 20:29 for a similar admonition of an apostle.

section resonates with the main point of the story, concluding the lesson with an enigma: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”¹⁷

Though the saying is enigmatic, identifying the principals is straightforward. Those “called” are they who respond to the invitation (“calling”)¹⁸ to work—all the workers engaged during the day. The “chosen” of Jesus’ statement, then, are to be identified with those few “first” workers paid (as identified in the immediately preceding clause). This “election” then from among “invitees” is not salvific,¹⁹ but honorific; of all invited to serve the divine Landowner, he will single out (“choose”) the last hired (the faithful) for special recognition. The saying perfectly conforms to its setting, ratifying Jesus’ point that God is seeking those who will honor him through implicit faith.

Jesus’ point is stated in terms of an election, but the full import of this choosing is left vague. The suspense is resolved, however, in a later passage (Matt 22:14), where Jesus repeats and clarifies the saying. Here, Jesus compares the “calling” (again, “many are called”) with the “invitation” to the royal wedding supper of the preceding parable. Of all guests “invited” to the wedding, those “chosen” to participate in the full celebration are only those who make preparation commensurate with an occasion of such gravity (a supper honoring the king’s son).

¹⁷ The saying is omitted in several modern translations, but textual evidence is weighted against a few early manuscripts, and in favor of the majority reading. Eliminating the reading are \aleph , B, L, Z, and scattered others. The Majority Text, with C, D, W, and most versionary witnesses, attests to inclusion. There seems little cause for rejecting the reading.

Various explanations have been offered for the variant. Read as a scribal gloss to the “first/last” saying, the addition would serve the function of “clarifying” or “proving” our parable’s inversion of expectation, based on the statement of 22:14 (as an instance of Metzger’s “dogmatic alteration”; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2d ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 201.)

¹⁸ BAGD, 399.

¹⁹ For a contrary (and representative perseverantist) perspective, see Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), where the explanation of the election is...“probably this—to teach us that men who have wrought in Christ’s service all their days may, by the spirit which they manifest at the last, make it too evident that, as between God and their own souls, they never were chosen workmen at all.”

In the parable, a casually dressed guest is singled out for exclusion, as demonstrating less than the decorum proper to such an invitation. The “chosen,” on the other hand, share (co-participate) in the joy,²⁰ while the unprepared invitee is relegated to anguished regret—weeping and gnashing of teeth.²¹ Applied to the coming celebration of the consummation of Christ’s love for His people, 22:14 carries the instruction that God’s fullest welcome will be offered only to the well-prepared. As such, it complements the message of 20:16 that the Great Employer will recognize most highly those whose zeal, complemented by a God-honoring trust in the justice of His dealings, prepares them best for that consummation. This is none other than the coming day of reward described in our parable.

V. CONCLUSION

Considered in its biblical setting then, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers offers powerful encouragement to us, late-day laborers all, who are invited to help gather a crop for life eternal. Understood from the framework of faith, its interpretive challenges yield to the principle everywhere affirmed in Scripture, that God abundantly honors confidence rightly placed in Him, whether faith for regeneration or for fair reward. If we approach our labors in the full conviction of God’s generosity to recognize all efforts expended in trust, we will be at no disadvantage to those who served Christ from the very beginning. Though last in time, we may realistically aspire to the high standard set by the disciples of Jesus in the flesh. May we rise to the challenge!

²⁰ Inclusion in the celebration. Cf. Matt 25:21, 23, where the “good and faithful” servants of an absent landlord are invited “into the joy of [their] lord.”

²¹ Hebrew expression of grief; cf. Ps 112:10. Cf. also the comment of Ralph Gower and Fred Wright: “To be put out of the lighted room into the darkness could lead to despair (and so, “gnashing of teeth” Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30)” *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997).