

**Well, What Do You Want?**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

<sup>1</sup>“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup>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? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

**Matthew 20:1--16 (NRSV)**

**Sermon:**

I think to fully appreciate our text this morning, we need to go back to chapter 19:13-30. Here we read about Jesus welcoming and blessing children, telling his disciples that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such people as these children. In the social scheme of things in the Ancient Near East, children were barely people at all and had no power of self-determination, totally dependent upon family, and no real social worth until they reached the age of puberty.

Later we hear about Jesus encountering a very conscientious, religious young man, who socially challenges Jesus by way of a compliment. Remember in the ANE, any public question, compliment, or criticism was always an honor challenge and one’s honor standing was one’s social worth.

We gather that this young man was part of a wealthy family or the head of a wealthy family and would have automatically been considered an unscrupulous and greedy person in the minds of Jesus’ audience. However, among the pious wealthy, this young man and his family would have been seen as highly favored by God with the implied responsibility to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Malina;Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 2019-2038). Kindle Edition.

The young man put Jesus on the spot when he asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to be saved?", assuming Jesus as a holy man knows the specific thing this young fellow must do to be included in the kingdom of heaven when it arrives. I must add that both the young man and Jesus would have understood the kingdom of heaven, Matthew's euphemism for the kingdom of God, as a new era coming on earth full of life, joy, and universal honor or glory for the righteous Israelites. The unrighteous and the enemies of Israel would have been relegated to eternal punishment in a place prepared for them, and all remaining peoples would be on the outside looking in, so to speak.

Such an understanding of the kingdom of heaven and a person's eternal life may be different from many understandings now. This reminds me of the story about the pastor who was talking to a group of young children about being good and going to heaven? At the end of his talk, he asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Heaven!" Suzy cried out.

"And what do you have to be to get there?" asked the preacher.

"Dead!" yelled Little Johnny.

Jesus deflects the young man's compliment-challenge by stating that he is not the final authority on what is good and if the young man wants to "enter into life" he must keep the commandments. The young man ups the ante by asking, "Which ones?" Jesus then recites the laws of Moses and thereby shifts the locus of authority from himself to God and the law. After the young man assures Jesus he has kept all these Laws, he asks what more does he lack. Jesus says that there is only one thing lacking in the man's salvation portfolio. The young man must sell all he has, which could have been either just his portion of the family estate or the entire family estate, abandon his family and responsibilities, and become a disciple, a commoner, like Peter, James, and John to follow Jesus around the country side.

I want to point out that Jesus' injunction to the young man to sell all he has and give it to the poor as a kingdom imperative is meaningfully only if, and I mean only if, we understand that the kingdom of heaven was so imminent that the young man's wealth and family obligations would have been inconsequential in the scheme of things. These passages have often been used to manipulate people into giving sacrificially to someone's cause without any due regard for the cultural and immediate end-times context of Jesus and the story.

The young man goes away disappointed because he has much wealth and given the collectivistic psychology of the culture and one's identity as defined within the family and a person's responsibilities to the family, it would have been impossible, out of this world crazy, for this young man to dishonor and impoverish his whole family by such an act. So, hear Jesus' demand as a rabbinic hyperbole to make a point about one's heartfelt, all-or-nothing relationship to God. The young man, if he did what Jesus demanded, would have in effect dishonored his father and mother, whether alive or dead.

However, I want to point out that this young man stands in contrast to Jesus, who presumed upon a higher honor standing, and in effect deprived his family of his contributions to their welfare and dishonored his family per the social conventions of the day. Jesus' presumption to a higher social status caused him to be declared crazy by his village, religious authorities, and his family as he gave his all to honor his heavenly Father's will in his life.

Jesus then turns to his disciples and tells them that it will be hard for a rich man or a rich person to abandon those cultural traditions that define and favor them on this side of the kingdom in order to do the one thing they need to do - become like little children, people without

concern for worldly honor, totally dependent on God, and become servants to all those in the new family of Jesus.

This story of the Rich Young Man is also called the story of the Greedy Young Man because he had everything going for him, but still wanted to know that one more thing that he could do that would assure him of his place in the kingdom. This encounter prompted a subsequent conversation among the disciples, giving rise to our parable today.

After hearing this exchange between Jesus and the young man, the disciples were astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" I mean if this guy, who obviously has the luxury to be super pious and has all the trappings of divine blessing, is not a shoo-in for the kingdom, then who is? Jesus says that human understandings of righteousness are not the final standards for kingdom citizenship, only God determines who is in and who is not.

Now, with this in mind, let's hear from my hero, open-mouth-before-engaging-brain Simon Peter. Peter, asked the question, which refocused everything and brings us to our text today, "Lord, we have given up everything to follow you. What then shall we have?" (Matt. 19:27) Whoa!

Alas, given all that the disciples have seen and heard, Peter asked this boneheaded question. This question comes on the heels of Jesus' just having told his disciples ( Matt. 19:28) that they will be rulers with all the incumbent responsibilities and attendant benefits over the tribes of Israel, when the Son of Man assumes his throne and all things are renewed. It is as if Matthew uses two independent stories and sees no need to make them coherent. However, let us hear the disciples trying to refine and impose this world's economy of rewards and proportionality upon God and the kingdom to come.

In response to Peter's question, Jesus shares a parable. It was harvest time and a wealthy landowner - already the bad guy in most folks' mind - went out early one morning to the village to hire day laborers. Please note that it is the landowner that goes out to hire, not his manager. This is very important and would not have been missed by Jesus' audience. The landowner hires the first group and sends them to work. But, the two subsequent hires, according to our text, weren't looking for work like honorable men; they were idle, standing around doing nothing. The final set of workers hired were asked why had they been idling away the day, and they told the landowner no one had come to hire them, implying they had wanted to work but hadn't been given the opportunity.

These ancient day-labors had a hard and bitter existence. Some of these men may have once owned ancestral farms but had lost families and land due to either high taxes, having defaulted on hard-time loans with exorbitant interest rates taken out from more wealthy landowners or money lenders. Thus, such men would have been the poorest of the poor; that is, without the financial or family networks to achieve or sustain a place of social worth or financially maintain themselves and their families.

If we could listen to this parable with the ears of Jesus' first audience, this parable would offend some and gladden the hearts of others. It would have offended some people's innate sense of fairness, proportionality, and limited good; however, for others it would resonate with a deep need for grace and compassion.

The fact that the landowner hired additional labors at various times of the day right up to an hour or so before quitting time poses some questions. However, all we know is that the landowner went in search of additional laborers at various times and found them idle.

The first bunch of laborers were under contract - a denarius a day. The later hires were simply told by the landowner that he would be fair - meaning the landowner would probably pay them a prorated hourly rate based upon a denarius a day. So, you can imagine the excitement and anticipation of those first workers when they saw the last hires, who were paid first, receive

a full day's pay for just a few hours' work. Now note, the manager comes on scene as the paymaster. Surely, the landowner, to be fair, would give the first hires a big bonus. I can only imagine their disappointment, when they received just what they had contracted for - a fair day's wage for a fair day's work.

Let's look at the first hires' disappointment and grumbling because it has merit. In Jesus' peasant culture, all desired and needed goods in life were in limited supply and allocated based upon one's family's status. This sense of limited goods and apportionment would have carried over even into one's understanding of eternal life in the kingdom of God. Peasants wouldn't expect mansions just over the hilltop. The peasant's hope was not to be taken advantage of in the kingdom, to be free of want, and to have the were-with-all to maintain their honor.

In the view of limited goods, an individual, a family, or even a community that sought to increase or expand what they had would have been understood to come at the expense of others. Thus, any incidents of good fortune would have been viewed suspiciously and as a threat to social equilibrium and the common pool of resources for community survival. Given this worldview of limited goods, the cardinal sin would have been envy.<sup>2</sup>

However, the peasants didn't envy the wealthy, they resented them. A peasant envied another peasant for his or her good fortune or accomplishments that distinguished them above others. A rich and powerful person did not envy peasants or the rulers above them, only their peers. Envy constantly played a role in Jesus' encounters with various people.<sup>3</sup>

So what if those latecomers had mouths to feed and a partial day's wages or an hour's wage would not have provided for "their daily bread." After all, isn't fairness in principle far more important than any one person's needs? To add insult to injury, the estate owner made a special point of having the last workers paid first in plain view of the rest of the workers. It seems the landowner is intentionally setting up the scenario for discontent and envy. But, Jesus did say the Gospel would be extremely divisive in the normal course of people's lives and in their relationships, didn't he?

Across the ages there have been many interpretations of this parable and each character labeled and given metaphorical designations and significance. I think many of these interpretations have made for some interesting sermons at times, but most miss the point of Peter's question, which was, what is the disciples' rewards or what will they have for giving up so much and following Jesus? So, let's not get citizenship in the kingdom confused with rewards.

The hired hands, partly out of envy of their fellow day-laborers, whom they saw as benefiting at their expense, and partly out of their preexisting resentments of landowners begin to grumble and complain. The landowner says he did not treat anyone unfairly and, after all, it's his money, he can do with it what he wants, it's his business and he is under no obligation to conform to his workers' ideas of ought and should or fairness. He is not accountable to them beyond their wages.

All this having been said, we modern, western Christians miss something else that would have been shocking, adding insult to injury to Jesus' first audience. That something is found in the last sentence of the story. This sentence should read, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" The evil eye beams the malevolence of a person's heart out onto a person or persons envied or held in contempt. The evil eye was and is a serious matter in Mediterranean societies and one must be on constant guard against the damage it can cause. Amulets, gestures, pictures, certain

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<sup>2</sup> Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2001, p 112-114.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.109.

colors, and accouterments to apparel are widely used even today in the eastern Mediterranean to provide protection from the evil eye.<sup>4</sup>

Well, the evil eye won't work on the landowner because the landowner is good. Remember, Jesus said there is only one who is good, and that would definitely not have been a landowner. A good landowner was an oxymoron for Jesus' peasant audience.

No matter what the various interpretations of this parable, if we are honest, at some levels it offends our sense of fairness and it should, especially as life-long Christians. We have struggled to live good, decent, moral lives of service to God and others only to come to realize in these passages that those last-minute folks will be the more honored in a last-hired-first-in priority. It is this sort of conundrum of fairness and unfairness that made the concept of purgatory so popular at certain times. However, in the Ancient Near Eastern understanding of limited goods, those last hired are seen as gaining at the expense of others and became objects of envy.

Therefore, I think the point of this parable is to upset peoples' sense of fairness and to bring home the fact that God is the final judge and arbiter of kingdom citizenship and decides whether one receives divine honor and rewards or not, based upon God's standards. So, let us rehear, as Job and his counselor-accusers heard - we cannot hold God accountable to human standards of fairness. Also, this parable seems to stress that it is more important to be concerned with entering the kingdom than with our rewards once in. I think this parable should make a person - old or new to the faith - question their motives in Christian service, double check their reasons for being moral and ethical, and their religious devotions.

In closing, I think this parable leaves us with a question: Do we want fairness, proportionality, and justice from God, or do we want unmerited favor - God's grace, regardless of our time in Christ?

So, Christian, you were promised a place in the kingdom of heaven, were you not? Well, you have it in Jesus Christ; what more could you ask for without betraying envious, self-serving motives in your Christianity? So, we either trust in God's grace or we are left with a hellish sorting out process according to human ideas of fairness.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Kindle Locations 2061-2064). Kindle Edition.