

File No. 143

MATTHEW 19:27 — 20:16

THE WORKMEN AND THEIR WAGES

(SBS Bk 5 Story No 29)

Story Notes

Context: Matthew 19:16 — 20:28

A rich young man enquired about a good deed he would have to do to have eternal life. He does not understand the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom belonging to children or the childlike. Jesus told him to give away his riches in this world so as to have riches in heaven, and to follow him, but he could not bring himself to do this.

Jesus then talked to the disciples about how hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. This amazed the disciples because they supposed that riches were God's reward to righteous people. Jesus said rich people could be saved, but with difficulty. Peter wondered then if anyone could be saved and Jesus said that, of ourselves, this was impossible, but not with God.

Peter seems to see this as unjust. Had they left everything to gain nothing? He had the same problem as the rich man, and was unaware of how he had come to have such a rich promise of the kingdom.

Jesus assured them that, when all things were renewed, that is, recreated to have their true purpose and function, with himself, the Son of Man, seated in authority over all things, they would be reigning with him. Even in this life, any believers who lost their homes or families or property because they followed him, would receive these same things in this world, and eternal life as well.

However, the disciples still had a very different view of the kingdom to Jesus. He was talking about being killed and rising again (20:17) and of giving his life as 'a ransom for many' (20:28). The disciples were thinking of their own advantage, both James and John whose mother sought their pre-eminence, and the others who were indignant with them (20:20–28).

The parable between the request of the young man and the request of the Zebedee mother is directed to his followers, and to all of us who must be weaned from thinking about earning merit, or about securing advantages for ourselves. In God's kingdom, what we think of as first is last and what we think of as last is first (19:30; 20:16). What seems reasonable in this world cannot describe the reign of God's grace.

The 'first' in the story Jesus told are those who begin their work early and earn a full pay for bearing 'the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (20:12). The 'last' are those who had no opportunity to work earlier (no criticism is made of those who start late) but are paid the same as the others for just one hour of work. "You have made them equal to us" is the complaint of the full day workers.

Clearly, the employer is eager to get his work done. He went several times to the market place to pick up people who may be free to work. He agreed to pay them 'whatever is right' (20:4). The employer makes an issue of his right to do as his wishes, and what he wishes is generosity. 'Do you begrudge my generosity?' is his question.

Who can afford to begrudge the King of the Kingdom his generosity? All of us stand in need of it. It is a generosity that would be measured later on by Christ giving his life as a ransom for many.

The 'first' who think they can earn the favour God gives, and who appear to have done so, are 'last'. They do not understand the kingdom and are misrepresenting its King, and may be in danger of never entering it.

However, God is generous to all. Those who know they have not deserved what they have received are the 'last', and they are 'first' because they know the nature of the kingdom. They know that everything they have, even though they laboured through the heat and burden of the day, is a gift of grace.

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