

Great Expectations

Matthew 19:27-20:16

22 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: What's in it for us?

Big Idea: God's good and generous grace is the great equaliser.

Introduction

Last week, Google made a major announcement which means that some of their staff might see their pay reduced by up to 25%.

And it's all got to do with working from home.

If a Google employee decides to permanently work from home, they'll get a different amount of money depending on where they work from.

Someone who works from home in New York City will be paid more – about 15% more – than if they work somewhere that's a one hour commute away by train.

All for doing exactly the same job.

I'm sure that you're not surprised to learn that many Googlers aren't very happy about this.

And there were plenty of media articles saying how unfair it is too.

We're used to pay being determined based on how many hours you work.

The more hours you put in, generally, the more you get paid.

Or else getting paid differently depending on the results you produce.

Making more widgets or hitting certain targets might mean that you get a bonus, a pay raise or a promotion.

Finally, you get paid more if you have more responsibility.

But getting paid differently depending on where you work from seems UNFAIR.

It messes with our expectations of what's fair – not just getting paid on effort, results and responsibility.

But is it really unfair?

Google say that they've always paid different amounts depending on location.

The cost of living in some major cities is significantly more than living in a regional city.

And the cost of living if you're posted to Woop-Woop might be heaps more than a regional town.

Google says that they always pay at the top of the local area – basically as much as it takes to get the best person in that area.

Instead of just varying pay from office to office depending on what city you're in, they're taking it to the next level with working from home.

Some Googlers are choosing where they're going to live based on this and they're not alone because apparently Facebook and Twitter do the same thing.

When it comes to the kingdom, it's not about merit either.

I know a number of Christian organisations that essentially only have one pay rate.

It doesn't matter where you are on the organisation's hierarchy, everyone gets paid the same – from the very bottom to the very top.

That's so completely foreign to the rest of the world that it takes many people by surprise.

God's kingdom works differently to other kingdoms.

The kingdom of heaven is outrageous.

As we're going to see in our passage this morning, God's good and generous grace is the great equaliser.

Outline

We're looking at a section of story in Matthew's gospel that's all about Jesus heading towards the cross.

The King's about to enter the capital city of Jerusalem and establish his kingdom.

But instead of establishing his kingdom by raising an army and using force, he's going to bring in his kingdom by dying for his people.

Jesus' kingdom is profoundly different to what people were expecting.

Last week, we saw a man come to Jesus asking what he needs to do to enter the Kingdom.

He gets quite excited when Jesus tells him to keep the commandments because by his own standard, he'd kept many of them.

But he had a love for money that trumped his love for God.

When Jesus told the man to sell everything and to follow him, the man just wasn't willing to do it.

Jesus tells us that it's impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, or anyone for that matter.

We need to depend on what God has done rather than what we can do to enter his kingdom.

I think that verse 27 is the beginning of a new section.

In this next chunk of the gospel, we're going to see the unfairness of God's fairness and his gracious generosity.

Jesus explains these principles by telling a story which shows **God's good and generous grace is the great equaliser.**

- The **first** will be **last** (19:27-30)
- The **last** will be **first** (20:1-16)

The *first* will be *last* (19:27-30)

Peter – who's often the spokesperson for the disciples opens his mouth.

He's the one who often realises too late that he should've thought a bit more BEFORE opening his mouth.

Many of us can relate, but on this occasion he hasn't said anything embarrassing.

Verse 27:

Matthew 19:27 NIV11 ²⁷ Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

It could be that Peter thinks that it's not fair.

Or perhaps he's thinking about what he and the other disciples have given up for Jesus and that it really should earn God's favour.

But I think it's significant that Jesus doesn't just tell him to dry up the tears and get over it, girlfriend.

Instead of getting correction, he gets compassion because it's understandable that old mate Peter's feeling insecure at this point.

Jesus has just said that it's impossible for anyone to save themselves.

It's impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom on their own.

Hearing that news, the rich man walked away.

The rich man didn't follow Jesus, but what about the disciples who had followed Jesus?

Peter's maybe wondering if that was a wise choice.

If the first are last, where does that leave them?

See, the disciples, they've banked everything on Team Jesus.

The rich man couldn't get into the kingdom but at least he still had his riches.

The disciples can't get into the kingdom, but they've given up EVERYTHING to follow Jesus.

Are they left with nothing?

Peter wants to know if there's going to be anything for them at all.

What is there for those who sacrifice and follow?

Jesus's answer to his question is that while the first will be last, the last will also be first.

Jesus talks about what things are going to be like after the renewal to explain this.

After the renewal, I think, describes the final state at the end of time when everything is made right.

I take it that way because of how Jesus takes the ideas from two passages and mixes them together to form one description.

He takes the image of the Son of Man – a term that refers to Jesus – from Daniel 7 and combines it with the image of God's servant sitting victoriously on his throne in Psalm 110.

Jesus, speaking to those who've chosen to follow him, says that they will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

That's another reason why I bumped this part of the passage back a bit – because I wasn't exactly sure what that means.

Turns out that it's anyone's guess.

Many people have had all kinds of guesses and while some of them are better than others and fit with other theological assumptions better than others, no one knows for sure because Matthew doesn't tell us.

The same's actually kind of true with the parable in chapter twenty because there's no explanation given for that either.

It could be that the twelve disciples are given the responsibility of judging over the people of Old Testament Israel who failed to put their trust in Jesus.

I think that's a good possibility, but Daniel 7:9 talks about there being lots of thrones.

Or it could be simply saying that all the people of God will judge all the people of the nations (since that couldn't really be conceived of yet).

Whichever way you go, I think that the point is reasonably clear – they're not going to miss out in Jesus' kingdom.

They're not on the road to nowhere.

What's much clearer is the second point he makes which is that there'll be substantial blessing for anyone who's left stuff behind for the sake of the kingdom.

Whoever's given things up will gain back far more.

Matthew 19:29 NIV11 ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

Following Jesus comes at a cost – we looked at that last week.

Houses and fields sometimes need to be left behind.

It also has relational cost.

This doesn't mean that you go out of your way to cause difficulties, but you might lose a brother, sister, father, mother spouse and even children for the sake of the gospel.

Losing those relationships is hard, painful and difficult.

It doesn't take long to realise this when you talk to someone who's experienced it.

Jesus isn't saying that you've got to give up everything enjoyable, however sacrifice for the kingdom is worthwhile and there's also great gain and great reward.

In the kingdom there's gain now as we receive a whole heap of new relationships – people to have those kin connections to.

We receive back so many more relationships than we could've possibly even dreamed of.

Don't worry, you won't get 100 mothers nagging you about leaving your dirty clothes on the bedroom floor, but you will get hundreds of caring and nurturing relationships.

That's on top of receiving eternal life.

It's all too easy to miss those few words at the end of the verse, even though they're probably some of the most significant.

That's what the bloke we saw last week was so mortified to be missing out on, but still couldn't bring himself to give up his first love.

Eternal life is the greatest thing that a disciple receives.

At this point, the disciples had already made huge sacrifices and we know that as their lives went on, they continued to make sacrifices for the kingdom, it even cost them their lives.

We tend to think that kind of sacrifice is for the missionaries and the super-spiritual ones.

Sometimes we even dare to read missionary biographies and we're blown away by how much some people have given up for the sake of the gospel.

We put C.T. Studd's quote on our wall in pretty frames with fancy writing:

"Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."

Or Jim Elliot's:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

So inspirational.

That kind of outlook truly takes the kind of child-like trust that the disciples saw exemplified in the kids brought to Jesus.

Yet we're not really willing to dare to take the same risks for ourselves.

Give up everything to follow Jesus to Africa, India or China.

But of course, we don't need to because we're not called to that!

We've been called to live a life of pleasure and ease here in Australia.

I'm not so sure that we can get out of the call to go to the nations that Jesus gives in chapter 28 that easily.

Even if we have been called to be senders, I'm not sure that we can get out of THAT so easily either.

We're happy to follow Jesus as long as it doesn't mean that it has to cost us too much.

We can put all our efforts into earthly success – profitable business, impressive Instagram, a family of kids who get to experience every opportunity, a perfect house – and fit Jesus in around the sides wherever there's a little gap to fit him in.

I wonder what that might really say about what's in our hearts?

When we invest in all these things that don't ultimately count for anything in the kingdom.

Perhaps we're like the disciples that we worry that it might be foolish to lose the things we love.

What does that say about the value of eternal life?

Jesus's point comes there in verse 30 where he describes what the kingdom's like.

Many of the first will be last.

That's talking about the kind of bloke we saw last week.

Anyone who thinks that they've kept all the commandments when actually they're a long way from the kingdom.

They're going to be last.

Matthew 19:30 NIV11 ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

And many of those who think they're last are going to be first.

Peter needed assurance that he's not going on a fool's errand.

What you give up now is nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to what you'll receive in heaven.

That's going to be so, so much better and greater.

And it frees you up for a life of service, knowing what really counts.

Jesus says that the first will be last.

And it's okay because the last will be first.

The *last* will be *first* (20:1-16)

The second thing we see is the last will be first.

Jesus repeats himself, saying the exact same thing in verse sixteen, but he says it in the opposite order to what he did in verse thirty.

We're going to see the obverse side of the coin.

Jesus tells a story, a parable, about the kingdom of heaven.

Like all parables, this may or may not have actually happened but it's a realistic story that people could relate to that's used to make a point.

The kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard.

In the Old Testament – for example in Isaiah 5 – the nation of Israel is described as being a vineyard.

But here I think it applies more widely to the kingdom that Jesus is ushering in.

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is used to portray God himself.

It's possibly harvest time and the grapes are plump and juicy on the vine, ready to be picked.

It could be that the owner of the vineyard needs help because there's often a very narrow window for the grapes to be brought in.

All it takes is for a storm to come along and the whole lot would be lost.

Or it could equally be just a regular day and the landowner wants to offer work.

That's what I think might really be going on.

Like most farmers, he makes an early start, getting up at sparrow to get some workers to help out.

Long days were typical and twelve hour days and 6am starts weren't unusual.

He makes a formal arrangement with them: if they'll come and spend the day working for him, he'll pay them a denarius.

There's nothing particularly significant about this.

That's not exactly a king's ransom since day laborers weren't exactly the most well-paid, often being just above slaves on the social ladder and below regular workers.

In fact, many of them probably had been slaves.

Even still, it was a full day's wage for a full day's work.

So, they're set loose amongst the vines to do the work that needs to be done.

Three hours later, we find that the landowner is back in the marketplace to hire more men.

Why didn't he hire them in the first place?

We don't really know why he did this because we're not given an explanation.

It might've been because he realised that he could fit more men in or maybe it was that they simply weren't around before.

Given the fact that it's God, I reckon that we can definitely rule out mismanagement though.

This time, he doesn't make a formal agreement with the men, but tells them to come to work for him and he'll see that they get looked after.

Verse four:

Matthew 20:4-5a NIV11 ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

What's even stranger is that he goes down to the marketplace again at noon.

He does the same thing again – hiring workers to come and work on a promise.

Then he goes out again at three in the afternoon.

Now, in Australia, the blokes he'd hired at six would've well and truly knocked off by that time, but this isn't a replacement crew.

Finally, 5pm comes around when there was only about an hour of daylight left.

Instead of starting to pack up for the day, the grape-grower's down at the marketplace again.

We're left wondering why they're still in the marketplace at that time AND why they weren't hired earlier.

We might think that he's having a go at them, when he asks, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

The answer they give in verse seven suggests otherwise though: "Because no one has hired us."

It's not that they didn't get out of bed because their dole check didn't come until one o'clock.

It's that no one hired them.

Instead of telling them off, the vineyard owner invites them to come and work in the vineyard.

Knock-off time would've typically been around six o'clock when the sun went down.

The owner of the vineyard gets his manager to hand out the payment for the day, as was the usual custom.¹

But instead of paying the first men to be hired, he specifically asks for the last ones hired to be paid first.

The last will be first.

When those who'd only worked an hour came up for their wages, they were probably expecting to only get paid pro-rata, a percentage of the day rate for a percentage of the day's work.

That's how it works. You only work some hours, you only get some of the dough.

They'd only worked an hour, so it's only fair that they'd get paid one twelfth of a denarius.

Yet it turns out that they're given a full denarius.

A whole denarius for one hour's work? You little ripper!

The big boss is ripping himself off by doing this.

This must've cost the landowner more than the value of the work done because he was essentially paying them for work that they didn't do.

He's being irrational and not a very shrewd business man.

His actions are more about the workers' needs than his own.

I think the reason that he hires them is that he can help them out rather than because he needs them.

They didn't deserve this payment based on the work they did, it was purely the generosity of the vineyard owner.

It was no fault of their own that they were standing around all day, but this would allow them to eat, just like the men who'd been working all day.

Yet the only one that he's being unfair towards is himself.

Why would he do that?

This is breath-taking generosity being displayed.

Matthew skips over telling us what happened with the ones who were hired at 3pm, noon and 9am.

Instead, he fast-forwards to the men who'd been hired at the very start of the day.

They'd already seen that the vineyard owner was paying one denarius per hour, so they were expecting to get more.

We know that because the text tells us so.

The ones that were hired first were thinking that they'd struck gold.

This guy must pay significantly over the award rate.

They must've misheard him saying that a denarius was the hourly rate, not the daily rate.

They thought they were onto a good wicket, that all their Christmases had come at once with twelve denarii coming their way.

"But each of them also received a denarius," verse ten.

Not. Happy. Jan.

They're cranky and begin grumbling about how unfair it is that they've been paid exactly the same even though they worked harder.

Or more literally, they give the vineyard owner the evil eye.

It's hard to forget what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about storing up treasure in heaven and how our eyes are a window into our souls, Matthew 6:22-23.

That comes right before him saying that we can't serve both God and money.

They're resentful – I think that's a better translation than envious.

They've got a list of complaints.

The last workers didn't do most of the work and they didn't even work in the hardest part of the day, but only in the cool of the afternoon.

Their biggest beef, though, is that the Johnny-come-latelies have been made EQUAL to them!

Those who are described as "these last" have been made equal with the first.

Verse twelve:

Matthew 20:12 NIV11 ¹²'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

The landowner hasn't been unfair at all, has he?

If he wants to pay over the award rate, then he's free to.

If he wants to be so generous as to give out extra, he's not treating everyone equally, but the guys who started at six weren't short-changed.

They got paid exactly what they'd agreed to.

The problem here isn't injustice, it's resentfulness for the vineyard owner's goodness, that he's decided to be generous in giving the last as much as the first.

Verse fifteen:

Matthew 20:15 NIV11 ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The vineyard owner pays on a different basis to what many of the workers expected, compared to what we expect.

He pays out of his generosity, not the amount of work done.

God's the same and it's no more or less than what he called the disciples to.

There was full disclosure when he called them in chapter four, when Jesus told them to leave their nets to follow him to fish for men.²

That's exactly what they did.

The last will be made first.

I think that the last are those who are the most needy.

See, the thing about this parable is that everyone ends up with exactly the same amount.

The fact that it was one denarius across the board is the reason for all the trouble.

The end result is the same, but God's generosity isn't equal to everyone.

It really matters here what the denarius refers to.

I suspect that it's salvation because everyone gets the same.

Firstly, because the whole discussion began with asking how you get eternal life and secondly, because everyone ends up getting exactly the same payment.

Or to put it more clearly, everyone receives the same outcome, eternal life, but some receive more grace to get it.

That could be hard to take if you're someone – like the disciples – who've absolutely slaved their guts out for the sake of the gospel.

I can empathise with the disciples.

Man, it must've been difficult for them to give up everything that they did to follow Jesus.

It's much easier to be the one who comes along later when things are established, to sign up when Jesus is has already risen from the dead.

I think we're probably fooling ourselves if we don't feel a little bit resentful to the person who lives wildly and foolishly and yet they get forgiven.

The person who lives in rebellion and does nothing for Jesus and then gets saved at the last minute.

It just doesn't seem fair that they should receive the same gift of eternal life.

I want to hold God's generosity to account for that and it's taken some serious prayer this week.

The problem with that, of course, is that I'm thinking that what I do should bring me some credit.

But putting in long hours doesn't make God more likely to save you.

The reward for isn't going to be in getting a better salvation.

And praise God that's not the solution.

Otherwise we'd all be a mess.

We'd all be sunk if God only accepts those who do enough good to enter his kingdom.

Because none of us are as good as God calls us to be.

God's grace is good and generous, completely undeserved.

The first receive a little and the last receive a lot.

A more modern analogy of the same thing is a giant game of picking the team.

Who gets picked first? Well, it's the strongest, most co-ordinated, most able.

The ones picked last are the least productive, weakest and insignificant.

The last picked are made first because they receive more grace since they need it.

Some workers were there waiting all day, but weren't called.

But out of his generosity, God gives them what they need.

Jesus repeats the little phrase.

But this time, he spins it around.

Verse sixteen:

Matthew 20:16 NIV11 ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Those who are the least will be made greatest.

Conclusion

Jesus' kingdom challenges our expectations of reward.

Grace is so unbelievably outrageous that it catches us off-guard.

We believe in salvation by grace, but often what we really expect is salvation by works.

God's plan is much better.

Praise him for that.

God's good and generous grace is the great equaliser.

Out of his goodness and generosity, he gives us all what we need.

¹ Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 24:14-15

² Matthew 4:18-22

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Big Question: What's in it for us?

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Discussion Questions

1. What are our typical expectations for how someone should be rewarded?
2. What is Peter's concern in verse 27?
3. What can those who follow Jesus look forward to?
4. How do we reconcile what Jesus says with living in Australia today?
5. Why does the vineyard owner go out to get workers at 12pm, 3pm and 5pm?
6. Why did the earlier workers expect to receive more?
7. Who are the early and late workers in Jesus' parable?
8. What does the 6am workers' resentment show about their understanding of salvation?
9. What does the parable tell us about living the faithful Christian life?