

*“God is No Man’s Debtor”*

Matthew 19:27—20:16

October 11, 2020

*How many of you like to be treated fairly?*

*If you had to choose between being treated fairly or being treated generously, how many of you would rather be the recipient generosity?*  
We all love to be treated generously, yet how quickly our gratitude can deteriorate when we see someone else blessed more abundantly than ourselves.

Consider a family enjoying pancakes at the breakfast table. Everyone is happy until one of the children notices that this sibling got a slightly bigger pancake than he did. What does he protest? “That’s not fair!” From a short-sighted perspective, it does seem like an injustice, doesn’t it? Until one adjusts his perspective just 12 inches, to see a platter in the center of the table with a giant pile of pancakes, far more than the entire family could eat in one meal. And in view of such surplus, the issue is no longer one of justice or fairness but rather a matter of unnecessary comparison—envy.

Now let’s say you go to Wedgewood Park on a hot summer day with 5 gallons of ice cream and you put up a sign that says, “FREE ICECREAM!” In no time you have kids lined up and you give them each a large, generous scoop of ice cream. But occasionally you give someone two scoops of ice cream. And when the other children protest, “THAT’S NOT FAIR,” why does it not sit right with you? Because although you have not given equal portions, you have not been unjust. You’ve given what you promised—free ice-cream. And the one protesting that you are not fair, has overlooked your generosity in having just given him a large scoop of ice cream he didn’t deserve. Gratitude has been swallowed up by envy.

What I hope to help you see from Matthew’s gospel is that...***Because God gives what He promises—and always more than we deserve—there is no place for comparison, envy, or entitlement in the Kingdom of Heaven, but only gratitude for undeserved grace.***

Today’s passage of Scripture is a response to the preceding verses that we examined last week. You will recall that a rich young ruler, came to Jesus asking, “what good thing shall I do to obtain eternal life?” He asked the question under the mistaken notion that he could somehow secure heaven by earning it (19:16). In vs. 21 Jesus answered the young rich man, “*sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.*”

Peter has taken note of Jesus answer, and seeing the man walk away from the offer of heavenly treasure, he says to Jesus in vs. 27, “we have left *everything* to follow You; what then will there be for *us*?” And Jesus says...[28-30].

Peter has nothing to worry about. Though the disciples may appear to be last in the world having given up earthly comforts and securities to follow Christ, they will be promoted to a place of leadership when Jesus establishes His future reign over the earth. And *everyone* who follows Jesus will receive blessing that surpasses any earthly sacrifice and inherit eternal life.

So the first thing we learn is that...

1. **No one’s earthly sacrifice to follow Christ will be ‘short-changed’ by the generous bounty of God’s grace** (Matt 19:27-30).

Whatever sacrifice is required of you, will eventually be multiplied to you in blessing a hundred times over (cf. Mark 10:30). Some of those blessings will come in this lifetime, but in the end the reward of eternal life will make every sacrifice miniscule. Eternity in heaven “is far more than enough to compensate for any earthly loss.”<sup>1</sup>

God will be no man’s debtor! His generosity is so extravagant and His grace so undeserved, that no man’s sacrifice can diminish the lavish mercy of God.

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<sup>1</sup> R.T. France, *NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew*, pg. 745.

When Jesus says the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, He indicates that the kingdom of heaven functions according to different values. In the world, the rich young ruler seemed to have *first* advantage and the disciples who have renounced earthly assets to follow Christ, seem to be *last*. But in the kingdom of heaven, those with child-like trust and dependence on God will be received and blessed regardless of their earthly status—the last become first

Because the kingdom of heaven cannot be earned by human effort or merit, the first and the last are put on equal standing because they both enter heaven only by undeserved grace. No man stands above another when both men stand on grace.

Beloved, we must uproot any sense that we deserve anything from God or that we can earn the right to God's blessing. The rich young ruler thought he could earn his way into heaven. Peter thought his earthly sacrifice could earn him advanced heavenly compensation. And while God is faithful and just to give the rewards He has promised, even rewards are received by grace and not human merit.

The Bible does teach that there will be varying rewards in heaven based on how we live our lives on earth.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it's important to realize that even rewards are the result of grace. No man can stand reconciled before God to receive a reward apart from the grace that flows from the cross. No man can do any good from a transformed heart that has not been transformed by grace.

Heaven's joy will be accentuated not by our works or sacrifice. Heaven's joy will be accentuated by the clear-eyed perspective that "I don't deserve any of this—not one second, not one sight, not one breath in heaven! It is only by grace—undeserved grace! This should be the perspective and mantra of every believer: "I don't deserve anything good from God, every good thing is a gift of grace!" This is the safest place to keep your heart from envy and ingratitude and entitlement. The defiling, joy-assassinating attitudes of envy, ingratitude and entitlement sprout from the belief that I deserve

something better in life. But when I realize that the one thing I do deserve is God's wrath for my sin, yet God has lavished upon me His undeserved grace to have all that heaven is for all eternity, my heart is fortified by deep gratitude and joy.

Jesus wants Peter to clearly understand that the undeserved grace by which we enter the kingdom of heaven, leaves no room for comparison or envy. And so he tells a parable in chapter 20, and what we are going to see here is that...

2. **No one enters the kingdom of heaven more or less deserving than another because we cannot earn what can only be given to us by grace (20:1-16).**

#### [20:1-16]

I have to confess that when I read this parable, I find myself reacting the same as those who worked all day. It doesn't seem fair that the guy who worked one hour should get paid the same as the guy who worked all day. It doesn't seem fair because it isn't fair. Not because the landowner is unjust—he paid what he promised. It's unfair because He is generous and compassionate.

The reason the landowner keeps going back to hire more and more workers is not because he failed to accurately calculate how much help he needed. He's not hiring more workers because he needs more workers. He's hiring more workers because the workers need him. Day laborers were at the bottom of the economic scale. They had less security than slaves (who could at least expect a meal at the end of the day). To not work was to not eat.

In this parable, the landowner represents God, sovereign and free to extend His grace as He wills. He is not obligated to treat one man the same as another. **The point of the parable** is that God is not only just, doing what He promised, but exceedingly generous, extending His life-giving mercy beyond what is deserved. God's generosity exceeds justice.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 5:10; Luke 19:17, 19

The landowner keeps going back and hiring more men out of compassion and generosity to meet their need—this is a picture of God’s benevolence. His excessive payment of those who only worked one or a few hours was an act of mercy to provide that day’s meal. So those who grumble do so out of jealousy rather than injustice. In fact, even those who worked all day would have gone hungry had the landowner not graciously employed them earlier in the day. Every worker was a recipient of his benevolence. Regardless of the hour, each one enters the vineyard (the kingdom of heaven), in response to God’s gracious invitation.

In the kingdom of God, there is equality among all people not because God is fair, giving each one the same opportunities or trials. Rather we are equal because all of us are the recipients of undeserved grace. And that undeserved grace is so abundant, that the only appropriate response is gratitude, joy, and praise.

One man may serve God for eighty years through trials so severe they seem impossible to endure—sustained by God’s ever-sufficient grace. Another man may live a lifetime of selfishness and be converted on his deathbed—revealing the exceeding graciousness of God. Peter would serve Christ at great cost and die as a martyr. What a contrast to the thief on the cross who trusted Christ in perhaps the final hour of his life. Yet does one get a better heaven than the other? No. The first shall be last and the last first, sharing equally in the joy of heaven because both stand on the ground of undeserved grace.

One of the beautiful realities of heaven is that though there will be varying degrees of rewards, each person’s joy will be full and unhindered. All believers get all of heaven and the fullness of joy because their delight is not in heavenly rewards, rank, or status, but in the presence of their Father and Jesus as their supreme treasure.<sup>3</sup>

As we consider Jesus’ teaching, beloved, it is essential for us to own the mindset of heaven now as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. First, **we must put on a heart of deeply informed gratitude**. And Ironically, gratitude begins with the constant awareness that *I don’t deserve any of God’s good*

*gifts*. Then, when you experience the generous bounty of God’s gifts, you rejoice with profound gratitude. So we are to live with profuse gratitude for every good gift, both big and small, both temporal and eternal. Beloved, keep in mind that God was not obligated to create you or redeem you anymore than the landowner was obligated to choose a particular worker. Thus every good thing in this life (and the next) is a gift of undeserved grace.

Second, **we must guard our hearts from being robbed of gratitude**. We must vigilantly war against any thoughts of what we ‘deserve’ (good health, possessions, or ‘to be happy’). When we begin to think in terms of what we deserve, we have taken on a ‘master mentality’ that views God as our servant (reversing our rightful roles). But as we guard our hearts with gratitude for God’s undeserved grace and generosity, we lock the door when temptation knocks with envy and entitlement.

#### **Communion:**

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, no one comes more or less deserving than another. Rather we come together celebrating God’s undeserved grace and generosity, and rejoicing as we see it in each other’s lives. (open bread)

This road upon which we follow Jesus into the bounty of God’s grace and blessing, is a road that requires much forsaking; forsaking sin, temptation, and the love of world and its seducing pursuits. The rich young ruler couldn’t truly follow Jesus because the affections of his heart were sold out to other things. This morning, Jesus calls us to examine our hearts, to forsake any idolatry and to confess and forsake our sin in the light of God’s undeserved grace. Take hold of Jesus as the only true bread of life that satisfies and nourishes to eternal life. → **Bread** (open cup)

Isa 1:18: *“Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.”* This cleansing comes only by the blood of Christ, that covers all our sin, that grace may abound. → **Cup**

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Pg. 1144-1145.