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Matthew 20:1-16 (Parable of Equal Pay for Unequal Work)

Think of all the things that will not exist in heaven. For example: there will be no sadness in heaven. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Or there will be no sickness in heaven. We will have glorified bodies that won't get sick. There will be no death in heaven. We will live forever and ever. There's one more thing that will not be in heaven: There will be no calculators in heaven. Calculators: you know, the things where you punch in numbers and multiply and add. There will be no calculators in heaven.

Today we are looking at Matthew 20:1-16. In the verses just before this, Peter asks Jesus a question. He says, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you, what then will there be for us?" Peter quit his job as a fisherman. He gave up his income to follow Jesus around. And he asks, "What reward will I get for that?" You see Peter had his calculator out, adding up the things he had sacrificed. Jesus answers him and Jesus does say that there will be great reward for those who follow him: **"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."** So there will be great reward for following Jesus, but then Jesus tells this parable to say to Peter, "Yeah, there will be rewards, but Peter you need to be careful about this calculator attitude, because the kingdom of heaven isn't like that."

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard." A denarius was an average day's pay. It certainly wasn't a lot of money. It was barely enough to buy bread for your family. But it was considered a fair wage for a day of work. And it was a hard day of work. All day long from 6 in the morning till 6 in the evening.

About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right." He doesn't say how much he's going to pay them. He just says, "Whatever is right." This creates some suspense in the story. How much is the owner going to pay these people? The tension builds with verse 5: **"He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing."** It doesn't say how much he is going to pay them so we are left wondering, "How much is the owner going to pay these people?"

"About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" Some people spend most of their lives without Jesus.

It was just before Easter last year. I was sitting at my desk and I got a phone call. The voice on the other end said, "Hi my name is Bill. I haven't been in church in 30 or 40 years. I got brain cancer. I want to get right with God. Can you come over and talk to me?"

So I went over to his house. I said that Jesus died to take away all your sins. He rose from the dead. Believe this you will be saved." I said do you believe this? He said "Yes." I said then you will live.

A week later he died, and now he's in heaven. At least 40 years of unbelief and he comes to faith a week before he dies. By the way I asked him, "What made you think to call me?" And he reached down under his chair and pulled out a mass mailing post card. "I got this postcard from St. John's inviting me to Easter service." That's just a side note. Back to the parable.

"You also go and work in my vineyard." 90% of the day has gone by. These people are going to work for only one hour. And the big question is: "How much is the owner going to pay them for doing barely any work?"

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. Remember the denarius was a day’s wages. They only worked for one hour and they got paid for a whole day!

What this owner is really doing is he is giving to the poor. Day laborers back then lived day to day. If these people would have gotten paid for what they had actually worked, one hour, that probably would have meant that their families didn’t eat that night. The owner had mercy on them and gave them a full day’s wage. I think of Bill again. If he had died in unbelief, he would have gone to hell. But God had mercy on him. God gave him a full day’s wage and now he’s in heaven.

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. The ones who were hired first see that the ones who were hired last got a denarius. So what do they do? They pull out their calculators. They figure “If those guys got one denarius for one hour of work. We worked twelve hours, so we should get 12 denarii!” **But each one of them also received a denarius.** Think back to Bill again. He was a Christian for the last week of his life. I’ve been a Christian for all 28 years of my life. Does that mean that in heaven I’ll get 28x the reward that Bill gets? Of course not!

But think of a more realistic example. Say you have a brother. And he’s been a really selfish brother his whole life. He was always mean to you growing up. You’re parents made him go to church when you were kids but now that he’s grown up he never goes. He’s a drug addict. He only comes around when he needs something. He’s hurt your parents time after time. Probably stolen from them on multiple occasions. And now that your parents are old, he of course leaves you to do all the work. But then one day he says he’s accepted Jesus as his Savior. And you think, “Now he gets the same reward as me?” That’s the real test isn’t it? Do you believe in grace or do you believe in works? Grace means that he gets the same reward as all of us.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These men who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal with us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” They have a point don’t they? Have you ever done manual labor for twelve straight hours? And they were out in the hot sun! And these guys come in for one hour from 5 until 6, when it’s nice and cool and they get the same pay as us? You would complain. I would complain too.

And we can sometimes think this way as Christians. We get out our calculators. And start punching in numbers. I’ve gone to church every Sunday for 52 Sundays in the year. Plus midweek advent. Plus midweek Lent. Plus Bible study. Plus alter guild. Plus a week night for the church council. Times 85 years over the course of a lifetime and I deserve a bigger reward than the person sitting next to me. This is the biggest problem with calculator Christianity. Calculator Christianity creates rivalries among Christians. The kingdom of heaven is not a place for rivalries

But he answered one of them, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” The owner says “are you envious”? The ones hired first said, “**You have made them equal to us!**” You ever experience rivalries before? Your friend gets a new car, so you need to get one too. She has her kitchen redone, so you have to get yours redone too? If he says he has something, your first response is, “Yeah I’ve got that too.” If he has a reward in heaven then I want a bigger one. But the point of this parable is that there is no room for selfish rivalries in the kingdom of heaven. **So the last will be first and the first will be last.** I think what Jesus is saying here is, if we have that rivalry attitude, we are in danger of putting ourselves in last place in the kingdom of heaven.

Get rid of all self-seeking calculations. We don't look at our brothers and sisters and calculate how much more work we've done than they have. The goal is not to have a better reward in heaven than the person sitting next to me.

Let me close today by talking about something in the Bible that I've always wondered about. Sometimes in Matthew it sounds like Jesus is saying that there will be extra rewards in heaven for the things that we've done here on earth. For example, in Matthew 6 Jesus says, **"When you give to the needy... your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."** And that makes me think, maybe there are extra rewards in heaven for the things that we've done while here on earth. If that's true, then this parable is an important qualifier to that. "Yeah there will be rewards in heaven. But don't take out your calculator and start thinking how much more you're going to get than anyone else." Other people say, no the reward is not an extra reward, the reward is eternal life.

I really don't know if there will be extra rewards in heaven or not, but I've come to the conclusion that it really doesn't matter that much. It doesn't matter that much because the only reward that really matters is Jesus himself. In heaven I'll get to see Jesus and spend time with Jesus. Am I really going to care if I have a bigger house in heaven? I'll be too preoccupied enjoying the presence of Jesus. God appeared to Abraham in the Old Testament and said, **"I am your shield Abram, and your very great reward."** Jesus is my very great reward. Maybe there will be extra reward in heaven for those who have labored faithfully here on earth. God has the right to do what he wants with his own money. But whatever the extra rewards are, the real reward is Jesus. Jesus himself is my very great reward. And he's yours too. In heaven we will be in the presence of Jesus. And when you have Jesus, who cares about the calculator? Amen.