

# Rewarding Service for Jesus

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Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] Do turn with me please to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 20. Rewarding service for Jesus.

The parable in the first 15 verses of this chapter has caused difficulty for people, and there are many and varied interpretations of it among the scholars.

Indeed, some have felt that it must be in the wrong place altogether, and that it would be easier to understand if taken on its own, without what goes before it and comes after it, especially the comment about the last being first.

It seems, at first sight, to be at odds with the detail of the story, where all of them get paid the same wage. But of course, we have already seen many times by now that Matthew very carefully orders his material, and we know that it's highly unlikely that he's got it wrong and misunderstood Jesus. Never mind the fact that we believe that the Holy Spirit of God is more than capable of ordering his message to us quite properly. And in fact, as we've so often discovered, it's when we do examine the context very carefully that we find the key to the whole message.

[ 1 : 24 ] And we're going to see that this whole chapter hangs together and teaches one very clear message. It's all about a right understanding of rewarding service for Jesus.

We've already seen in chapter 19 that we're on a journey with Jesus. He's going to Jerusalem. But he's told us also that that's part of a far greater journey. A journey to the glory, verse 28 of chapter 19, of the new world.

And yet the only road to that glory is the road to the cross, to his death. And that means that for all who follow him, they too must walk the same road, the way of the cross.

forsaking this world, as he put it in chapter 16, losing your life in this world to find life in the kingdom of Christ.

And that's why in these chapters here, in Matthew's Gospel, there is a repeated refrain, follow me. And the challenge of chapter 19 is the challenge of which world you really belong to.

[ 2 : 41 ] We saw that. This world or the new world, the kingdom of Christ. And if you want the rewards of Jesus' kingdom in the new world, it means turning your back on the rewards of this world, on the very powerful relationships we have with this world that offer us reward and satisfaction.

The relationships of marriage and sex, of children, of many material things, all things that we can invest in as the source of all our reward.

But Jesus says that to everybody who does leave or is made to forgo these precious relationships for Jesus' sake, whether it's, as verse 29 says, property or family or children or spouse, whatever it is, whoever does leave the rewards of this world behind for Jesus' sake will have reward, great reward, he says, a hundredfold and eternal life.

You may appear to be last in the eyes of this world, but you will be first with the Lord Jesus Christ. God is no man's debtor.

And Jesus assures his disciples of that. He's assuring followers then and he's assuring his followers today that that is true. But there is also, as well as that wonderful encouragement, there is also warning in these words.

[ 4 : 13 ] Many who are first and think themselves first will be last. God does promise great reward to all of those who give up everything for his sake, but beware that your attitudes, even about spiritual things, like you're thinking about Christian service, for example, beware your attitudes don't become tainted by worldly thinking.

The heart, you see, even the transformed heart of the followers of Jesus is deceitful above all things.

So in verse 27, Peter says, we've left everything and followed you. What shall we have? And Jesus' answer is first to encourage Peter, yes, you will have great reward.

You'll have glory and authority ruling in the heavenly kingdom. You'll have great reward a hundredfold and you'll have eternal life, yes, but also warning.

Beware that your heart deceive you and the thought of reward and rule beguile you and ensnare you. Remember, remember, lest your hearts be possessed with being first, even in my kingdom.

[ 5 : 35 ] Remember, that that attitude will be made last in the kingdom of heaven. And in chapter 20, Jesus is warning against a wrong attitude to rewards and glory, a wrong spirit, a wrong mentality that betrays not the attitude of the kingdom of heaven, but the attitude of this world.

And he's teaching his disciples, by contrast, how the values of the kingdom of heaven stand the world's valuations on their head.

And he says, these attitudes and this mentality must be yours. This way of thinking must be your way of thinking in my church, or else you're never going to understand the truth about real rewarding service in my kingdom.

So let's look then at this chapter. First of all, in verses 1 to 16, Jesus warns against a reward mentality. A mentality that actually prevents us from enjoying the real rewards of God's kingdom because it hasn't understood the meaning of God's grace.

He's warning against a mentality that grumbles at grace. It's a simple story, isn't it? It's making a simple point. We shouldn't try and see in it an allegory with every single detail, meaning something unique.

[ 7 : 09 ] Nevertheless, the details are important and significant. First of all, we must realize that this landowner is doing a great service by hiring these day laborers.

They're not regular employees. They don't have the security of being part of a household. They're indigent workers living day to day for a daily wage only if they're fortunate enough to be hired on that day.

So they're standing in the marketplace. They're hoping for hire. They're hoping to get work so that they can eat that night and feed their families. It's rather like the picture we sometimes see of illegal immigrant workers in the large cities in the southeast hanging around waiting for some dodgy builder to come along and offer them work for the day.

So when the master of this house arrives the first thing in the morning he comes down to the marketplace and he says come and work in my vineyard and it's wonderful.

He's chosen them and he's offered them a denarius a very, very good wage for a day's work the scholars tell us. It's great news. I'll have pay tonight.

[ 8 : 20 ] I'll be able to eat. I won't go hungry today. So off they go into his vineyard no doubt very happily indeed. But then as the day progresses we see the master reappearing again and seeing more men without work and therefore without money to live on.

And whether he did really need them or not seems most unlikely especially those that he calls very late in the day. Whether he needs them or not he invites them also into his vineyard.

The place of privileged working. the place that provides a living wage. Clothes for your back. Food for your belly. And then along comes sunset the twelfth hour and it's pay time.

What happens verse 8? Well the last are called up first. And they've only worked an hour and what do you know? They get a full day's pay.

Wow! They must be pretty excited I guess. And as the other labourers who were lining up and watching and waiting for their term you can imagine them getting very excited.

[ 9 : 29 ] Wow! What are we going to get? If they got that for doing so little work wow! What are we going to get? We're working all day. And then there's the shock.

Their turn comes and well they all get a day's wage. they all get a very fair day's wage. A wage they'd been very very happy to work for.

They got everything they'd expected. They got everything they could have wanted. But verse 11 says they grumbled. They grumbled at the master of the house.

They were angry with him. They resented what he'd done. And the complaint is there in verse 12. You've made them the last equal to us who've toiled all day for you.

They didn't like it at all. They hated it. They deeply resented this principle that in this master's vineyard the last should be made as the first.

[10:36] In other words they neither understood nor appreciated the sovereign grace of this master. they grumbled at grace.

Jesus makes it explicit in verse 15. Do you see? They resented his sovereignty to do as he will. Am I not allowed to do as I choose with what's mine? And this attitude says no.

Not if it puts others before me. You're not. They resented his generosity and grace to give to the undeserving. Do you begrudge my generosity?

And the answer was yes. I do. I certainly do if it means that these last who ought to be behind me get ahead of me. Yes I do resent that Jesus.

And what's Jesus' message to his followers who say we've given up all for you Lord what will we have? Well it's clear isn't it? Don't have this kind of reward mentality.

[11:40] mercy. Beware lest you should become a grumbler against God's grace. And therefore show in fact that you've got no understanding of your master.

And therefore no real love for your master. You see that attitude betrays a totally back to front view of the values of God's kingdom.

The reality was that these men had received mercy and grace from the master who called them into his vineyard. And so their response ought to have been joy and privilege of serving him there and receiving from his hand their daily livelihood.

The reward that he promised them. But not only could they not see the value of what they had from his hand more than a fair wage. The means of life in place of their lack and their want.

they couldn't stand the fact that others should also have received what they received. Others who seemed less deserving than they were. You see Jesus is saying to his disciples and his followers, to those who have been called into his kingdom to serve in his vineyard, he's saying beware of the reward mentality that can seduce you, that can take you over and poison your attitude to God.

[13:06] Even as you labor for him in his kingdom. You see it's possible, Jesus is saying, to give up everything and follow him in such a way that in your heart of hearts, in your deepest attitude of mind, you're just harboring that attitude of a grumbler against God's grace.

An attitude that festers with resentment against your master. love. Because as you look at this world's people and even other followers of Jesus and his church, you slide back into the thinking of this world.

It's what we do, isn't it? We compare ourselves to others. We look at what we have in comparison to what they have. And we look at what they seem to have been given in comparison to us.

And we look at what we do in comparison with the little that they seem to do, and we grumble. We grumble at God because he doesn't seem to order things as they should be.

Others who do less than you seem to be ahead of you. Maybe in the church they seem to get more recognition than you do, for example. Others who are definitely not as committed as I am, seem to be blessed by God, where I seem to have all the struggles, or the hardships, or the sorrows.

[14:41] And you feel, you see, maybe it's deep down, maybe you've never exactly put it this way, maybe it's hidden under a lot of martyr-like thinking about your duty and your service and so on, but it's there all the same, you think, that's not fair.

Why don't I have that position? Why don't I have that blessing? Why don't I get those rewards from my hard service?

But you see what we're really saying when we think that? We're saying, I want the first to be first and the last to be last. We're spiritualizing it, of course.

We're using terminology that makes us think that we are dutifully serving our master. But the truth is that when we think like that, and we so often do think like that, we're not really working for the master at all.

We're working for the reward. And Jesus, you see, is saying that that attitude, that mentality totally nullifies all the good and the sacrifices that you're making.

[15:52] Because the sacrifice isn't really for Jesus' name's sake, is it? It's for yourself, it's for your own name's sake. There's all the difference in the world between giving up everything for Jesus and giving up everything for the reward.

You see, the one is true worship, it really is serving Jesus with joy, because you recognize what you've received from him, what you could never deserve. But the other, you see, is the opposite. It's actually serving in order that you will receive reward. Reward that you feel deep down, you must actually be owed. And that's not true worship, is it?

That's idolatry. That's using God to serve me. That's making me the God and God my servant. See, in chapter 19, Jesus has warned us of the very real dangers of idolatry, of the power of the relationships of this world to seduce us away.

from the prize of the new world. But here, he's exposing something far more sinister and dangerous because it's far more subtle. It's the terribly deadly danger of idolatry that lurks even in Christian service itself.

[ 17 : 13 ] Because it's so easy to slip back into the basic idolatry of the human heart. world. It's so easy just because the ways and the values of the kingdom of heaven are so utterly upside down, so utterly opposite to the values of this world.

And that's because the grace and the generosity of the master is so utterly alien to us. and we constantly drift back into the bondage of this world's thinking.

Because the natural heart will always grumble at grace. It will always resent God's sovereign grace and mercy. Because the grace of God makes the last first.

It's the great leveler. It puts us all down in the dust. And we find that so offensive. It's the death blow to all human pride, isn't it? So we resist it and we drift from it at every single turn.

But Jesus warns us, don't have a worldly reward mentality. If you do, you'll never be able to enjoy the real rewards of serving Jesus in his vineyard.

[ 18 : 36 ] That's so true, isn't it? We know that. As soon as we forget the grace and the privilege that it is, the generous heart of God towards us, as soon as we begin to think with a worldly reward mentality, we just begin to resent God.

We get angry and resentful when troubles in our life begin to afflict us, don't we? We get jealous when we feel that others in the church who ought to be behind us seem to be in front of us in all sorts of ways.

Our service becomes a burden. We lose all the joy of serving in the Lord's vineyard. We may become sullen, we may feel hard done to with the whole church, miffed with them all.

I don't get the recognition that I deserve for all that I do. But Jesus says to us, friend, I'm doing you no wrong.

Do you begrudge my generosity? Have you so quickly forgotten my grace and generosity to you who are standing idle with no purpose, with no means of life, when I called you into my vineyard and offered you the means of life?

[ 19 : 52 ] Have you forgotten? But now I see you working in the heat of the day. But who are you really slaving for?

Is it for me? Is it really for my name's sake? Because you can't really serve me without joining my joy.

The joy of a master who loves to lavish generous grace in abundance on many, many who don't deserve it. If you're really slaving for me, you'll join that joy.

If you won't, you can't really be slaving for me at all. Just like the parable of the two sons, isn't it? The older son, all these years I've been slaving for you.

But no, he wasn't slaving for his father. All these years he was working for the fatted calf. That's what he wanted. He'd really been slaving for himself, to put himself first.

[ 20 : 58 ] And Jesus says, not in my kingdom. That attitude will be put last. If that's you, you won't find yourself at the forefront of the reward, says Jesus.

You find yourself way in the background. Beware a reward mentality. But, this chapter shows us the poor disciples are just like us.

They're so slow to get the message. In verses 17 and 18, Jesus could not be more explicit, showing how utterly different his whole attitude was.

He repeats for the third time the very heart of his own mission. He points them to the cross. He points them to the way of the cross. As if to say, look, this is what I'm talking about. This is the way of the glory.

This is the way of my kingdom. The way up is down. The way of life is death. The way of being first is putting yourself last. The only way to be first and great is to be made last.

[ 22 : 05 ] It's to be made humiliated in the eyes of the world. It's such a contrast. And yet, verse 20 is quite staggering, isn't it? Mrs. Zebedee and James and John.

And Jesus takes up this request and issues a second warning. Not so much about rewards, but warning this time against a rule mentality, an authority and glory mentality.

A mentality that hasn't understood the meaning of God's glory, nor therefore the glory of true discipleship. A mentality that grasps at wielding the glory and the authority of man. Jesus has promised not just rewards, but he has promised authority and rule, twelve thrones. And because in our hearts we still really think like the world, that the first will be first, well, Mrs. Zebedee in cohorts, cahoots rather, with her two sons, she decides to go for gold, doesn't she? You know those thrones, Jesus, you're talking about? Well, we've been thinking about those. I like the sound of that. In fact, we rather thought that the ones closest to you would be really special, and perhaps James and John could have those.

[ 23 : 23 ] Maybe, you know, we could put a little brass plaque on them just with their names to save any arguments later on. Well, it's very easy, isn't it, for us to be superior and scornful.

But let's be fair to them. They were right to desire glory with Jesus. He had promised them that. They would be rulers with authority, they'd be apostles in his church, they were to be judges of his kingdom.

But again, you see, the question is this, what kind of glory? The glory of Jesus and his kingdom's glory, or the glory of this world and its values?

What kind of rule and authority from these thrones? Is it the world's power that demands submission and subjection that puts self first? Or is it Jesus' kingdom's power that manifests itself in slavery and in service to others that puts self last?

You see, in verse 22, Jesus says they didn't really understand what they were asking for. Can you drink my cup, he says? He's clearly referring to what he's spoken about on several occasions about his suffering and death.

[ 24 : 39 ] Well, yes, they say, I'm sure they were sincere. But the truth is, they were still totally naive, weren't they? They hadn't grasped yet the meaning of Jesus' death.

They hadn't grasped that all the true glory of Jesus comes not just after his suffering and death, but comes through his suffering and death.

Indeed, it is his suffering and death. That is his glory. Not just James and John who misunderstood. Verse 24 is clear. The rest of the disciples were just the same.

They were indignant. They were jealous. They were just like the workers in the vineyard who grumbled. And for the same reason. Because you can't understand truly the grace of God, nor the glory of God, lest you understand him properly.

It's only when you come to terms with the truth about the cross of Jesus that you can begin to make sense of God's wonderful grace made known in Christ and the fullness of God's glory made known in Christ in his death on the cross.

[ 25 : 59 ] And that's why you see in the midst of these two warnings here in the chapter not to have a reward mentality and not to have a rule and authority mentality like the world Jesus points to a total contrast pointing to himself and his way of the cross.

He points us to have not a reward mentality not a rule and power mentality but a redeemer mentality.

not a mentality that grumbles jealously at the grace of God. Not a mentality that grasps for worldly rule and authority, the glory of man.

No, a mentality that stoops to serve. Look at me, says Jesus. Listen to me. Listen again. For the third time he makes it absolutely clear to them that his journey to glory, to the new world where he sits on his glorious throne is the journey to the cross.

Verse 18. You'll be delivered, condemned, handed over to apostate pagan Gentiles, flogged, killed in the cruelest, most degrading fashion the world has ever seen.

[ 27 : 22 ] That's my mentality, says Jesus. That's the mentality of my kingdom. It's a redeemer mentality. The glory of God is in the very action of Jesus' self-giving death.

That's his glory. And the grace and mercy of God is in the achievement of that death. Verse 28 says his death is a self-giving service to be a ransom for many.

It's a death in the place of many to redeem many. It's recalling Isaiah chapter 53 and the suffering servant who would make many to be counted righteous because he bears their iniquities, because he bears the sins of many.

Because he who was first in the cosmos, who was ruler of everything, made himself nothing, made himself last for the sake of the many.

And that, Jesus says, is the way to true grace. That is the way of true glory. It's the very antithesis of the way of this world, where the first shall be first, and the last shall be kept last.

[ 28 : 42 ] That's man's view of power and glory. That's God made in our image. But not so, says Jesus, with this God. Not so with the one true God, he stoops to serve.

That's why this God, the God of Scripture, is so offensive to the world, whether it's the secular world or the religious world. No secularist can understand that kind of power.

No Jew could stomach this degradation of God or God's name. God's stooping, God on a cross, it's anathema to a Jew then or today.

No Muslim could stomach such a view of God. That's weakness, that's not strength. To be despised, certainly not glorified.

Look at what we've seen in the world these past weeks. If to a Muslim, for the prophet Muhammad to be in any way ridiculed, is an absolute abomination.

[ 29 : 51 ] How much more for God himself to be beaten, flogged, crucified. It's anathema. The world cannot stand or tolerate or understand this kind of God.

But Jesus says, this is the one true God. This is the God of glory in all his glory. This is our God, the servant king.

You see, the world and the world of religion can't stomach this God. Scorns his glory, grumbles at his grace, but Jesus says in verse 26, not so with you.

You are not to worship the glory of this world that puts the first first and keeps the last last. No, as with the master, so with his servants. Verse 27, whoever would be first among you must be his slave, must be lost.

You stoop to serve. Because that's what people with a redeemer mentality do. Because they understand true grace, they cherish grace, they understand true glory, and they embrace that kind of glory.

[ 31 : 09 ] glory. You know, the reason that we have such wrong views of rewards and of glory, ultimately because we've got a wrong view of God.

Constantly, we remake God in our own image, instead of seeing him for who he really is and reveals himself to be in Jesus. But Jesus is saying, look at me. Open your eyes.

He who has seen me has seen the Father. Father, this is your God. And just as in chapter 19 we saw that to have a right understanding of God's commands, we must have a right understanding of the God whose commands they are.

So here, to have a right understanding of rewards and glory, we have to have a right understanding of the grace and generosity of the rewarder and of his true glory and rule, which is a giving glory, not a grabbing glory.

Even as believers, isn't it true that we so easily fall back into our natural idolatry, we exchange the truth about God for a lie of our own imagining?

[ 32 : 28 ] That's why we grumble like the servants did in verse 11, because we misunderstand the generosity and the grace of God. We don't understand the master. That's why we're indignant and jealous of others in the church, like the disciples were in verse 24, because we don't understand the true glory of our master, and therefore we don't understand what true glory in discipleship is.

That's why we rebuke the seemingly insignificant, like the crowd did in verse 31, because we totally underestimate the compassion and pity in the heart of this, the God of glory.

But Jesus says, look at me, listen to me, understand in me the heart and the mind of the one true God of glory and grace and generosity.

Friends, you and I, we need to hear that again and again and again and again. The Jesus that we see here on earth and read about in scripture, he's not different from the Jesus who's enthroned in glory and heaven.

God's self-humbling, his serving heart is not in contrast to his true nature. God, as we see him in the flesh of Jesus Christ, is the fullness of the glory of the God of heaven, of God almighty.

[ 34 : 05 ] This is our God. Meekness as well as majesty, stooping to serve. He's a redeemer God.

God. And he bids those who follow him to share that same glory now. Just as he bids us to share his glory in the kingdom forever.

Because what is forever beautified in glory above is the glory of the redeemer who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

That is the glory that fills heaven. Not some different glory. This is our God. And you see, loving this kind of God, rejoicing in his generosity and compassion and gladly sharing in his glory, the glory that gives up everything and puts ourselves last in order to serve the kingdom.

That is what tells if we will be truly near him and his kingdom like James and John wanted to be. In essence, James and John had the highest desire of all, to be near Jesus forever.

[ 35 : 38 ] There is no higher desire. But if we would be near him then and share his glory then, we must be near him now and share the same kind of glory that he was glorified with on earth.

We sang, so shall we bear your image here and share your throne above. To share his throne, we must share his cross. And our glory and our joy and our reward will be to be near him in his cross. Because that is to share the Redeemer's heart. That is to share true glory. It's so hard for us to see that.

It's so hard for us to live it. Indeed, it is impossible with men because God is so utterly other than us and his values and his kingdom so utterly upside down with our natural hearts.

But it's not impossible with God. Not if we ask him to open our eyes. And that's the wonderful encouragement of the little epilogue to the story in verses 29 to 34 with the blind men.

[ 36 : 54 ] Do you see? The only ones who can see things clearly in this chapter are these two blind men. It's a wonderful irony, but it's a wonderful grace of God.

You see, they grasp, don't they, the wonderfully generous grace and mercy of God in Christ. They cry out to Jesus, God's Messiah King, the Son of David, the Lord, and they seek his generous grace and mercy and they find it.

They find a king who is willing to stoop to serve blind beggars when everybody else wanted to lift him on a pedestal and have nothing to do with such trash.

And they therefore grasp the glory and the reward of true discipleship. Do you see? Having received grace and mercy from Jesus, all they want is to be near him now.

Not just in the glory to come, but now. Do you see? Immediately they receive their sight and key word in the chapter. They followed him. While the poor disciples still thought that they were serving Jesus in the hopes of receiving a reward from him, these blind beggars knew that they had already received everything from Jesus so that they might follow him as Lord.

[ 38 : 21 ] And that's the gospel of Jesus. It rejoices in grace. and that's genuine gospel discipleship. Its glory is to serve him and to serve his kingdom's glory now to follow him.

And friends, we need to see that. Every one of us here in this church this morning, every one of us tends by nature to have a reward mentality. And you know, it stops us doing so many things.

it stops us sharing in the joy of sharing God's lavish grace with others now. We want to keep it to ourselves. It makes us grumble far too often about our own lot in life.

All of us tend to have also a glory and rule mentality. It makes us envious. It makes us bitter about others who seem to be ahead of us, seem to be above us in church life and should be behind us.

So we need to learn, don't we, from these two blind men. We need to pray with them every single day, Lord, let our eyes be opened.

[ 39 : 37 ] Let our eyes be opened to see the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. We need to pray, Lord, let our eyes be opened, that we might follow the Redeemer with a Redeemer mentality.

rejoicing in the Redeemer's kingdom, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. We need to pray, Lord, open my eyes.

Whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.

me. Let's pray. Our gracious God and Heavenly Father, we rejoice in your glory, that of the Redeemer King, who came from the glory of heaven to serve the lowest of this earth.

love. Open our eyes, we pray, to see the sheer joy and wonder and delight and reward that it is to be called into your vineyard, and the wonder of serving for your namesake now.

[ 41 : 08 ] Give us in our hearts, we pray, no greater desire than to be near Jesus today, and every day as we walk his road of glory, the road of the cross, the road of making ourselves last, that the redeeming love of Jesus Christ may be broken open to this world, that many men and women and boys and girls may see through us the glory of our servant King, who we ask it in his name.

Amen. Amen.