

# THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

## The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

### STUDY NINETEEN

## Let's Let God Be God

*Matthew 20:1–16*

*Your life moves eastward toward pain,  
Another's life westward toward gain,  
Regardless of how those differences are perceived;  
It's your acceptance of God's compass,  
Not your feelings about fairness,  
That determines the rewards you'll receive.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**T**HAT'S *not fair!* From small children to mature adults, humans have rehearsed this refrain since the dawn of creation. God prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit . . . *that's not fair!* He accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's . . . *that's not fair!* Esau would receive the inheritance over Jacob . . . *that's not fair!*

Now let's hit a little closer to home . . . your lazy colleague gets the promotion over you . . . *that's not fair!* Your apathetic sibling gets a larger inheritance than you . . . *that's not fair!* Though you've been living clean, your report reads malignant while your friend's, who's been living dirty, reads benign . . . *that's not fair!*

The parasite of comparison often infects the mind causing us to put self in the judge's seat to determine what's fair and what isn't. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we will look at one of Jesus' most famous stories to learn what true fairness actually means—not according to us but according to God.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

## Let's Let God Be God

*Matthew 20:1–16*



### PREPARE YOUR HEART

Write your own prayer to God, thanking Him for His generosity toward you.



### TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus didn't always offer His wisdom. At times, He let Himself be prompted by others. In Matthew 20:1–16, He tells a story built upon a conversation He had with a rich man starting in 19:16. What is the first word of *Matthew 20:1*? How does this word show a connection to the preceding context?

Jesus used His encounter with the rich, young man to teach His disciples an important lesson: “But many who are first will be last; and the last, first” (Matthew 19:30 NASB). Jesus knew this statement confused His friends, so He illustrated it by telling a story about something very familiar to most of us: a long day of hard work.



### Observation: Who's in the Parable?

Like we've seen previously, Jesus often compared the kingdom to a seemingly simple image that listeners would have understood, but He would use this comparison to communicate a complex idea. To understand what this idea means, we must first observe what the parable says.<sup>1</sup>



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*Matthew 20:1–16*

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Read the *parable in Matthew 20:1–16* and list the characters.

According to [20:2](#), How much did the landowner agree to pay the workers he hired at the beginning of the day?

According to [20:4](#), what did the landowner say he would pay the workers he hired at 9:00 in the morning?



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Use the chart below to note each worker’s start time and wages as well as the order the owner paid the workers.

Worker’s Start Time	Worker’s Wages	Owner’s Order of Payment

How did the workers hired at the beginning of the day respond in [20:11–12](#) to the actions of the landowner?

*Mistake number one: “They assumed.” That’s what we do every day of our lives. We assume, we assume, we assume, we assume. And I can assure you, in life, you can never assume anything. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

Now that we’ve observed the key parts of the parable to see the flow of the drama, we can look backstage and learn what this illustration teaches about the kingdom of heaven.



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### Interpretation: What's the Point of the Parable?

When interpreting a parable, it can feel tempting to look for hidden meaning in every character, image, or word. But Jesus usually used each parable to communicate *one timeless truth*. Our interpretations should lead us to understand this main idea and what it means for us today.

What do the major images in Jesus' parable represent? Use your *Bible study tools* to guide you through these interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

Landowner: \_\_\_\_\_

Workers: \_\_\_\_\_

Wages: \_\_\_\_\_

Walk in the sandals of the worker hired early in the day. You woke up at dawn to ensure you arrived at the market early enough to receive work, and you gave your best effort throughout the day to prove that you were a reliable worker who could be hired again. At the end of the day, your sweat-soaked cloak sticks to your skin, your muscles ache, and your eyes feel heavy.

When it's time to reap the reward for your hard work, the foreman places in your hand the same amount as the worker hired *an hour ago*! If *he* gets a day's wage for just one hour of work in the cool evening, shouldn't you get *far more*? . . . *That's not fair!*

But in *Matthew 20:13–15*, Jesus approved of the owner's actions. Why?

*God's grace is just and generous. The fact that anybody got hired is grace. The fact that anybody made anything is grace—regardless of the hours. The fact that you can come to know Christ and have eternal life is grace—regardless of what life may throw at you, regardless of what God may permit. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



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A wooden translation of the latter part of Matthew 20:15 says, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” In what ways does this parable reveal God’s goodness? Why might someone look at God’s generous deeds as “evil”?

Did you notice how Jesus concluded His parable in [20:16](#) the same way he introduced it in [19:30](#)? Why did Jesus frame His story this way? What does this tell us about the main idea of the parable? And what does this parable mean for Christians today? For some help, see pages 126 of Pastor Chuck’s commentary *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

While the worker hired at the beginning of the day felt slighted by the landowner, the worker hired at the end of the day must have been brimming with gratitude because of the act of generosity he received. **How wonderful it is that God offers this same generosity today!**



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### Correlation: The Example of Job

If anyone had the right to shout, “*That’s not fair!*” it was Job, and his example proves very instructive. Job was righteous and “blameless—a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil” (Job 1:1). Despite Job’s spotless character, he faced some truly horrendous circumstances. Read [1:13–19](#) and summarize what happened to him.

How did Job initially respond to these circumstances in [1:20–22](#); [2:9–10](#)?

As time went on, Job questioned whether God had treated him fairly, and after some time, God addressed Job in a direct and powerful way. Read [38:1–7](#) and summarize God’s words to Job. How did Job respond to God in [40:3–5](#)?

What a powerful example! What would it look like for us to adopt an attitude more like Job’s and apply the truths of Jesus’ parable to our lives?



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### Application: Where Are We in the Parable?

Pastor Chuck encourages us to reflect on our lives and consider where we fit in Jesus' parable. We're all among the laborers—recipients of God's generosity—but which camp?

Perhaps, your life is a colorful canvas painted with countless portraits of God's grace. You sympathize with those workers who arrived at the eleventh hour but still received a full day's pay. Or maybe you feel like the first workers—as though you've given so much for God, but it just seems you never get a fair shake. Possibly, you land somewhere in the middle.

With which of these workers do you identify the most? What experiences have caused you to feel this way?

What lesson does God want to teach you through this parable? What would it look like for you to appropriately respond to this lesson today?

It's tempting to assume we know what's fair and what isn't. But we humans have a limited perspective, and what seems unfair to us likely is a powerful example of God's grace. And if not for this grace, every single one of us would face the full judgment of God because of our sin against Him. *That* would be fair, but thankfully, we serve a merciful and generous King.

So let's let God be God!





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### A FINAL PRAYER

As you end your time in God's Word today, use this prayer from Pastor Chuck to ask God to help apply this passage to your life:

*We tend, our Father, to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves with others. I pray that You would catch us up short before we allow that to continue. . . . Give us the mind of Christ that we might see things from His perspective. Help us come to terms with what is right, as difficult as it is.*

### ENDNOTES

1. For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck, consult our online instructional web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." This page provides you an introduction to four important skills in Bible study—observation, interpretation, correlation, and application—along with other helpful study tips. You can also follow the link to purchase a copy of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, on which our studies are based.
2. Other tools we recommend are a whole-Bible commentary, such as the two-volume *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary is the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. A variety of versions of the Bible are available at [BibleGateway.com](#), and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at [netbible.org](#).

