

Matthew: His Life And His Gospel

– Part 13

Matthew 20:1-16 [New King James] *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’ So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the labourers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”*

This parable, apart from the method of payment, describes the kind of thing that frequently happens at certain times in Palestine.

The grape harvest towards the end of September is closely followed by the autumn rains, so if the grapes are not harvested before the rains break, they are ruined. So any worker is welcome even if they only give an hour’s work.

The pay offered was perfectly normal for a day’s wage of a working man, but was not a wage that left any margin for savings.

The men who stood in the market place were waiting to be offered work.

The fact that some of them stood on until the evening is proof of how desperately they wanted work.

These men were hired labourers, the lowest class of worker. Even slaves or servants were to some extent attached to a family and never be in any imminent danger of starvation in normal times.

It is very different for the hired day-labourers, they were entirely at the mercy of chance employment. If they were not employed for just one day their family would go hungry, for there was little to spare out of a denarius a day for any savings for hard times.

The hours in the parable are normal Jewish hours, the day began at sunrise, at 6am, so the third hour was 9am, the sixth hour twelve midday, and the eleventh hour 5pm.

This parable goes to the heart of Christian religion.

It is in one sense a warning to the disciples who had the privilege of coming into the Christian fellowship right at the beginning.

Other people will enter the Christian fellowship later. Jesus Christ told His disciples, “you as my first disciples must not claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before others.”

It was a warning to the Jews who knew that they were the chosen people and looked down on Gentiles.

It tells us that no matter if a person enters the Christian Church in their youth or old age, they will find equal love and comfort from the Eternal Creator God.

This parable tells us that the whole point of work done for Jesus Christ is the spirit in which it is done.

The early labourers made a contract with the Master, “*if you give us so much pay we will work for you.*”

But in the case of those engaged later there was no word of contract or agreement, all they wanted was a chance to work, they were willing to leave the reward to the Master.

A person is **not** a true Christian if their first concern is the reward they will receive, only to experience the thrill of working for Jesus Christ and the joy of being able to serve other human beings.

This parable is about salvation, a strong teaching about grace, God’s generosity, [verse 15].

We should **not** begrudge those who turn to God in the last moments of life, because in reality no-one deserves eternal life, it is a gift from God, [**Romans 6:23**].

Matthew 20:17-19 [New King James] “*Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.’*”

This is the third time that Jesus Christ warned the disciples that He was on the way to the cross, [**Matthew 16:21; Matthew 17:22-23**].

There was an atmosphere of tenseness and certain foreboding in the group of disciples.

Mark tells us that Jesus Christ was walking ahead by Himself and the disciples were amazed and afraid, [Mark 10:32-34]. They did not understand what was happening. Here Jesus Christ deliberately and open-eyed sets out for Jerusalem and the cross.

Every possible form of pain was about to be faced by Jesus Christ, physical and mental.

Jesus Christ was betrayed into the hands of the chief priest and scribes by Judas.

Jesus Christ suffered the broken heart of seeing the disloyalty of friends.

He was condemned to death, suffered injustice, mocked by the Roman soldiers, suffered indignity and humiliation of deliberate insults.

Tortured with the Roman scourge and finally crucified.

Yet Jesus Christ finishes His words to the disciples with the confident assertion of the resurrection.

Matthew 20:20-28 [New King James] “*Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to Him, ‘Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.’ But Jesus answered and said, ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to*

*drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ So He said to them, ‘You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.’ And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; **but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.** And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a **ransom** for many.’”*

Here we see the worldly ambition of the disciples in action, they had failed to grasp Jesus Christ’s previous teaching on rewards, [Matthew 19:16-30] and eternal life, [Matthew 20:1-16]. They failed to understand the suffering they must face before living in the glory of the Kingdom of God, the created family of God.

James would be put to death because of his faith, [Acts 12:1-2] and John would be exiled to the island of Patmos because of his preaching the words of Jesus Christ, [Revelation 1:9].

Jesus Christ was showing that He was under the authority of God the Father, who alone makes the decisions about leadership in the Kingdom of God.

Such rewards are **not** granted as favours, they are for those who have maintained their commitment to Jesus Christ in spite of severe trials, [verse 23].

The other disciples were upset with James and John for trying to grab the top positions, all the disciples wanted to be the greatest, [Matthew 18:1].

Jesus Christ taught that the greatest person in the Kingdom of God would be the person who served the most.

Authority is given **not** for self-importance, ambition, or respect, but for useful service to God and all human beings.

Jesus Christ then describes leadership from a new perspective, instead of using people we are to serve them. A real leader has the heart of a servant.

Servant leaders appreciate others’ worth and realise that they are **not** above doing any job.

If we see something needs to be done, do not wait to be asked, take the initiative and do it like a faithful servant.

A ransom was the price paid to release a slave from bondage. Jesus Christ often told His disciples that He must die, but here He tells them why, to redeem all people from the bondage of sin and death.

The disciples thought that as long as Jesus Christ was alive, He could save them. But Jesus Christ revealed that only His death would save them and the rest of the world.

Matthew 20:29-34 [New King James] *“Now as they went out of Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, ‘Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!’ Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, ‘Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!’ So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, that our eyes may be opened.’ So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him.”*

The blind men called Jesus Christ the “*Son of David*” because the Jews knew that the Messiah would be a descendent of King David, [Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6].

These blind beggars could tell that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, because of what they heard He was doing.

Yet the religious leaders who saw Jesus Christ's miracles were blind to His true identity, refusing to open their eyes to the truth.

Seeing with our eyes does not guarantee seeing with our heart and mind.

Although Jesus Christ was concerned about the coming events in Jerusalem, He demonstrated what He had just taught about service, [Matthew 20:28] by stopping to care for the blind men.

Matthew 21:1-5 [New King James] *“Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord has need of them,” and immediately he will send them.’ All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.”’”*

Matthew mentioned a donkey and a colt, while the other gospels mention only the colt. This was the same event but Matthew focuses on the prophecy in **Zechariah 9:9** where donkey and colt are mentioned, thus giving his Jewish readers another indication that Jesus Christ's actions fulfilled the prophet's words that referred to the Messiah.

Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt confirms His Messianic Royalty as well as His humility.

Matthew 21:6-11 [New King James] *“So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” Hosanna in the highest!’ And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, ‘Who is this?’ So the multitudes said, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.’”*

The crowds, from all over the world, were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus Christ could not have chosen a more dramatic moment, it was into a city surging with people, who were keyed up with religious expectations that He came.

This was not a sudden decision of Jesus Christ, He had prepared in advance for this moment.

Jesus Christ sent His disciples into the village of Bethany, [Mark 11:1] where He had already arranged that the ass and her foal would be waiting for Him. The password phrase was *“the master needs them”* by which the owner would know that the hour had come which Jesus Christ had arranged, [Mark 11:1-7]. The fact that no-one had ever ridden on the colt was significant, it made it specially suitable for sacred purposes.

[Numbers 19:2; Deuteronomy 21:3] In the ceremonies of cleansing it must be a beast upon which never was placed a yoke.

The cart on which the ark of the Lord was carried had to be a vehicle which had never been used for any other purpose, [1 Samuel 6:7-8].

The crowd received Jesus Christ like a king, and a pilgrim, [Psalms 118:26] who came to the feast.

“Hosanna” means “save now,” it was the cry for help which a people made in distress addressed to their king or their god.

Matthew 21:12-13 [New King James] *“Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” but you have made it a “den of thieves.”’”*

This was the second time that Jesus Christ cleared the Temple, [**John 2:13-17**]. The scene of this incident is the Court of the Gentiles into which anyone might come for prayer but it was crowded with money changers, the temple tax could only be paid in shekels, and those selling animals for sacrifice that had to be without blemish. There were official inspectors of the animals, and it was to all intents and purposes certain that they would reject any animal bought outside the temple and direct them to the temple stalls and booths where the cost of the animals was extremely high, great extortion and exploitation especially of the poor people.

Matthew 21:14-17 [New King James] *“Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant and said to Him, ‘Do You hear what these are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes. Have you never read, “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise?”’ Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.”*

“The children” very often a rabbi’s disciples were called his children. When we read the account in Luke, we see it was the disciples whom the Pharisees wanted Jesus Christ to silence.

Yet Matthew makes use of the quotation from **Psalms 8:2** makes it clear that He had real children in mind, who would normally be turned out by Temple police. But this was **not** an ordinary day in the Temple!

Matthew 21:18-22 [New King James] *“Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, ‘Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, ‘How did the fig tree wither away so soon?’ So Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, “Be removed and be cast into the sea,” it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.’”*

Why did Jesus Christ curse the fig tree? This was not a thoughtless, angry act but an acted out parable. **Jesus Christ was showing His anger at religion without substance. Just as the fig tree looked good and fruitful at a distance but was without fruit on close examination, so the Temple looked impressive at first glance, but its sacrifices and other activities were hollow because they were not done to worship God sincerely, [Matthew 21:43], not bearing “fruit” of the Holy Spirit, [Galatians 5:22-25] in the lives of the people.**

If we only appear to have faith without putting it to work in our lives we are like the fig tree that withered and died, [**James 2:14-26**].

Matthew 21:23-27 [New King James] *“Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?’ But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?’ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” He will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus and said, ‘We do not know.’ And He said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’”*

At that time Jesus Christ was not prepared to give them the direct answer that His authority came from the fact that He was the Son of God. It would have precipitated the end. There were still actions to be done, and still teaching to be given. So Jesus Christ countered the question of

the Jewish authorities with a question of His own, a question which placed them in a dilemma. The people were convinced that John was the messenger of God; if they denied outright that John's message came from God, they would have to bear the anger of the people. As members of the Sanhedrin, it was part of their duty to distinguish between true and false prophets.

If they answered the question they would have to admit that Jesus Christ was the Messiah because that was part of the teaching of John the Baptist, [**John 1:24-32; Matthew 3:5-17**].

Matthew 21:28-32 [New King James] *“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’’ He answered and said, ‘‘I will not,’’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘‘I go, sir,’’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’’ They said to Him, ‘‘The first.’’ Jesus said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.’’*

This parable tells us of two very common classes of people in this world.

First there are people who make promises but their actions fail to keep that promise.

Other people just refused what was asked of them, but then changed their minds and fulfilled what was asked.

While one of these sons was preferred, neither were anything like perfect.

This parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of performance, and fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds.

The mark of a Christian is obedience graciously and courteously given, and whose actions match our words.

Matthew 21:33-41 [New King James] *“Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?’ They said to Him, ‘He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.’”*

The main elements in this parable are, the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the Jewish leaders, the landowners servants, the prophets and priests who remained faithful to God and preached to Israel, the Son is Jesus Christ, [**Matthew 21:38**], the other tenants the Gentiles, Jesus Christ was exposing the religious leaders' murderous plot, [**Matthew 21:45**].

When the chief priests and Pharisees heard this parable they knew that Jesus Christ was speaking about them, and tried to find a way to silence Him, but feared the reaction of the people who regarded Jesus Christ as a prophet.

This parable has much to tell us about God the Father, Jesus Christ and human privilege.

It tells us about God's trust in human beings –

The owner of the vineyard, God, trusted it to the human cultivators. He did not even stand over them to exercise a police-like supervision. He went away and left them with their task.

It tells us of God's patience –

The master sent messenger after messenger, not taking vengeance when the first messenger was ill-treated.

It tells us of God's judgement –

In the end the master of the vineyard took the vineyard from the cultivators and gave it to others.

God's sternest judgement is when He takes out of our hands the task which He meant us to do. A person has sunk to their lowest level when they become useless to God.

It tells us about human beings –

How great a privilege it is to be a human being. The vineyard was equipped with everything that made the work of the cultivators easy to produce fruit.

God does not only give us a task to do, He also gives us the means whereby we can be fruitful and complete the task we have been given.

Galatians 5:22-25 [New King James] *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”*

It is through the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us that we can fulfil the task given to every human being made in the “image” [Hebrew “tselem” meaning “material representation”] of God to become also in His “likeness” [Hebrew “demûwth” meaning manner and character] of God, [Genesis 1:26-27].

This “likeness” and the “fruits” of the Holy Spirit are the same.

This process begins with receiving the Holy Spirit which is only given to those who ask for Him, [Luke 11:13] and obey God, [Acts 5:32].

It tells us about human freedom –

The master left the cultivators to do the task as they liked. God is no tyrannical task-master. He is like a wise leader who allocates a task and then trusts the person to do it.

It tells us about human accountability –

For all humans there will come a day of reckoning, and we are answerable for the way in which we carried out the task which God gave us to do, [2 Corinthians 5:10].

It tells us of the deliberateness of human sin –

In this parable the cultivators carry out a deliberate policy of rebellion and disobedience towards the master. Sin is deliberate opposition to God. It is deliberate taking of our way, when we know quite well what the way of God is, [Romans 1:18-25].

It tells us much about Jesus Christ –

It tells us of the claim of Jesus Christ who quite clearly lifts Himself out of the succession of the prophets. Those who came before Him were messengers of God, they were servants of God, Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

This parable contains one of the clearest claims of Jesus Christ ever made to be unique, to be different from even the greatest of the prophets who went before Him. **Being the Son of God as well as a prophet sent by God.**

It tells us of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ –

The parable makes it clear that Jesus Christ knew what lay ahead for Him. In the parable the hands of wicked men killed the son. Jesus Christ was never in any doubt of what lay ahead. Jesus Christ did **not** die because He was compelled to die, He went willingly open-eyed to His death, [2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2; 1 Peter 1:18-20; Revelation 13:8].

Jesus Christ in total agreement with God the Father, knew of the death He would face, when He was God the Word and Creator of all things including human beings, [John 1:1-3, 14].

Matthew 21:42-46 [New King James] *“Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes”? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.’ Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.”*

This vineyard parable concludes with a picture of Jesus Christ being a capstone or cornerstone, [Psalms 118:22].

A *“capstone”* which is the key stone in the top of an archway that holds all the stones of the arch together.

Colossians 1:17 [NIV] *“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”*

Jesus Christ was not only the Creator of all things, He also holds it all together.

“Cornerstone” this is the sure foundational stone on the corner of a building, [Isaiah 28:16] that can cause a person to stumble if they are not looking carefully where they are walking, [1 Corinthians 1:23].

This is also referring to the sure foundation, or rock, [Matthew 7:24-25; 1 Peter 2:7-8; 1 Corinthians 10:4; Exodus 17:6; Deuteronomy 32:4].

The people saw Jesus Christ as a great prophet, but chief priests and the Pharisees hated Jesus Christ because it exposed them in a true light, destroying the façade they wanted the people to see.