

SERVANTS BY DESIGN

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

Do you ever ask yourself this question: "What on earth am I here for?" Rick Warren, author of The Purpose-Driven Life has asked that question to millions of people worldwide. So why are you here? What is your purpose? In Matthew chapter twenty Jesus begins by telling a story about a man who gave people a reason to live, a purpose in life. We are all servants by design. As we walk through this chapter together, we'll follow the outline below:

- I. The Parable of Jesus about Our Service (vv. 1-16)**
- II. The Patience of Jesus toward His Servant (vv. 17-29)**
- III. The Pity of Jesus toward the Suffering (vv. 30-34)**

I. The Parable of Jesus about Our Service (vv. 1-16)

As we've noted, Matthew's Gospel is jam-packed with the parables of Jesus. And why not? Parables seem to be the favorite teaching method our Lord pursued. I'm glad He did. I am confident the people of His day liked parables as well. This particular parable focuses on our service to God.

It's very important to remember that in this parable, Jesus is referring to our service, not our salvation. It deals with our deeds for Christ instead of our deliverance from corruption. (Yet our salvation is not based on our service or deeds. Our salvation is based on our faith!)

Let's look first at the analogy of the parable. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is similar to a landowner who hires men to go out into the field and work in his vineyard. This surely was no ordinary man for he had room in his vineyards to continue hiring working crews even up until the last hour before sundown (v. 6). Thus, he was a very rich landowner.

The agreement reached between himself and the first crew at daybreak is a for a "penny a day" (v. 2). The term "denarius" indicated a standard sum for a full day's work. Sometimes regular work and fair wages were an exception. Understandably, the men were excited about the opportunity, immediately heading out to the vineyard to begin work.

There is a lesson for us here. Once we've given our hearts to Christ and entered into God's Kingdom, excitement should flood our lives. We should immediately head for the vineyard and begin to fulfill God's purpose for our lives. That may be the first word we need to hear—*since we are designed to serve, then let's do it; let's serve!*

Because the vineyard was massive, the landowner went back to the marketplace to find more manpower (v. 3). There is no discussion of an agreed amount the servants would receive. Instead, there was a promise: "Whatsoever is right I will give you" (v. 4). Sometimes we will not know the produce of our service and labor for the Lord. There is but a promise. But on such promises and nothing more, the faithful servant is to trust.

Three hours later, the landowner returned to pick up another crew (v. 5). He did so again in three more hours. But the strangest thing was, the landowner went back an hour before quitting time and hired still others who hadn't yet found work (vv. 6-7). After a short inquiry, the workers headed out for only a few minutes of work. They too received the promise "whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive" (v. 7).

Reflection Connection

Does the parable of the hired servants teach a works-salvation message? Why or why not? Do you think the parable negates kingdom work altogether? Please be specific.



Reflection Connection

Justice is a basic concern when it comes to labor law. Was the landowner insensitive about labor law when he promised so much too the ones who worked for so little a time? How would you feel if you had worked all day and got the same as one who worked less than an hour?

The custom of those days demanded that a servant be paid at the end of his day's work, offering his family assurance for necessary supplies the following day. So, Jesus said, "When even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire..." (v. 8). The men began to form a line, and the steward carefully made sure the last ones hired were the first ones paid (v. 8b).

Note again that the first ones to receive their wages had been in the field barely an hour if even that. On only a promise, they faithfully went into the field to work. The landowner was generous; they received a full day's wage much to their delight (v. 9). Their family could eat tomorrow!

On only a promise, they faithfully went to work.

As the ones who worked so long edged toward the front of the line, their expectations began to excite them. They thought if the others received the same wage as they were promised but worked ever so little compared to them, what nice bonuses they themselves deserved! To their surprise, and thorough disappointment, as they held their hand out for their wages, they "received every man a penny"—the same amount as the crew who served but a miserable moment in the cool of the day (v. 9). This caused them to complain: "when they received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house" (v. 11).

When they offered a superb rationale about how they had worked through the heat of the day, the landowner reminded them that he did them no injustice but met his end of the bargain as they did theirs (vv. 13-16). Since all are servants of God, all are endowed in different ways, all are called to different places, and all serve on different timelines, no one can say it is unfair if one reaps where he did not sow. Is the King not King over Kingdom servants? *Our focus must be to fulfill the purpose in which God has placed us and leave the produce up to Him.*

II. The Patience of Jesus toward His Servants (vv. 17-29)

After the parable, Matthew records that Jesus and His disciples were "going up to Jerusalem" (v. 17). This was true geographically, but it was also true spiritually! In addition, the crowds were on their way to Jerusalem. Most of them would probably make the trip many more times. Yet this would be the last trip to Jerusalem Jesus would travel.

The crowds were on their way to Passover, taking a sacrificial lamb with them. Jesus, too, would be going to Passover but He Himself would be the sacrifice. Jesus knew what would happen there, but not once did He hesitate. All through life He saw the cross in front of Him. Yet He calmly kept walking toward it. As a young boy, He told his parents that he must be about his Father's business. Now the business about which He spoke was about to be finished.

As we consider the patience Jesus has toward His servants, let's first observe the passion He predicted to gain full appreciation for His patience (vv. 17-18). Beginning at Caesarea Philippi (16:13), Jesus seemed to be non-stop in His repeated focus on the cross as He taught His disciples.

Reflection Connection

Why did the disciples not seem to accept that Jesus was going to die? Do you think we would be any more receptive to Jesus' prediction about His impending death?



First, He would be delivered into Hebrew hands (v. 18). One of His own disciples would betray Him. That never seemed to sink into the disciples' minds. *Second, Jesus would be delivered into heathen hands*—"and they shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify him" (v. 19a). One cannot blame the crucifixion on the Jewish people alone. The Gentiles were just as responsible.

Third, Jesus would be delivered into heaven's hands. Jesus never failed to tell the entire story: "and the third day he shall rise again" (v. 19b). This was the progression of the passion—deity nailed to the cross! Every kind of suffering one could experience is revealed in Jesus' predicted passion: the heartache of a friend's *betrayal*, the heartbreak of His disciples' *desertion*, the heaviness of *rejection*, the *humiliation* of mocking, the *helplessness* of the scourging, and the *horror* of the crucifixion.

Thus far, this may be the most comprehensive statement Jesus gave his disciples. He kept adding details to it.

Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that what Jesus predicted came true precisely as He said. All of it, down to the smallest detail, happened just as He said it would.

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Now that we've noted *the passion Jesus predicted* to teach His disciples, let's move on to *the patience Jesus practiced* toward His disciples (vv. 20-29). This is simply an amazing text. Jesus revealed more here than He ever had thus far about His impending death. But while He taught them about the cross, they were talking about a crown! Jesus was revealing eternal realities and they were concerned about where they were going to sit when the Kingdom came.

Do we not find ourselves in the same spiritual stupor—thinking of ourselves, focusing on ourselves—when we should be focusing on Jesus? Once again, this incident reveals for us the magnitude of mercy, and the incredible amount of patience Jesus has with His servants. Jesus counted this not as a time to *condemn* but a time to *correct*, not an opportunity to *punish* them but an opportunity to *prod* them forward in their spiritual formation. The disciples' petition concerned the principle of greatness, prompting these *two lessons* from Jesus about greatness.

First, one's desire for greatness must be examined (vv. 20-24). As Jesus put the desire the disciples had for greatness under scrutiny, His microscope exposed it as purely selfish. The disciples simply wanted reserved seats in God's Kingdom. Their mother asked, "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on the right hand and the other on the left in thy kingdom" (v. 21). They wanted to be God's personal assistants.

Jesus revealed their ignorance telling them that they "know not what ye ask" (v. 22). He went on to speak of the cup and baptism that were His death. Jesus was telling them there could be no crown without a cross. They thought they could handle it. And handle it they did! Only it was years later.

Reflection Connection

We've all heard the prayer in the well-worn cliché, "Lord, I pray for patience and I'd like it now." What are some ways that help believers develop patience in their lives? Reflect on a time in your life when patience really paid a great dividend. Be prepared to share it with others.



Reflection Connection

Do you think it is possible to be a martyr in the United States? If so, is there any difference in being a martyr here and in a Third World country? How?

James was the first disciple martyred and John the last, as he was banished to the salt mines on Patmos. But all the disciples deserted Jesus the night He was betrayed. They could handle it later but not then. But as for the disciples' request, Jesus said that assigning spaces was not His to do but was only possible through the Father (v. 23).

Of course the other disciples went haywire: "And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren" (v. 29). Why? Because James and John were taking unfair advantage, that's why.

They even coached their mother into getting involved. If the truth be told, the others were probably upset because they did not think of it first. Our natural inclination is sometimes so focused "selfwardly" that it's hard to understand the love of Jesus for us. Once again, however, the patience of Jesus toward His servants was (and is) wonderful beyond measure.

The second lesson is this: one's definition of greatness must be exact (vv. 25-28). The problem with the disciples was that they were thinking of greatness as the world thinks of greatness. Jesus sums up their understanding in two simple words—"exercise dominion" (v. 25).

The term Jesus used literally means "to lord it over." This term carried with it the idea of a harsh, severe rule of power. It was used of one who rules or controls others. This type of greatness is the type which dominates and makes everyone under it feel the power wielded. Such greatness is like "the princes of the Gentiles exercise" and has no presence in the kingdom of God: "But it shall not be so among you" (vv. 25-26).

Greatness in the Lord's work is based upon a different standard.

Greatness in the Lord's work is based upon a different standard. If the disciples wanted to be great, the disciples would serve (vv. 26-27). Power in God's vineyard belongs to those who have a humble, serving spirit. The way to greatness is found by serving people.

In fact, Jesus reveals that His entire purpose and focus was centered on possessing that type of greatness: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (v. 28). *If only the church could learn this exact definition of greatness and pursue it.*

III. The Pity of Jesus toward the Suffering (vv. 29-34)

Not only did Jesus take time to patiently deal with His disciples, continuing to teach them the significance of His death, burial and resurrection, but He also never forgot the lonely, the hurting or the helpless. On His way to the cross, Jesus Himself showed a servant's spirit.

First, note the cry of the two men to Jesus (vv. 29-30). We know one man's name—Bartimaeus (cp. Mark 10:46). We also know both these men were blind. I'm often saddened when I hear of someone losing their eyesight. No

Reflection Connection

How close in comparison are lack of patience and pride? Is there any overlap between the two? If so, what?



more beautiful sunsets or colorful flowers are possible for them; no more can they receive from the faces of ones they love a tender smile, or loving acceptance.

Yet no matter how horrible we imagine physical blindness to be, nothing compares to spiritual blindness. The horror of sin and sin's danger escapes the one who is spiritually blind. The only cure for spiritual blindness is spiritual sight!

Matthew records that the two men heard the commotion and learned that Jesus "passed by them" (v. 30). This was a chance of a lifetime for these poor men; they probably never thought they'd get close to the Man from Galilee. They wasted no time.

"Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David," they cried out. The term "cried" means "screamed." What were they screaming about? Mercy is what they wanted! It was also what they needed. It makes a real difference when we know what we want when we go before the Lord. The Lord had plenty of mercy to give and the men wanted it!

Reflection Connection

It's amazing that the blind men did not stop calling out to Jesus. Would you be that bold and unrelenting in calling out to Jesus? Name some obstacles that prevent people coming to Jesus today.

Let's now notice the criticism of the multitude (v. 31). Their continual crying out provoked the multitude to stand against them. "And the multitude rebuked them," Matthew records. We are unsure why the crowds criticized them, but we can take a really good guess. People who themselves know they need the Lord and are under deep conviction of sin often become a grievance to others.

Also, life teaches us that crowds tend to keep people from Jesus. Crowds can turn on a dime. The very crowd that welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem, after only a few days, was ready to string Him up! Every believer should be cautious that the crowd he chooses to hang with is not a crowd that will keep him from Jesus.

As the crowd attempted to shout down the blind men, the men "cried the more." They absolutely were not going to let the opportunity to get to Jesus pass.

Finally, let's observe the compassion of the Master (vv. 32-34). Note Matthew's way of describing Jesus' response to the two men: "Jesus stood still" (v. 32). What a statement! The Holy Lord who proceeded to Calvary paused dead in His tracks by a pitiful cry for mercy.

The men realized a hush had come over the multitudes. Mark records what those standing near said: "Be of good comfort, rise; he calleth thee" (10:49). As their friends assisted them to get to Jesus, He asked them, "What will ye that I shall do unto you?" (v. 32). Immediately, they informed Him they wished to see (v. 33).

Are we able to so quickly state precisely what it is we desire from God when we go to Him in prayer? That we do not know or cannot say may be part of the reason our prayers never seem to be heard. Jesus was moved again by "compassion" for the men (v. 39). This revealed a spiritual pattern in Jesus' life. His pity in the form of love was what fueled His servant's heart. What fuels ours?

Golden Greek Nugget

The term for "ransom" Jesus used in v. 28 is *lytron* which was the price for freeing a slave. Consequently, the ideas rooted in the ancient world were connected to the slave trade. But also, ransom was a part of the earlier Hebrew culture. It expressed the duty of the nearest kinsmen to purchase his nearest kin's property upon his kinsman's death. We see this for example, in the account of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4). Even earlier, ransom was connected with Israel's deliverance in Deuteronomy 7:8. For our purposes here, Jesus pays our penalty due for sin—the ransom—through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Wrap Up

Jesus never failed in taking every opportunity offered to teach His disciples. It is no surprise, then, we find Him teaching even on the road to the cross. In addition, Jesus not only taught about a servant's heart, He possessed it. He practiced what He preached. May our Lord give us power to do the same.

