

Homily for Sunday, September 20, 2026



If ever there was a parable that rubbed Jesus's listeners, and us, the wrong way, it's this one. There's a little voice, even in the most open-minded of us, that wants to say, "Ya, but those people who worked the whole day under the scorching heat, I still feel they deserved better." When I think that way, I need to be reminded of what God said to Isaiah in that first reading, ***"My ways and thoughts are not your ways and thoughts, Isaiah."*** If Isaiah, who I always regarded as being very close to God, needed to hear those words, then it's even more imperative that I hear them. As the heavens are far above the earth, so are God's ways and thoughts above mine. That's probably why St. Paul encourages us to ***"put on the mind of Christ"*** (Phil.

2:5). Only the mind of Christ can understand the ways and thoughts of God. Until we have put on the mind of Christ, we don't dare dismiss the parables simply because they are challenging.

To understand any of the teachings in the Bible, including the teachings of Jesus, it's of ultimate importance that we know the historical context from which these arose in the first place. Without context, little of the Bible makes sense, leaving us scrambling to inject our own meaning. And then we fight over who has the best interpretation.

Matthew has been our gospel guide this entire liturgical year. It's likely that this parable may have been directed toward Jewish Christians who were inclined to despise latecomers to the faith, Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. It's nothing less than the debates Peter and Paul got into about who should be

considered a member of the Early Church. Many Jews, converting to Christianity, had spent long years faithfully and staunchly observing Jewish law and participated in synagogue and Temple. They felt resentment towards those who came late to the faith and who, in their minds, didn't "earn their stripes". Jesus seemed to be welcoming the Gentiles with the same ease he was welcoming his fellow Jews. Can we do the same when it comes to welcoming people into the Church? Or welcoming immigrants into our country?

Another bit of context that's important is what immediately preceded this parable. A young, rich man wanting to possess eternal life, is bragging to Jesus that he has followed every one of the commandments. (This is the tipoff that he was indeed "young". I had half of the Commandments broken by the time I was 17!). This young rich man wants to know what he must do to *possess* eternal life. He has many possessions already; he'd like to make eternal life his next one. Jesus praises him but reminds him that eternal life can't be bought like all his other possessions. The only way we can possess eternal life, says Jesus, is by giving it away. Jesus encouraged him to give his possessions away and then come back and follow him. But this young man is not into *giving away*; he's into *accumulating*. He walks away, with all his possessions, and never becomes a follower of Jesus. Peter overhears this whole exchange between Jesus and the young rich man. What he probably didn't notice was the disappointment in Jesus. But because Peter lives in the world of comparison, he compares himself to the young rich man and says to Jesus, "What gives? We committed to following you and gave up everything. This guy commits to nothing and gets to walk away with all his possessions. If he gets to keep all that for doing nothing, surely our reward will be significantly greater than his?"

Jesus tells Peter that anyone who gives up even the slightest—even if someone offers a cup of water to a thirsty person—for his sake and the sake of the gospel, that person will receive eternal life. How could Jesus possibly give anything more than eternal life? Peter is being offered the maximum—eternal life. Instead of rejoicing in the maximum that Jesus is giving him, his envious eyes are still on the young rich man who walked. When you're not content with

what is on your side of the fence, you'll spend your whole life envying what's on your neighbour's side of the fence. Unfortunately, Peter is still comparing himself with the young rich man, so Jesus has to add, "Peter, if you're still in the game of comparison, thinking yourself so much better than that young rich man, I guarantee you that whatever you gave up, thus far, you will receive 100-fold in return" (Mt. 19:16-29). The lesson Jesus is trying to teach Peter, ends with the same line as today's gospel ends with: ***"So the last will be first and the first will be last"*** (Mt. 19:30, Mt. 20:16).

By saying that, twice, Jesus is not reversing the categories of first and last. He's not demoting the people at the top nor is he promoting the people at the bottom. He's doing something much more radical. He's destroying all categories of first and last. In the Kingdom of God--a kingdom so far from our thoughts and our ways—there are no first and lasts. There is only radical equality. In God's kingdom, unlike ours, nobody can earn or buy or influence their way to the top.

In the parable, at the end of the day, everyone—whether they worked the entire day or only one hour—received the maximum pay, a full day's wages. One way to interpret the "daily wage" is to equate it with "heaven". The whole story is about God giving "heaven" to anyone who God pleases. What's distressing is that Jesus seems to be saying that God can give heaven away with the same ease to the "undeserving" as to the "deserving". When the workers who worked all day see that they are paid the same daily wage as those who only worked an hour, they catch on and are not too happy about it. They realize immediately that the "work" they've done doesn't matter. This causes them to instantly get angry. In other words, they've learned the most important lesson there is to learn: If the work we do to get into heaven doesn't matter, it must be because *you can't earn heaven!* For Jesus, it isn't a question about whether or not you'll make it to heaven. The real question is whether we are building heaven here on earth. Are we building the Kingdom of God? Or, are we simply trying to secure a place in the afterlife?

Notice how the all-day-workers are perfectly fine with getting the maximum pay—the daily wage—until they compare themselves to others whom they deem as undeserving. In their anger they say, ***"you have made***

them equal to us.” How dare you! In their minds, they are not equal to the late-comers; they are better than them, superior to them. They cannot celebrate the generosity of the vineyard owner nor can they celebrate the good fortune of the late-comers. In the world of comparison, you never celebrate. You’re too busy comparing.

If we have trouble with this parable, we will also have trouble with Jesus who said, “The tax collectors and prostitutes are going ahead of you in heaven.” And if we have trouble with that, we will also have trouble with the “good” thief crucified next to Jesus. He spent his entire life stealing from people, yet Jesus says to him, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise!” He’s stolen paradise right under Jesus’ nose and gotten away with it. That thief, by the way, is not only the first declared saint in the Church but also the only one declared so by Jesus himself. Talk about giving away the farm! Talk about God’s ways being nothing like our ways.

Jesus was crucified not because he had theological differences with the religious leaders of his time. He was crucified because he dared to speak of a kingdom—the kingdom of God—where there are no firsts and no lasts. This was seen as subverting the established order by the power brokers of the time and deserved death. How dare he make the poor equal to us!

Every time we pray, “May your kingdom come”, it should be accompanied with, “May our little kingdoms go.” If we can do that, the world of comparisons will be put on the shelf where it belongs. And we’ll finally be able to celebrate the generosity of God without an ounce of envy.

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