

First and Last
Matthew 19:30—20:16

Jesus and His Disciples have left Galilee and are headed to Jerusalem. Jesus has been preparing the Disciples for His upcoming death (Matthew 16:21; 17:9, 22—23) because His death was just months away. They were the ones who were going to take over in Jesus' absence and would be the ones who lead the Little Flock of believing Israel through the Tribulation. Their faith needed to be strong and unwavering.

The Disciples had just seen that those with riches could not enter into the Millennial Kingdom and were thinking if a rich man couldn't enter then how could someone with nothing enter into the Kingdom. Previously they had sold everything to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:27) and now were wondering about their future. Jesus had answered them with the promise of entering the Kingdom and ruling over the nations.

Parable of the laborers (verses 1—15)

In this parable the master of the vineyard hires workers in four shifts to tend to the grape vines. Each group puts in a different amount of time yet gets identical pay for their work, to the consternation of the first groups. Interpretations of this parable run from being a show of God's love and mercy to the importance of generosity and even job security (??) with many understanding this parable to be speaking of the long-time saved versus those who are saved late in life and how they will be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The reason there is such a divergent view is that most do not rightly divide truth from truth in Scripture.

In context, Jesus is continuing His answer to Peter about how the Millennial Kingdom will be set up. His answer is meant specifically for the Disciples, not Christians as so many understand. Jesus just told the Disciples they will be ruling in the Millennial Kingdom and that everyone who has given up everything on earth will be rewarded a hundred-fold. The parable then emphasizes and expands on this teaching.

An understanding of the terms used in this parable is necessary to see what Jesus is talking about. The landowner of the vineyard is God and the vineyard is Israel, not a spiritualized kingdom of believers. Matthew 21:33 uses this same terminology using Scripture from Isaiah 5:1—7. God planted the vineyard on a fertile hill in carefully cultivated soil. He did everything possible to make sure this vineyard produced the finest grapes but Israel produced only worthless ones. Verse 7 clearly defines this vineyard as the house of Israel (see also Psalm 80:8—11; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10).

I believe the timing of hiring laborers is an important detail. There were people hired early morning, at the third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours. Just as Israel's day ends at around 6 p.m., her day begins at 6 a.m. The first workers were hired around 6 a.m., the second batch around 9 a.m., the third about noon, the fourth around 3 p.m. and the last group around 5 p.m. This last group worked for only one hour (verse 12) meaning they were done at 6 p.m., the end of the Hebrew day. I believe this time span relates to Israel's history from inception to the Tribulation. The Tribulation is often depicted as night or dark with evening coming just before the Tribulation (Matthew 14:15—27; John 9:4; Luke 17:34—37; Isaiah 60:1—3; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). This would make the laborers the people God called to admonish Israel to produce good fruit.

The last will be first (verses 19:30 and 20:16)

This is usually interpreted in light of Mark 10:44—45 and Mark 9:35 saying these verses are about humbling yourself to be a servant to others. Those who do this will be greatest in the Kingdom. I believe these verses in Matthew have a different focus with special meaning to the Disciples.

Notice that the above parable is bracketed by the phrase concerning the first and the last meaning that the phrase and parable need to agree with each other regarding their meaning. The parable speaks of those who are first and those who are last working for God in getting Israel to bear fruit. When this is related to the Millennial Kingdom the first ones working with Israel on earth will be the last ones into the kingdom while the last ones working with Israel will enter the Kingdom first. Since Christ is speaking directly to the Disciples we can surmise that since they were one of the last ones called into service to get Israel to bear fruit that they will be the first ones into the Millennial Kingdom. In other words, those who will be rulers will be installed into their place of leadership before the others come in. I also believe Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David will be resurrected and placed into their positions of authority before the masses are let in (Matthew 8:11; Luke 13:28).

Metaphoric names of Israel (see Judges 9:8—15)

Four plants in the Bible metaphorically refer to Israel with each plant having a specific usage and meaning. An understanding of how these names for Israel are used may help in understanding some of these parables. The first is the olive tree and speaks of Israel's spirituality (Jeremiah 11:16—17; Romans 11). I believe it is significant that Israel was connected to the olive tree in Romans but is now temporarily cut off. Their spirituality had to be wrapped up in their connection to Jesus Christ. Those who were properly connected to Christ were the only ones who could produce fruit within Israel. They were also the ones who would be saved from eternal damnation. This is why Christ compared Himself to a vine and Israel to the branch (John 15:4—6). Since the Pharisees were wrapped up in their own self-righteousness they were unable to bear good fruit.

The second type of plant that pictures Israel is the fig tree (Mark 11). This tree represents Israel's religious life. The Mosaic Law dictated their religious life. Today we see many people who claim to be religious because they follow man-made rites that they think will honor God. They, as well as the Pharisees, do these things to gain eternal life. They are self-righteous because they think they can obtain eternal life through their own effort. Israel was commanded to follow these specific religious rites but in this Age of Grace these things are all set aside having been fulfilled in Christ (Romans 8:1—4). When Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered it pointed to the soon-to-come destruction of the temple—the ruin of their religious system.

The third plant that portrays Israel is the vine and symbolizes their earthly blessing. If Israel had built her religion upon a true spirituality grounded on Jesus Christ then she would have prospered greatly. Instead, Israel worked at being religious without Christ and Israel withered like a plant without water. Hosea 10:1 makes this clear by calling Israel an empty vine, bringing forth fruit for her own purposes instead of for God. Ezekiel 19:10—14 exemplifies how Israel is cursed when they wander from God.

The last plant that Israel is called is the bramble. This specifically refers to apostate or unbelieving Israel.

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