

Still Counting

Matthew 20 opens with a story about a vineyard and closes with two blind men on the road out of Jericho. Between them a man asks what he is going to get, and a mother asks where her sons will sit.

The story itself is short. A landowner goes out early and hires men for the day. He goes out again at nine, at noon, at three, and once more at five in the afternoon, and each time he finds men standing about and sends them into the vineyard. At the end of the day he pays them, starting with the last hired, and every man receives a denarius. The men who began at dawn take their denarius and complain. The landowner answers them:

Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last man the same as to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good?

I have preached that as a parable about grace, and it is one. God gives what he wants to whom he wants.

But the parable does not sit on its own. Nine verses earlier Peter has asked a question — *see, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?* — and Jesus has answered it. Thrones, a hundredfold, eternal life. Then, without a break, *but many who are first will be last, and the last first.* Then the vineyard. Then, at the end of the vineyard, the same sentence again: *so the last will be first, and the first last.*

The parable has been set down inside a line that is said twice. And nine verses after it finishes, the mother of James and John comes and asks for the two best seats.

Three requests, one story, and a sentence repeated on either side of it. That is the chapter, and the parable is what it is holding up to the light.

Read the hiring again and one thing separates the first group from every other.

After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

They agreed. The word Matthew uses is a marketplace word — they came to terms, they settled on a figure. Both sides knew what the day was worth before a man picked up a tool.

Nobody else in the story is given a number.

At nine in the morning he sees men standing idle and says, *you go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you*. At noon and at three he does the same. And at five in the afternoon he finds men still standing there and asks why. *Because no one has hired us*, they say. He says, *you go into the vineyard too* – and this time there is no mention of pay at all. No figure, no promise, nothing about what is right. Just go.

So four hirings, and one contract.

The wage is worth knowing. A denarius was a day's keep – what a labourer needed to feed his household that night. Not a windfall and not a prize. It is the difference between a family eating and not eating.

Which changes what the men hired at five o'clock receive. They are not overpaid. They are given enough to live on.

And it changes what the men hired at dawn have. They have exactly what they asked for, and they are the only men in the vineyard holding a number.

The complaint does not come when the men at dawn see the others being paid. It comes after.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house.

They had the coin in their hand. The agreed sum, the full day's keep, the thing they had settled on that morning – and holding it, they complained.

So the money did not become insufficient. It became insulting.

They thought they were worth more.

The master's answer runs in two directions, and it is worth taking them separately.

To the men who complain: *did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go*. He does not argue with them. He points at the arrangement they chose and honours it exactly. Nobody in this story is cheated.

Then, of the last man hired: *I choose to give to this last man the same as to you*. Not *I owe him*, and not *he is worth it*. I want to.

Two different words for two different footings. Terms for the men who wanted terms, and a gift for the men who had nothing to bargain with. The master is not being inconsistent. He is meeting each group on the ground it came in on.

Which is the thing I had not seen before. A contract is a limit you can put on someone else's generosity, and it holds. He keeps it to the letter. The men who fixed the price got the price they fixed, and lost the chance to be given anything.

And when he asks them the last question, he does not use the language of fairness. *Is your eye evil because I am good?* An evil eye, in Matthew, has been mentioned before – in the teaching about treasure and money, a few chapters back, in the same breath as *you cannot serve God and money*. It is the eye that looks at what someone else has.¹

The word for what the men at dawn do is *gongyzō*, and it is the sound it describes: a low, continuous mutter. Not a speech. Not an argument. A noise made under the breath. It is the only time Matthew uses it.²

It also has a history. In the Greek Old Testament this word and its close relatives carry Israel's murmuring in the wilderness – at the bitter water, over the bread, after the spies came back. Every one of those complaints is about provision. They have been given water and they complain about the water. They have been fed and they complain about the food. And the murmuring is never finally against the provision; it is against the one who provided it. Matthew says the labourers grumbled *at the master of the house*. Paul makes the same connection with the same word, warning a church not to grumble *as some of them did*.³

Nine verses after the parable ends, the disciples complain again – and Matthew uses a different word.

The mother of James and John has asked for the two seats. *And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers*. The word is *aganakteō*, and it is not a sound. It is heat. Provocation, moral offence, the flare of something that feels like justice. Matthew uses it of the chief priests when children shout in the temple, and of the disciples when a woman breaks a jar of ointment over Jesus' feet. In every case the indignation arrives with a reason attached, and the reason sounds right.

So the two complaints are not the same complaint.

A mutter is what a man makes when he has been given something and it is not enough. It has no case in it, only a noise. Indignation is what a man produces when someone else is being given something, and the man making it is right.

That is a progression. In the parable the men grumble about their own wage. Nine verses later the ten are angry about two other men's chairs, and by then they have stopped muttering and started making a case.

And the twelve are the only people in the chapter who do both.

Go back a page.

Just before all of this, a young man comes and asks what he must do to have eternal life. He has kept the commandments, all of them, since he was a boy. And he asks *what do I still lack?*

It is a ledger question. He wants the outstanding balance – the last item, the thing still owing, so that he can pay it and have the account closed. Jesus names a figure, and the young man will not pay it, and he goes away sorrowful, because he had great possessions.

Then Jesus says it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, and the disciples are astonished.

I used to think the difficulty was the money. It is more particular than that. A rich man is a man who has spent his life counting, and he is good at it. Wealth is a comparison – you are only rich alongside somebody. Take the counting away and he does not know where he is standing. That is what the young man could not do. He could keep commandments. He could not stop keeping score.

And the next voice in the chapter is Peter's. *See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*

The same question from the other side. The young man asked what was still owing; Peter asks what is coming to him. One wanted the balance, the other wants the return. And Peter is not a rich man. He has left everything he had.

Which is why the parable sits exactly where it does. It is not there to tell the disciples that God is generous – they knew that, and it is why they stayed. It is there to show what generosity does to a man who is still counting. You cannot be offended by a gift unless you were measuring it.

Then, at the end of the chapter, two blind men sitting by the road out of Jericho hear that he is passing and start shouting. The crowd tells them to be quiet. They shout louder. He stops and asks what they want him to do, and they say, *Lord, let our eyes be opened.*

They ask for something. So did the young man, and so did Peter, and so did the mother of James and John. Nobody in this chapter is rebuked for asking.

But the two men at the roadside have nothing to compare. No day's work behind them, no years of commandment-keeping, no everything-left. They cannot tell him what they are owed and they do not try. They ask for sight, and they receive it, and they follow him up the road.

There is a sentence in this chapter I have never been able to settle.

| *But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*

It comes just before the parable. And at the end of the parable, turned round: *so the last will be first, and the first last*. Twice, one on each side of the story, and Matthew does not explain either one.

I can see what it is not. It is not the running order of the payment, because every man was paid the same and being paid first was no advantage. It is not a promise that the people at the back will get the better end of it, because there was no better end – there was one denarius and everybody had it. And it is not a warning that the long-serving will be demoted. Nobody in the vineyard loses anything.

What I notice is that the men who came first are the only ones who thought there was an order. And the men who came last were not standing in a queue. They were standing in the market at five in the afternoon because nobody had hired them.

I am nearer to it than I was this morning. Not settled. Nearer.

One last thing, from the end of the chapter. When the ten heard what the mother of James and John had asked for, they were indignant.

Which is a strange thing to find in men who had left everything. Unless it was already there before the money went, and had been waiting for something to be given away.⁴

¹ *Evil eye* appears in Matthew at 6:23 and at 20:15, and nowhere else in the Gospel.

² Matthew 20:11 is the only occurrence of the verb in Matthew, and he never uses the compound form.

³ 1 Corinthians 10:10, looking back to Numbers. The wilderness passages themselves more often use a compound form of the verb; Paul uses the simple one, which is Matthew's.

⁴ Paul puts pride and the devil in the same clause, and does it in a passage about who should be given position: a new convert should not be made an overseer, *lest he become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil* (1 Timothy 3:6).

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.