

When I was a kid, my brother and I loved a movie called, “The Mighty Ducks.” It’s the story of a disgraced lawyer who gets sentenced to community service and decides to serve out his sentence by coaching the worst Pee-Wee hockey team in the league. I mean, these poor kids were dead last, they didn’t even have proper equipment, hardly knew how to ice skate, bumbling clumsy - the laughingstock of the entire league.

Smash cut to the end of the movie, and it’s this team, the team who began dead last, that comes in first place and wins the state championship! The crowd cheers, confetti flies...

And we eat this stuff up, because everybody loves a good underdog story!

That’s why countless movies have followed that same formula of the unlikely hero, the *team* nobody expects to win, or the *person* nobody ever expects to amount to anything - ***the underdog*** - who starts at the bottom of the barrel, but somehow comes out on top. Stories like these draw us in, evoking all kinds of emotions from us.

When I hear an underdog story, I can’t help but identify with the unlikely hero! I root for them. And inevitably, I always see a little bit of myself in them.

And the parable we’re looking at today *begins* like a classic underdog story, but there’s a twist. Jesus begins and ends His parable this way:

30 But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.

Have you heard that said before? Or maybe you’ve heard it this way,

“The first will be last and the last will be first.”

It’s puzzling, like a brain teaser from the mind of Jesus.

As a kid growing up in church, this verse was most often used as a kind of cheap ‘Bible joke.’ **You know like, a joke that no one ever thought was funny - but for some reason kept being recycled.**

Like, say you were at some church function, like a pizza party, and everyone’s waiting for pizza to get there. And when it finally arrives, there’s a mad rush to be the first in line for food and inevitably some wise cracking bible scholar in back of the line yells to the person in front: Hey! The first will be last and the last will be first! So... that’s me... I’m actually first.. Right? **Bible jokes!**

But that can’t be what Jesus meant! There’s no way he really meant: “Hey! Don’t be the first guy in line, disciples, because really - you want to be way in the back, yeah - be the last... because, I’ll tell you a secret - the last guy in line is really the first?”

No way! That can’t be what Jesus was getting at. Then, what was He getting at? And why use such an enigmatic phrase to illuminate the truth about the Kingdom of God? Today, we’re going to explore one of Jesus’ parables, TOGETHER, and see if we can hear the true meaning behind those cryptic words ‘The first will be last and the last will be first.’ but before we do that, I’m going to pray for us:

Lord open our ears. Give us ears to hear! We want to understand with our hearts and minds what you desire to teach us. So help us now, I pray. Make your word come to life, and illuminate the truth. I pray in Jesus name, amen.

So if you are a disciple of Jesus, that is, if you consider yourself a Christ follower, I've got good news for you - the parable we're looking at today is distinctly for You! In other places in the book of Matthew, Jesus is telling these stories, these parables, to multitudes of people. He's out on a boat, shouting in a way that would carry his voice over the waters to be heard by the masses who have gathered on the shoreline to hear him teach. But this one... This story is personal. Jesus was not speaking to a crowd in Matthew 19 and 20. He was speaking directly to his disciples. To his closest friends. He had something revolutionary to show them - if they had ears to hear.

So, turn with me to Matthew chapter 19, and before we go any further I just want to say welcome to those of you who are joining us online, and to our North Indy and Fishers campuses welcome to all of you! We're in the last week of our Parable series, and it is a BYOB Bring Your own Bible series. So whether your Bible is on your phone, or computer, or in book form, I hope you've got one in front of you ready to go, and as we turn to Matthew chapter 19, let me give you a little background to set the stage:

Matthew was one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus, and the writer of the book of Matthew. He was, himself, an underdog of sorts - certainly an unlikely choice to become a founding father of our faith. **He was a Jewish man who held one of the most despicable positions in all of Israel. He was a tax collector working for the Roman government.** Tax collectors were known for their corruption, and their deception. And because of this they were despised by their fellow Jews. Tax collectors were considered the lowest of the low. Matthew would've been seen as a traitor to the people of Israel, and as such - he was a complete social outcast.

But then, one day as Jesus was passing through Galilee, he saw Matthew, Matthew the low-life traitor, sitting at his tax office. And with just 2 words he alters the course of Matthew's entire life. Jesus looks at him and says 'Follow Me.' And just like that, without hesitation, Matthew leaves his post, leaves his old life behind, and FOLLOWS JESUS. And right after this, Matthew invites Jesus, his disciples, and his tax collector buddies over to his house for dinner - a 'GREAT FEAST' as Luke describes it. THIS WAS NO CASUAL DINNER! MATTHEW WAS PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS, TO HONOR HIS SPECIAL GUEST. But Jews had very strict 'purity' laws that forbade them from eating with anyone who was considered an 'unclean sinner.' Jesus sitting around and eating with such misfits, was totally unacceptable in the eyes of the religious leaders. The Pharisees were incensed! They protested "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?"

Imagine what it must have felt like to be Matthew in that moment. You and all your friends, publicly humiliated, vilified - disgraced. Branded by the powerful RELIGIOUS elite - as scum! **Detested! Despised.**

But I believe Jesus' response in that moment changed Matthew forever. He said,

“Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do... I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” Matthew 9:13

Matthew knew he was a sinner. And now he knew that Jesus came for him, and sinners like him. I believe this is the reason that the Parable of the Vineyard owner is only found in Matthew’s gospel. This is a story that would’ve spoken deeply to him, because he could see himself in the story. **Matthew, the outcast of society, dead last in the eyes of his Jewish contemporaries, was somehow offered the generous, life altering mercy of Jesus.** Matthew the **UNDERDOG** was drawn into the upside down kingdom of God, where **those who seem the least important now, become the greatest. The upside down kingdom of Heaven where**

Grace is not fair and square. It is merciful, and generous.

So, the Parable of the Vineyard Owner:

We have to start with some context. There was a real life event that brought about the telling of this parable. Jesus was hanging out with Matthew and the rest of His disciples, when a rich man approached him with a burning question. He asked, “What good deed must “I do” in order to have eternal life?” Jesus told him, “If you want to receive eternal life, keep the commandments.”

And he said, I HAVE! I’VE KEPT ALL THE COMMANDMENTS. What else must “I do.”

And Jesus replied, well If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” **Follow me.** That would’ve sounded very familiar to Matthew, for those were the same two life altering words that had been spoken to him earlier on. **Follow me.**

But where Matthew had heard those words and jumped at the chance to follow Jesus, without hesitation - The rich man heard those same words - and walked away sad, scripture tells us, for he had many possessions.

And as he walked away sad, ignoring Jesus’ invitation to follow him, Jesus turned to his disciples in Matthew 19:23 and he said something like this, “Boy, it sure is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.”

And the disciples are just astounded! Look at their response in verse 25:

“Then who in the world can be saved?!” they asked.

Jesus had just upended their idea of what it took to get into the kingdom of heaven.

Like, if not this guy, then who?! He’s practically perfect! He’s kept all the commandments- like, all of them! Look at him! HE’S RIGHTEOUS, he’s successful, he’s wealthy - Jesus, he’d be such an asset to the kingdom... Look, you don’t really expect every person to liquidate their entire estate, leave their families behind and live as a nomad following you around? Do you? Is that really the only way to inherit eternal life? Because that sounds impossible!

Now, right here! This is where I want you to look at your Bibles because Jesus’ answer to His disciples here - is everything.

Matthew 19:26 Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God, everything is possible.”

Peter starts to connect the dots. He says "We've given up everything to follow You. What will we get?"

And in so many words Jesus says to Peter: 'Don't worry. You and all those who have given up so much to follow me, will inherit eternal life.

"But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then."

Matthew 19:30

And he tells *his disciples* this story:

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Read with me in Matthew 20 starting with verse 1:

Matthew 20:1

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner *Pause, when you see Kingdom of Heaven- it's the same as saying Kingdom of God. Kingdom of Heaven, Kingdom of God - same thing. **who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.**

3 "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. 4 So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. 5 So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

6 "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'

7 "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'

"The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

8 "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. 9 When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. 10 When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. 11 When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, 12 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

13 "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage?'

14 Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. 15 Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’

16 “So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.”

Do you hear it? Whoever has ears, let them hear! There's a good story in there. In fact, there are a few good stories in there. This one parable is so rich with symbolism and meaning! There are so many facets to this illustration - so many directions for our minds to go! And that is what makes the Parables of Jesus so incredible! They are an invitation to stop, and wonder. To think and think deeply. So would you right now, allow yourself to wonder with me? Where do you see yourself in this story? Or more accurately, where do you see the Kingdom of Heaven? There are some fundamental truths here that reveal the Kingdom of God. The kingdom that so many of us have been praying for - for much of our lives, every time we say the 'Lord's prayer':

“Your kingdom come! Your will be done! On Earth as it is in heaven!” So what does this story tell us about the Kingdom?

- Well, likely the most obvious takeaway is that this is a story about generosity. About the extravagant kindness of our benevolent landowner God, who gives of His gifts freely - to whomever He wills. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! Our King is generous! And He pours out his mercy equally, to everyone who answers His call.
- He pours out his mercy equally. Is this a story about equality? About fairness in God's economy, and how we are all created equal in His sight? Everyone received the same wage at the end of the day, regardless of hours spent laboring in the fields. Everyone who heard the call of the generous landowner and was willing to follow him.
- So then it's a story about willingness. A story that indicates our need to simply be present and willing follow Him - follow Jesus - just like Matthew did. Follow Jesus into the vineyard, because it's harvest season and we desire to do the work of the Kingdom.
- The work of the Kingdom. Harvest time. Is this a story that illustrates how the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few? I think it is. Earlier on in the book of Matthew, Jesus had been going through all the towns and villages, teaching, healing all kinds of sicknesses and diseases, and proclaiming the good news to crowds of people. He told his disciples to

“Pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.”Matthew 9:38

Folks, it's harvest time! I had a moment a few weeks ago where I was feeling overwhelmed. I cried out to God - the need is so great, and the workers are so few. And I heard His still small voice in that moment - it was a voice of loving correction. He said, that's not what I said. I said THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL! He did not say the need is so great, so pray that I send more workers... He said the HARVEST. IS. PLENTIFUL.

That's a good thing! Every farmer wants a bountiful, plentiful harvest. **I need to change my perspective.** Instead of feeling overwhelmed at the great need all around me, *I should recognize the opportunity for God to do something incredible.* The fields - just like this vineyard - are ripe with opportunity. We need to pray to our

generous God, and ask for Him to raise up an army of workers to come alongside us in these fields. To tell the good news of a Grace that is not fair and square, but merciful and generous!

- Merciful and generous. Is this parable telling us to become more like the Father? To be like the vineyard owner, and to show each other mercy, human being to human being? That we are to demonstrate His brand of justice, God's justice, with such extravagant kindness, love and mercy toward one another? Forgiveness where it isn't deserved. Kindness and mercy where it hasn't been earned" Jesus said:

“Love each other in the same way I have loved you!” John 15:12

- But that's so hard to do! It's upside down! It goes against every natural tendency I have, because I identify with the indignant, disgruntled workers in this parable! This is this a story about jealousy! And I know jealousy! The first few workers were hired early in the morning. They'd been the one's laboring in the scorching heat all day! All day! Their bodies were sore. They were worn out.

Have you ever worked a job like that and been so bone tired by the end of the day? I've been there. It was time to get paid and go home! And as the landowner calls the crew hired last to step forward and receive their pay - if I've been here all day I know full well they only worked an hour. And now I'm getting angry because -

they just got here!

I got here first thing this morning - so - shouldn't I be first to get paid? Why is he letting 'those guys' go home first? Whatever, at least I know I'm getting paid more than they are. And then to everyone's complete surprise, the crew that only worked an hour got a full day's wage! A full day's pay for an hour of work? I'm thinking Oooh! This is going to be good, because I know I worked way longer than that! Let's see a full day's wage for an hour of work, that means I'll probably get - OVER A WEEK'S PAY! I'm gonna get a big ole bag of money! Suddenly this is the best job I've ever had, the best luck, the greatest payday the boss I've ever worked for - and now it's my turn. I step up with my hands outstretched - he puts the money in my hand... ONE coin. Just one coin. One coin, that's only one day's wage! That's what you paid the crew that had only been here an hour! You were super generous with those underdogs?! But what about me?! And then the vineyard owner speaks: **'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'**

Oh it's an underdog story, but with a divine twist.

- And here's the twist. GRACE ISN'T FAIR and square!! IT IS NOT FAIR! Grace is merciful and generous! AND this is GREAT NEWS when I identify with those workers hired later in the day - When I know I am a sinner! When I know how much I don't deserve His grace!! How rich and how generous is this landowner God, that he would pour out his blessings on someone like me, who does not deserve it? This undeserved favor of the Father! Listen, maybe some of ya'll have been good all your lives, but that is not my testimony! I was down at the bottom of the barrel, and still Jesus called me. He invited me to follow Him - and I did! And He has transformed my whole life! And I want to tell everyone about this great thing that has happened to me! Because of Jesus, I have

just won the day! Salvation is mine! Forgiveness is mine! Eternal life is mine! Hope! Strength! And Mercy are mine! (By the way, that mercy is new every morning! Brand new mercy that automatically renews and never expires!) Love is mine. Because I just met the Savior, and he gave me far more than I have ever deserved.

And the crowd cheers, and confetti flies, and mercy abounds. For He has come! Not to call those who think they are righteous, but to show mercy to underdogs like me, who know they are sinners.

Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Grace is not fair and square, it is merciful and generous.

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner, who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. Is that you? Have you been doing this a long time? Have you been faithfully doing the work of the Kingdom, and you're trying to do your best, but you're tired, and worn?

- Pray. Ask the Lord to send more workers into His field, to share the load, to bring about an abundant Harvest, all for His glory! Pray, and wait on God. Be still. Let Him renew your strength. It's an 'active recovery' so to speak. As you rest in Him, as you wait on Him - Pray, and let His peace guard your heart and mind.

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner, who says 'Friend, should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'

- Do you struggle with being judgmental toward others in the kingdom of God? To Christians who don't believe exactly the same way you do? Jesus said

"Love each other in the same way I have loved you!" John 15:12

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner, who gives generously of His abundance - grace and mercy to all who would simply receive.

- Do you struggle to receive His mercy? Do you feel branded, like Matthew was branded, a sinner? Do you feel like you can't break free from your sinful past? FORGIVENESS IS YOURS! Christ came for YOU! His mercy is new every morning. Lift your head, and follow JESUS. Step into the calling, and the destiny He has for you!

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner, who went out late in the day to hire more workers for his vineyard. Is that you?

- Are you still waiting? Have you not yet accepted Christ's invitation for 'Follow Him?' I have good news! Our God is generous and He's still hiring! No matter where you find yourself. He's still looking for you. And look, you don't have to be perfect! He's not looking for perfection. He will take you just as you are. "Jesus stands at your door and knocks, saying build your life upon the solid rock and know the peace I have for You." He is still good. He is still giving, still pouring out His love to all who will receive it. He's still changing lives. He's still offering you a grace that is not fair. Good news, it's better than fair! His grace is merciful and generous.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.