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The Shocking Salary Schedule

Matthew 20:1-16

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Recently I read a little bit about the movie *Bruce Almighty*. In the movie Jim Carrey plays news reporter Bruce Nolan, who is angry with God about his circumstances in life. In one particularly telling scene, after losing the anchor desk position he felt he deserved to his haughty nemesis, and being fired from his job and having his car vandalized, he is particularly frustrated with God. As he reviews the day with his girlfriend, he first claims that God is ignoring him; but then decides he is a victim; and finally concludes that God enjoys watching him squirm. Finally tired of Jim Carrey's complaining, "God" (played by Morgan Freeman) has Jim Carrey take over as the Almighty for a few days. And this is the basis of the comedy.

I find it interesting that the subject of the distribution of God's blessing—God's favor—is questioned even in a secular movie. Behind Jim Carrey's rant against God is the question: How does God distribute His favor? And we have all probably felt like Jim Carrey at one time or another in our lives. We have felt like we are being ignored or that we are a victim. We've struggled as it seems like someone much less deserving has been blessed with financial favor or good health or rich relationships, while we have not. And we complain to God.

Well, as it was portrayed in *Bruce Almighty*, God is not going to let us walk in His shoes so we can experience the difficulty of His job. But I do think He wants us to have a little insight on how He distributes His favor. We're going to look at Matthew 20:1-16 for an answer to the question: How are we to understand the distribution of God's favor?

Before getting to our passage, it is particularly important that we understand the context, so we need to look back in chapter 19. In Matthew 19:23-24, in talking with the disciples, Jesus summarizes His interaction with a wealthy man:

And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (*NASB)

The disciples are astonished to hear this response, so in verse 25 they ask a question, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus responds to them in verse 26 by saying, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." At this point Peter responds to Jesus. He asks a very mercenary question: "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

I like Peter. He has a good, firm sense of justice. He wants to know if one of those rich guys can be saved by a miraculous work of God. Will that rich guy get the same reward as someone like the disciples who followed Jesus for a number of years? Peter wants to know: "Jesus, what's in it for us?" Implied is the idea: "We are going to get more for sacrificially following You than some guy who enjoys the world to the max, then gets saved late in life by a supernatural working of God, right?" It is a very mercenary type question.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter for the question. Instead He answers him starting in verse 28:

And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

This promise is specifically given to the 12 disciples, and He lets them know that at the consummation of history they will judge the nation of Israel with Jesus, presumably for its general rejection of Jesus. However, in verse 29, Jesus moves on to include all those that follow Him. He says:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”

This verse seems to promise a reward here in this life and eternal life. In a parallel passage, Mark 10:30, it is clearer that the reward will be 100 times in this life, and eternal life in the life to come. The promise is not literal. It is not a 100 to 1 match for everything we sacrifice in following Jesus. Rather, it is a reminder that God is no person's debtor. God will handsomely reward those who follow Him.

In verse 30, Jesus quotes a proverb as a way of setting forth God's grace over and against all notions that the rich, powerful, great and prominent will continue so in God's kingdom:

“But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.” (Matt. 19:30)

Five months ago Bryan challenged us to live for that which really matters. He challenged us to live for that which is eternal. He called us to give up the treasures of this world, to store up treasures in heaven. Maybe after five months you are wondering, *Is it worth it?* You can do the math and you know where your checking account would be if you had not given x-hundred dollars for the last five months. Or you have seen the ads for the newer car and you're thinking, *That sure would be nice.* Maybe you've chosen to serve in some capacity within the body and you don't have the leisure time you once had. Maybe your adoption of an eternal value system over a temporal value system has made friends or family uncomfortable and they have subtly or not so subtly rejected you. In all this you wonder, *Is living for eternity really that important? Wouldn't it be enough just to get into heaven?*

I want to tell you, based on Jesus' answer to Peter, your sacrifice is worth it. You are not going to get shortchanged. God is no person's debtor. You will be handsomely rewarded.

We would think the guarantee of abundant blessing in this life and eternal life in the life to come would be enough of an answer to Peter's question. But there is more to Jesus' answer. We see the link between the parable we are about to study in Matthew 20 and Jesus' answer to Peter here in Matthew 19, because both end with a similar proverb. The words of Matthew 20:16 are very close to those of Matthew 19:30. Let's see what else Jesus has to say on this subject and try and get an answer to our question: How do we understand the distribution of God's blessing?

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’”

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’ But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

(Matthew 20:1-16)

It is always a bit of a challenge interpreting a parable. Historically people have read meanings in and out of parables that Jesus never intended. Parables have been over-allegorized, with people drawing sometimes absurd conclusions from these stories. The reaction of biblical scholars to this over-allegorization has been to say that there is only one point to a parable. This reaction certainly put a stop to the over-allegorization of the parables, but it may have limited the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus intended there to be more than one point in some parables.

In 1990 one of my professors at seminary, Dr. Craig Blomberg, published a book entitled *Interpreting the Parables*, suggesting that in interpreting any parable we should assume that each main character, or each grouping of main characters, makes a point. I find his argument convincing, for it limits the over-allegorization of parables, but doesn’t limit every parable to one point.

In our parable, like Dr. Blomberg, I see three main characters, or groups of main characters: the early group of workers, the later group of workers, and the master. From the early group of workers we learn that none of God’s people will be treated unfairly. In our story the early workers are up in arms because they think they should have gotten more money since they worked longer than the other workers. Verse 12:

“...saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’ ”

Look at the master’s response in verse 13:

“But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ”

The master’s response is: “Stop complaining. We made a deal and I held up my end of the deal.”

God will always be at least fair with His people. In fact, I would argue that He has been more than fair with most all of us. Fairness and justice say that we deserve eternal damnation. If you have been saved from that punishment, God has been more than fair with you. When I am frustrated with God, one thing I never demand is justice—because justice says I should spend an eternity separated from God. God will always be fair with His people.

From the later group of workers we learn that some seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to the sovereign grace of God. According to verse 9, they received a denarius, a day’s wage, for as little as an hour’s work. Why were they so well paid? Because of the sovereign generosity and grace of the master. It was his choice.

This is the conflict of this parable. It really messes with our performance based society and world. Like the early workers in verses 11 and 12, some of us are bothered by this story. Some of us are outraged by this story, because we do not have a category or explanation for how this can happen.

Well, here is the explanation. From the master we learn that God can do with His favor what He pleases. Look at verses 14 and 15:

“ ‘Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ ”

God is not constrained by human expectation or societal norms when it comes to the giving of His favor. His favor is never earned; it is His to do with as He pleases. He will always be fair with His people, but with some He will be more generous. And His generosity with some people does not negate His fairness with other people.

We started our look at this passage by asking a question: How are we to understand the distribution of God’s favor? Based on what we have seen in this parable, we can say, “The distribution of God’s favor depends completely on His sovereign grace and does not conform to human expectations or norms.” *The distribution of God’s favor depends completely on His sovereign grace and does not conform to human expectations or norms.*

Why didn’t Jesus put the subject of God’s reward for our service of Him with the promises of Matthew 19:29 and 30? We don’t know; the text doesn’t say. But I wonder if Jesus knew He had to deal with our tendency to compare His blessing of our lives with His blessing of other people’s lives. He knows that from time to time, though we recognize God’s blessing in our life, we get upset when we perceive that we are getting shortchanged in comparison to another person. And when this happens, instead of being a great source of joy, God’s blessing becomes a source of great frustration for us.

Going back to the movie *Bruce Almighty*, one thing that really upset Jim Carrey was that his nemesis, Evan, got the news anchor job he wanted. Speaking of God in this situation, Carrey says, “He is ignoring me. He is far too busy giving Evan everything he wants.” That is a very irrational conclusion about God’s working. But many of us at one time or another have felt Jim Carrey’s frustration.

I didn’t get married until I was 33. That wasn’t my plan for my life. I had hoped to be married around 26. With each year after 26, I grew more impatient with God. I’d say, “God, I serve you full-time as a missionary, making less pay than most of my college friends. Why are they married and I’m not? Is this what I get for serving you faithfully?” Or I would go to Campus Crusade’s national meeting and see many of my peers, with whom I joined the staff of Campus Crusade, married and even married with children. I’d say to God, “Why did their prayers for a spouse get answered and mine ignored?” I wondered, *What did they do, that I haven’t, to deserve a spouse?* Though God had blessed me with great friends and a rich ministry and had more than met my financial needs, from time to time I was mad. I couldn’t enjoy God’s blessing of my life because I was too consumed looking around at others, noticing that they had a spouse and I did not.

For me it was the marriage issue. Maybe for you it is money. You look at a certain individual or family and wonder, *God, how is it they have an abundance, while we struggle?* Or maybe it is a relational issue: *God, why did she get such wonderful parents, when I got stuck with mine?* Or, *Why*

is our child so rebellious, when everyone else's children are doing fine? Or maybe it is a health issue.

It could be any number of issues. But in each case we wonder, *God, why have You withheld Your blessing from me and been so extravagant with this other person? What has he done that I haven't?* Hopefully, as we remember the distribution of God's favor is based solely on His sovereign grace, we can stop comparing God's blessing of our lives with our perception of God's blessing of other people's lives. Hopefully, as we realize the truth of Matthew 20, we can stop asking questions that compare our performance with other believers' performances. Hopefully we will be freed up to rejoice in God's abundant blessing as it is articulated in Matthew 19:29, rather than have God's blessing become a source of frustration for us.

What do we do with this passage? First, remember the words of verse 29: God is no person's debtor. His promise to those who sacrifice for Him is rich reward in this life and eternal life in the life to come. If you made a commitment this past January to sacrifice something of this world to live for eternity, I encourage you to stay the course. You have His promise that He will richly reward your service. Thank God that He will richly reward your service and sacrifice for His kingdom.

Second, do not compare God's favor in your life with what you perceive is God's favor in another person's life. Confess your comparison for what it is: the sin of ingratitude, of discontent, of envy. Repent and ask God to change you.

Third and finally, use your reaction to the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 as a gauge to see how much you need to grow in your understanding, acceptance, and application of God's grace. Jesus is the master storyteller, and I think He tells this story to upset us. We live in a performance based world. Thankfully, Jesus is not a performance based God. But we want to fit the grace based Jesus into our performance based world, and it does not work. This parable reminds you and me that we need to grow in our understanding, acceptance, and application of God's grace. Use the conflict you might feel over this parable as a sign of your need to seek God. Ask Him to help you capture grace on a heart level—that you might rejoice when you encounter seemingly less deserving people that have been richly blessed by Him.

My senior year in high school, I was part of a class that did miserably on a particular trigonometry exam. We were shocked when we got our tests back. As our teacher walked us through the exam, he showed us that each test problem was related to an assigned homework problem leading up to the test. So we were without excuse. He then proceeded to tell us that he was going to curve the test. However, instead of just giving everybody an additional 5 points, he was going to give us a certain percentage of the points we lost back. I can't remember the exact number, but let's use 20 percent. So a person with a 90 percent lost 10 points. Twenty percent of 10 is 2, so he would get 2 points back, and his score would go from 90 to 92. Likewise, a person with an original score of 80 would go from 80 to 84.

At first we were overjoyed to get points back. The problem set in when we began to compare with other students. I don't remember my exact score, but let's say I had an 80 and went to an 84. I checked with the person in front of me and she went from a 90 to a 92. I got 4 points back and she only got 2 points back. But I thought, *Hey, that's the system.*

But then I checked with the guy behind me. He went from a 70 to a 76, so he got 6 points back. All of a sudden I was upset. I wanted 6 points. So I said "Hey, Mr. Peveto, why does he get 6 points and I only get 4?" Pretty quickly, due to an act of kindness, this poor teacher had an uproar on his

hands. Everybody, except for the person with the lowest score in the class, was upset because somebody in the class got more points back on their test than they did. Even with his clear and patient explanation, we could not handle a system that was different and a system that did not distribute points evenly. Finally the bell rang and everybody left in a stew, muttering how unfair Mr. Peveto was.

As I look back on the situation, it is a little bit like God's distribution of His blessing. Just as Mr. Peveto gave us points we didn't deserve, God gives us His blessing we do not deserve. Just as we were initially happy to get a few points added on to our test, we are initially thrilled to receive God's grace and blessing. Likewise, just as the problem in the class started when we began to compare the points we received back with other students, so much of our frustration with God comes when we compare our perceived blessing with that of another person. Finally, just as we assumed Mr. Peveto's system was unfair because it was different from the norm, so we assume God giving His favor based on His sovereign grace is unfair because it is different from our performance based society.

God wants us to know His system of distributing His favor is not the world's system. It is not a performance based system. I believe one of the values of understanding God's system is different than the world's system is that it will save us the frustration and angst of comparison, so we can fully enjoy His blessing in our lives.

How are we to understand the distribution of God's favor? God's distribution of His favor depends on His sovereign grace and does not conform to human norms or expectations.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation

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