

July 1, 2018  
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## WHY I RODE THE CAROUSEL Matthew 20

Isn't it great that most of us now have mobile phones that include a camera that we carry with us everywhere so that we take pictures of the events of our lives at all times? We don't have to pay to have film developed so we can snap an unlimited number of photos of what we're doing. So when we go on vacation, or have a family celebration we can have a detailed record of all that happen so that we can remember it.

Surely these new cell phone cameras help us keep alive and fresh the events and memories of our lives. Or so it seems. In 2014 a researcher at Fairfield University in Connecticut named Linda Henkel published a study in the journal *Psychological Science* that called that idea into question. She invited people to take a tour of an art museum. Some wandered through looking at the art while some snapped photos of what they were seeing. She then surveyed them afterward and found that those who took pictures remembered fewer art objects and less detail than did those who took no pictures at all!

This provoked a follow up study by 2 researchers at UC Santa Cruz. They asked 42 people to look at 15 different paintings. They asked them to look at the first 5 paintings with no camera available, then had them look at 5 more and take a picture of each, and finally had them look at the last 5 and take a picture that would soon disappear as though on Snapchat. After this they gave them a multiple choice test asking about details of each of the paintings. They recalled far more about the paintings that they took no pictures of than they did when they snapped photos.

In other words, researchers are discovering that "taking photos can impair a person's ability to remember the details of experiences being photographed." I share this because it is a surprising, counterintuitive truth. The problem with counterintuitive truths is by definition they don't seem right to us. Unfortunately that means we are going to act on what seems right to us, and we will be messing up our lives because we are doing the wrong things. As we are studying the life of Jesus as recounted by Matthew we have noticed that he often surprised people with unexpected truths. We saw in chapter 16 that he claimed that it is only when we deny ourselves that we find life, just the opposite of what we think is true. In chapter 20 we are going to see more of this kind of thing. We will find out that he,

in fact, was the king of counterintuitive. He tells us some things that we have difficulty wrapping our minds around. They are contrary to the way we think. But they are also true, and terribly important for us to grasp. Let's look at Matthew 20.

### JESUS HAS A BEWILDERING PAY SCALE

Jesus began this chapter with a story, saying, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard."

The word "for" is important. It means that the story Jesus tells in verses 1-16 relates to something he said in the previous chapter. Especially it had to do with his last statement in that chapter. "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Peter had pointed out that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Jesus, and asked, "So what do we get for that?" Jesus said in verse 28, "You who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel." Hey, that's great! They're going to be the most important people in their nation, which, they knew would rule the whole world. This is amazing because it means they will be the most important people in the world. But that kept causing arguments among them about which of them would be the most powerful. It fed their pride. So Jesus said, "Many who are first will be last." In other words, watch out, because your pride and striving to be on top could end up putting you on the bottom instead.

So then he told a story about the kingdom of God. In the story a landowner needs to hire some people to work in his vineyard for the day. Maybe he needed them to do some weeding, or maybe he needed them to pick grapes. Early in the morning he found some guys sitting by the street hoping that someone would hire them for the day. The landowner offered them a denarius, the expected pay for a day's work, to come work for him. An hour later he sees some more men who were available, and tells them if they want work he'll pay them "whatever is right." He has a reputation for being a fair man, so they go work for him. Later he sees that work isn't progressing as fast as he'd like. So at noon, and again at 3 he goes out, finds more idle workers and offers them the same deal. Finally at 5 p.m. when there is little time left in the work day he goes out and finds a few more men to put to work.

At pay time he starts with the guys he hired at the end of the day. They had worked only an hour but he gave them a denarius, a full day's wage. The other guys are thrilled. They had agreed to work for the standard minimum wage, but seeing how well the vineyard owner paid the latecomers they figured they were in for a huge

bonus, maybe even double, triple or more of what they thought they were working for. They were in for a surprise. The landowner paid them exactly what he promised, one denarius.

That was disappointing and galling. They put in a full day's work, a solid 10 hours laboring out in the sun. And the boss paid them the same thing he paid the guys who worked one hour! How would you feel if you worked all day long and there was another guy who barely broke a sweat because he worked one whole hour, and you both got paid the same thing? Let's imagine that you worked that 10 hours and the boss paid you \$15 per hour, so at the end of the day you got \$150. But so did Mr. One Hour, which means he got paid at a rate of \$150 per hour. At that rate you should have been paid \$1500 for your efforts. You were doing the same work as those other guys. Shouldn't you expect to be paid at the same rate they were? I have to say I'd feel cheated if I were in those sandals. I'd be really mad. It's just not fair.

That's just human. The early bird catches the worm, and that's what these early birds felt they'd been given. A worm. They were upset and grumbled against the landowner. But the landowner responded, "Did I pay you what I promised? Yes, I did. So I was honest and fair with you. Is it any of your business if I choose to be outrageously generous and pay someone a full day's wage for working half a day, or even for one hour? No it isn't, because I have the right to do whatever I choose with my money as long as I'm not cheating anyone. And I didn't cheat you. I gave you what I promised and what is fair. I was just exceptionally generous to them. Isn't it my prerogative to be generous to whomever I choose because, after all, it is my money?"

That's kind of a strange story. It's a bit puzzling. What does it mean, and what does it have to do with the kingdom of God? We learn from this story that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. It is radically different. This is a point Jesus went to considerable pains to get across to his followers.

Some try to plug people and God into the story and think it tells exactly how God works. So they try to decide what it means that the landowner pays everyone equally no matter how long they worked. In a sense, it does mean something like that, but it is not so specific. Have you heard of Forrest Fenn? He is 85 years old and lives in New Mexico. He is a former Air Force combat pilot and a retired art dealer who is very wealthy. A few years ago he did something that he said was intended to give people hope and to get them off their couches and get outside into

nature. He filled a box with gold nuggets, gold coins, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and other gems. Then he hid it in the Rocky Mountains. Several people verified that the box exists and is filled with treasure, having seen it before he hid it. The treasure is worth at least \$1 million, and may be worth as much as \$2 million. After hiding the box Fenn published a poem that contains 9 clues to the location of the box. All you have to do is solve the clues and follow them to find the box, and the treasure is yours. Fenn has confirmed that the box, hidden somewhere between Santa Fe and the Canadian border, is still there, though searchers have gotten within 200 feet of it. Here's the dark side of the story. Last year alone 3 different men died while searching for the hidden treasure.

Let's suppose that I use that story to illustrate the point that we touched on in Matthew 19, that pursuing riches can be deadly. The story would only generally illustrate that point. But suppose someone then takes the story and tries to press it by saying, "pursuing money will always kill you." So if you get a job in order to earn money, it's going to kill you, or if you invest money in order to make more money in the future so you can retire, it's going to kill you. The problem is I never intended the story to say that. I only intended it as an illustration of the idea that pursuing treasure can be deadly. You have to take the one point I'm trying to drive home with the story, rather than press every possible angle from the story.

Jesus was making one general point here. The kingdom of God is not like this world. It does not operate by the world's ways of doing things or the world's way of thinking. In fact, God does things that seem incomprehensible to us, that are so different we struggle to even begin to accept them. Specifically, in response to the disciples thinking maybe they had earned something because they believed in Jesus first and dedicated themselves to sacrificing to follow him, Jesus said, "Look out. In the kingdom of God the first will be last." God is going to graciously give to people something they haven't earned. If you think the way this world operates you will not accept this system. It will make no sense to you. God is going to give graciously to people who have never earned it, and often never were interested in earning it.

We live in a world that is locked into a system. People are ranked, valued, accepted and rewarded according to the system. Those who are the best at something should get the best. Those who work the longest and hardest should get the most. We earn something by being smarter, more talented, more beautiful, or by working harder or longer than other people. We have a hard time believing that God might operate by any other system. To do anything else, we think, would not be fair. But this

story says that God is subversive. He undermines the whole system. He relates to people on the basis of grace and undeserved generosity. His system is as foreign to us as the Klingon language, but God's grace based system is for real.

This system begins rewiring our brains. It changes how we think about God, how we think about ourselves, how we see other people and how we treat them. It changes our priorities and upends our social hierarchies. In the end, it creates an entirely new, alien way of thinking, living and relating.

I recently encountered a person who for years masqueraded as a friend of mine, but I learned after the fact that this individual had done me considerable harm. In fact, this person had stabbed me in the back, only not just once, but continually over a period of years. What this person *deserved*, what they had earned, was rejection. The natural way to respond to this person is to walk away, to have nothing to do with them. But I had to come to grips with what the kingdom of God is like. It doesn't relate to people on the basis of what they deserve. It relates to them on the basis of grace and generosity.

That makes no sense to us. It doesn't seem fair. It is unnatural. But it is what the kingdom of God is like. The principle this story illustrates touches every aspect of life, every person, every relationship. There is another incident in this chapter that reveals how wildly different the kingdom of God is.

### JESUS HAS A BIZARRE ORG CHART

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had a Jewish mother. Likely she wanted her sons to be doctors, but they had chosen a different path. However, in their current situation as disciples of Jesus she saw an opportunity for advancement for her boys that would make being doctors look like slumming. We saw how Jesus told Peter that the 12 disciples would rule with him in his kingdom. What powerful positions they were going to have. Mommy Z went to Jesus and recommended her boys for positions on Jesus' right and left. In other words, she was certain they'd be perfect to be his vice presidents, the next most powerful men on the planet. There are thousands of doctors in the world. There's only going to be two vice presidents, so this is way more important than any mere physician.

Jesus said, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you handle what comes with getting to that position?" Jesus was going to be the ruler of the world, but what he would go through to get there was beyond horrible. Those who go with him will get some of that same treatment. The boys said, "We can do it!" Jesus said, "You

will indeed, get your share of what's going to happen to me, but it's up to the Father to decide who becomes vice president." And the two boys did, in fact, get their share of the suffering to come. True to their word, they handled it.

However, even though Jesus didn't make any promises about roles in his future administration, just the fact that the discussion occurred sparked indignation among the other disciples. Perhaps they didn't have helicopter mommies who were going to bat for them and they feared they were being outmaneuvered. They were upset because they were constantly playing the hierarchy game. They were trying to figure out who ranked where, and trying to move up the ladder. In other words, they were doing what humans do 365 days a year.

Jesus described how the world works. The people on top are the ones that matter. They use their position to puff up their own sense of importance, to increase their own wealth and power, and they walk all over the people down at the bottom of the ladder. They exercise power and they "lord it" over everybody else. Everyone is always fighting for power and prestige. To have power is to be in control, and we hate not having control. We hate not being somebody important. We hate being discounted, used, controlled and considered of no value. So we strive for the top.

What Jesus said next was astounding. In his kingdom, in that bizarre, other worldly, alien kingdom, things don't work that way. In fact, it is the exact opposite. In verse 20 Jesus said in his kingdom, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." Wow. You want to be great? You want to matter? You want your life to have real value, to count for something? You want to be somebody? Then be a slave. A slave of whom? A slave of every person you ever encounter!

Slavery is abhorrent to us in our culture. It sickens us that people were once enslaved in this country. It makes us angry that such a thing was done to human beings. We cannot imagine anyone ever choosing of their own will to be a slave. Yet, that is what Jesus ordered!

Slaves exist only to do the bidding of their master. What the slave wants, thinks or feels, is irrelevant. All that matters is that they do what the master says. I have known a couple of people who had jobs in which they were almost treated like slaves. They were ordered to do the most menial and meaningless things and were treated with utter disrespect by their bosses. In every instance I have observed where something like that happened, they quit the job. They walked away because

no one wants to be a slave. What do we mean when we tell someone we are “slaving away”? We don’t mean we are having so much fun we are practically giddy. We mean we are grinding away at some onerous task that we just have to bear and somehow complete.

Jesus calls on us to willingly choose that role! This is almost inconceivable to us. I have observed that Christians mostly don’t take this instruction very seriously. We certainly don’t follow this command very closely when it comes to who we put up as leaders and who gets all the respect in the church. Who should be considered the greatest, the ones to follow? It’s not the most gifted, the most powerful speakers, the most charismatic leaders. It is those who more than anyone else serve others. This teaching is routinely ignored in churches. We don’t take the command very seriously in our personal lives either. How many of us consider other people to be our masters, and to live as though our goal in life is to do their bidding? I’m thinking that’s a pretty small number.

While Laurie and I were on vacation we played tennis one day. It was quite warm, warmer than we are used to, and we tired rather quickly. We had been hitting back and forth for a bit, but seeing we were tiring thought maybe we should work on our serves before we ran out of gas. We had stopped to rest briefly, then Laurie tossed me a ball and said, “You serve first.” I said, “Yes, see, that’s the problem in so many marriages. It’s just that attitude that causes so much trouble.” She actually laughed at that. Though I was joking, the fact is, that is where the trouble always starts in relationships. We don’t want to be a slave. We want to be served.

A few weeks ago I officiated at the wedding of Danny Martin and his bride, Torrey. After they recited their vows they did something that was a bit unusual. They washed each other’s feet. That’s the first time I’ve ever had a couple do that during their wedding. Torrey sat down on a chair, then Danny got a bucket of water, knelt down, took off her shoes, washed her feet then dried them with a small towel. Then Danny sat down and Torrey maneuvered her beautiful wedding dress out of the way, knelt down and washed Danny’s feet. It was a bit awkward for them in their wedding finery, but that made the visual symbol all the more powerful. I had just told them that as 1 Corinthians 13:5 says, love is not self seeking. It serves. It gives. I told them that when they declared their love for each other that day and promised to love each other the rest of their lives, what they were doing was saying they were going to serve each other from that day on. They were to see that their role from then on was to serve their spouse. Washing each

other's feet was a symbol of humbling oneself to do an undesirable thing in order to serve each other.

I suspect that the bride and groom made sure that their feet were the cleanest and neatest they've ever been as they prepared for the wedding, because who wants a whole bunch of people looking at your dirty, ugly feet? So the irony is that they washed each other's feet when their feet probably needed washing less than they ever had in their lives. It would have been more realistic if they made sure their feet were as grimy and stinky as possible. The real test of love in a relationship is whether we will serve a person when they are totally undeserving of that service and when serving is utterly unappealing. The person who serves that way is great in the kingdom of God. Not the one who is a dynamic leader, not the one who is a spell-binding speaker, not the one who is an incredible evangelist, not the charismatic person, not even someone who can seem to do miraculous deeds by faith. Not the one who leads a huge movement or church. The one who is great in God's kingdom, in God's eyes, is the one who humbly serves people, whether they deserve it or not.

This raises questions. In Mark's account of this incident in Mark 10:44 Jesus said, "whoever wants to become great must be the slave of all." How can I be everyone's slave? Even Jesus said no one can serve two masters. What do I do when I want to serve everyone but people want exact opposite things? I can't please both! Of course we cannot literally be everyone's slave for that reason. Jesus' point is that we are to approach life and relationships with the spirit that our role, our desire, our goal in every relationship, every interaction, is not to promote, protect or provide for ourselves, but to serve the other person. We are to do this to the extent that it is as though we are their slave!

There is a perfect model for what this means. In verse 28 Jesus said, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus' whole life was a sacrifice, a humble giving up of what was best for him, in order to bless and do good to people, most of whom rejected him. That is the way we are to live.

## APPLICATION

### REMEMBER GRACE

The most important element in enabling us to truly serve is to remember what Jesus did for us. When someone does something exceptionally kind, gracious and generous for you, it is humbling. In our case, the delta between what we deserve



and what has been given us because Jesus sacrificed himself for us is too vast to have any meaningful measure.

When we are truly gripped in our soul by this reality the last thing we want to do is to make life about us. We will desire more than anything to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We will want the spotlight to be where it belongs, which is on him not us. With that reality we will seek not to be served by others as though we are deserving of it, but to serve as Jesus did. We have been given a precious gift we have not earned. So we should be humbled, grateful, and desiring to respond to his goodness and grace to us.

Furthermore, as we remember grace we are given confidence that as Jesus has taken care of us, so he will continue. Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him give us all things?" There is no end to his grace. He will keep on providing for us as he has, so we need not fear. Imagine that in Jesus' first story the next day that landowner asked those end of the day guys if they would like to work for him again? What do you think they would say? "Um, sure, but, uh, could I wait until 5 o'clock to start work?" Well, maybe, but more importantly I think they'd be anxious to work for him. They knew he would be fair and generous with them. He would take care of them. And God has proven he will be generous to us and take care of us.

## REALIZE WHO YOU ARE

Have you ever had that experience when you get really tired where you become restless? Perhaps you are with some people and you need to sit still, but it feels like torture. You have to move. Of course, what you really need is to lie down and sleep, but in the meantime you can't get comfortable. It is relentless until that feeling is relieved. Do you ever experience that? I hate that. There is something else in us that is even more relentless. It is our need to feel that we have worth. That desire is actually insatiable. No matter how much affirmation we get, we still long for more. It is a relentless desire, an apparently bottomless pit.

This makes being the slave of all torture for us. Everyone is going to think I don't matter if I take the role of slave. I will feel as unimportant as the lowest slave, and I can't stand that. We were at Disneyland recently. At one point we had stopped our adventures for the moment and were just resting. As I was sitting there a guy walked by with a broom and dust pan. He was walking along the paths sweeping up trash. I appreciate Disney's efforts to keep the place looking good, but I thought, "I would hate that guy's job." It is an impossible job. There are thousands

of people in the park every day, and that many people generate a lot of trash. His job is endless. And thankless. He has to keep maneuvering through masses of people all of whom are intent on what they're doing, and he's just in the way. He's slaving away. His job doesn't pay especially well, and it certainly doesn't get him any glory. It's not going to get you tons of respect if you have on your resume "sweeper at Disneyland." No one notices him much and no one thanks him. And none of us relishes the idea of having our whole lives be like that.

In order for us to be able to consistently, happily, willingly serve in every situation, we have to have that issue of worth settled. That only happens when we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. We have to find our worth in God's love for us, in his esteeming us and wanting us so deeply that he would make an unfathomable sacrifice to have us be his children. When our worth is unshakably grounded in God's love for us and in our position as his children, it won't matter how we look in the eyes of others. Then we will be free to serve in every situation.

#### RELAX IN GOD'S CONTROL

One of the difficulties of being a slave is that a slave has no power. He controls almost nothing in his life. He doesn't have the power to choose a different station or direction. Being powerless is terrifying to many of us. We will do anything to control our lives.

If you've been around for some time you probably feel like airline travel is much more trying than it used to be. That is true, and there are facts that prove it. I have 2 words for you: security and pitch. Just dealing with TSA has made flying way more difficult. But pitch is another factor. That's the airline term for the distance between seats. 20 years ago that distance averaged between 34 and 35 inches. Today that distance is between 30 and 31 inches. We've lost 4 inches of legroom! It makes a big difference. However, even when the seating was more comfortable, many people still were uncomfortable flying. One large contributing factor is control. Michael is not uncomfortable with flying. In part that's because he is in control. He's not sitting strapped in a torturous chair with no idea what's actually going on with the plane and no way of affecting what happens. It occurred to me that I would like flying a lot more if Michael were the pilot because I have total confidence in him. In fact, what if he were in charge of the whole thing, how I get through security, where I sit and how comfortable the seat is, plus flying the airplane? I would have absolute confidence that the whole experience would be great because I know Michael would handle things perfectly.

As long as we are focused on power and control for ourselves it is extremely difficult to be occupied with serving others. Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” The New American Standard translation of that verse, which is more literal, is, “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.”

The New Living Translation of the end of Ephesians 1:11 is that God “makes everything work out according to his plan.” God will get us where he wants us to be, which, though we may not always know it, is where we want to be. In other words, we may not be in control, we may find ourselves in situations where we have zero power over what happens to us, but we are not out of control. We are never out of control, for God is working out everything, and he will bring good out of everything that happens to us. So we don’t need to fret about ourselves. We are safely in God’s control and power, so we can focus on serving others.

## REVEL IN THE FREEDOM OF SERVICE

As I mentioned last week we went to Disneyland with Toby, Anna, Ella and Cara. Laurie and I have had lots of fun at Disneyland. Typically for us a trip to the Tragic Kingdom is a long day, for we want to get the most out of it. We have some favorite rides which are high priorities for us. We love Thunder Mountain, Splash Mountain, Space Mountain, Radiator Springs Racers, with the next tier being Star Tours and Indiana Jones. And of course we love to catch the fireworks show and Fantasmic at night.

This most recent trip to Disney was different. We did not go to experience our favorite rides and shows. We went because we wanted to see our granddaughter, Ella, experience Disneyland. Laurie and I did go on a couple of rides we like, but that was tangential to the real point. We wanted to be with Ella as she enjoyed it, so the whole point was to do what Ella would like. In other words, the purpose was to serve Ella. So we went to see Minnie and Mickey Mouse in their Toon Town houses. We rode on the Peter Pan ride and the Little Mermaid Ride. And we rode on the carousel in Fantasyland. I never ride on the carousel. In fact, I’m not sure if I had ever ridden it before.

Here’s the cool thing about that trip. There were two things I experienced there. First, there was freedom. We had the freedom to just go at a nice slow pace. We had the freedom to not feel like we had to get on Space Mountain or Thunder Mountain. We didn’t feel like we had to stay until at least after the fireworks show. We just went at a nice easy pace. We didn’t feel bad about riding the carousel

instead of Splash Mountain. There was no need to rush around and squeeze everything in. We were free to just do what would be fun for Ella.

Second, there was great joy. It was a blast. It wasn't fun because we got to go on rides that are fun for us. It was fun because we got to see the glee, the joy and the wonder on Ella's face.

What we sometimes forget is that we were created to serve others. When we live with serving others instead of making sure we get what we want or need for ourselves, we discover there is enormous freedom. We will also tap into a joy that nothing can take away. Never forget that when we orient our minds and hearts to the goal of serving others at all times instead of living out our personal agenda, what we get in return is boundless life. And we become great in the Kingdom of God!



