

**DAY 8 | MATTHEW 20:1-16**

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

# By Grace Alone

*by Gilbert Cangy*

When I migrated to Australia in September 1981, I received good counsel from some well-intentioned migrant friends who had arrived in the country before I did. They suggested that I should immediately find a job—any job—and not to be too choosy or difficult as my priority was to very quickly achieve a measure of financial independence. I took counsel and made it known to my friends and fellow church members that I was in fact available for any job.

Soon after, my new friend Kevin approached me after church to suggest that he was a production manager and that there was a vacancy where he worked and I could have the job if I wanted. I immediately accepted and did feel the need to ask about the nature of the job, in view of the counsel I had received. The only things I asked were where the job was, when I could start, and what time did I have to report.

He immediately responded, “Monday morning at 5:00 a.m.” I thought it was a joke, and I waited for him to say so; but he went on to ask if I had a car, which I did not. As he drove to work past the place where I lived, he proposed to pick me up. He said that as the production manager he had to be there at 4:30 a.m., so he would pick me up at 4:00 a.m. and told me to bring a change of clothes. I felt trapped, but it was too late to back down.



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This occurred in the heart of winter and I wrapped myself in my ten dollar St Vincent de Paul coat as I waited under a streetlight to be picked up. Soon we arrived at the work place: it was at the Flemington Markets—a packing and distribution warehouse for fruits and vegetables. Upon arrival Kevin briefed me on my job: I was the new potato packer on the potato line.

## The Production Manager

Large bins of dirty potatoes were tipped onto a conveyor belt; they were washed or brushed, weighed, packed in five kilogram plastic bags, and sealed automatically. These five kilogram packs ended up on a rotating table where a lady skillfully slotted five of them into large brown paper bags; this is where I came into action.

I had to lift the 25 kg potato bag and place it on a moving belt connected to a sowing machine; at the right time, I pressed a pedal to sow the bags and stacked 40 of them on a pallet. I had to use a jack to wheel the pallet to the back of the warehouse and run back; by the time I returned there were about 15 filled bags I had to catch up with and there was no stopping of the machine (sometimes we prayed for it to break down). That was my job. When the 10 a.m. bell rang for a break, I could hardly walk or move my arms—I just laid my head on the dining room table and groaned and moaned.

When I got home that afternoon, my wife hardly recognized me and immediately ordered that I should resign. I was not to resign; it would be too shameful to give up after boasting that I would do anything.

After a month on the job, my friend Kevin told me that work was booming and asked if I was willing to do some overtime—two hours every day. I was in pain, but I agreed. Again, a couple of weeks later, he told me that the business was doing really well and asked if I could come in on Sundays. Again, I said yes. By that time my friend Kevin did not pick me up any more; I caught the train and I was never late.

**Can you guess which day of the week I thought was the best?** (Let audience answer).

Sabbath?

Yes, in a way it was Sabbath, because I could rest.

But I must confess that there was another day of the week that was really exciting – it was Thursday – payday. Because of the hard labor and the long hours, it was always exciting to see how thick the pay packet was.

I was prepared to do this back-breaking job for long hours and deprive myself of leisure and family on Sundays because of the pay packet.

That’s how society works – the more you work, the more you get paid. You get what you deserve.

Life, in general, functions like that; there is a natural sense of justice and fairness.

There are laws that govern our society – if you live within boundaries of those laws and you are generally fine. You do what is right and are rewarded; you do wrong and you are held accountable.

You apply yourself and study hard, you pass your exams; if you don’t prepare, you pray extra hard before the exam and you still fail.

You exceed the speed limit or drive through a red light, you become a celebrity— your photo is taken.

You get what you deserve; that is to be fair.

When it comes to religious life, the same principle is in operation.

## **Salvation in Other World Religions**

In Hinduism, there are four ways to “Moksha” or salvation – when the human mind is freed from the cycle of life and death and become one with God.

1. The way of action – you observe religious ceremonies, duties, and rites

2. The way of knowledge – you acquire complete comprehension of the universe
3. The way of devotion – your acts of worship
4. The royal road – the practice of meditation and Yoga techniques

In Buddhism, the blissful state of Nirvana is reached through the Noble Eightfold Path.

1. Right understanding;
2. Right resolve;
3. Right speech;
4. Right action;
5. Right occupation;
6. Right effort;
7. Right contemplation;
8. Right meditation.

In Islam, it is a balancing act.

In Islam salvation is based on a combination of Allah's grace and the Muslim's works. On the Day of Judgment, if a Muslim's good works outweigh his bad ones, and if Allah so wills it, he may be forgiven of all his sins and then enter into paradise.

The good that you do cancels out the wrong that you have done.

If you go for a pilgrimage in Mecca, you accrue a huge credit in the books of heaven.

If you die as a martyr defending the faith, you have direct access to heaven.

# Salvation in the Christian Faith

What about Christianity? What does Jesus have to say about how we enter the kingdom of God, how we inherit eternal life?

A young man came to Jesus with that preoccupation. He came to Jesus with the one million dollar question. It's one of the most famous and most poignant stories of the gospels.

"Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'" (Matthew 19:16).

As we piece together the narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we discover that this man was young, wealthy and successful – he was a ruler in his community. Why would someone like that be interested in eternal life, or in the kingdom of God? He had everything, didn't he?

Mark tells us that Jesus was actually leaving a particular place when this young man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him, publicly. How desperate was he? **"What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?"** (See Mark 10:17-27.)

You see, eternal life does not just begin when Jesus comes a second time; the eternal kind of life, the eternal quality of life with peace, contentment, joy, serenity and purposeful service begins today, in the here and now, in anticipation of the glorious Second Coming of Jesus. Wealth, position, and power can never bring that; neither can religion, for this man was religious as well and professed that he had observed the law perfectly since he was a child.

The encounter of this young, rich, successful and religious young man was full of promise:

1. He had come with the right question;
2. He had come with the right attitude;
3. He had come to the right person.

Everything was set for a great ending to the story.

**“What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What do I still lack?”** he asked.

Approaching eternal life like the Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Muslim in terms of things to be done, he was looking for one more thing to do.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One more thing you lack’, he said  
(Mark 10: 21).

**“TRUST ME.” Jesus’ answer to him can be summed up as “Trust me.” Place me first in your life; I cannot be just ‘one more thing’ in order to save you; you have constructed your life on the pursuit of wealth and position and religious actions which now define your existence; you have recognized that this is not satisfying the deeper longings of your heart. You have now come to me to add just one more thing to your to-do list. But you need to seek first the kingdom of God. “Trust me.”**

The young man pulled out his calculator, did a quick calculation, and when he looked at the bottom dollar, the Bible says his face fell. That was going to cost him too much. With all his desperation, with all his commandment keeping, with all the love that Jesus could level at him, he left sad and unsaved. **He could not put Jesus first.** He could not place his life in the hands of Jesus. He could not sing the last hymn...“all to Jesus I surrender.” He left sad and unsaved.

The disciples who had witnessed this encounter were confused and engaged Jesus in a discussion. If this guy who seemed to be FIRST in the line for the kingdom of God could not make it, who possibly can? They could not help but ask the question:

**“Who then can be saved?”**

**“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” And Jesus’ final remark was “Many who are FIRST will be last, and many who are last will be first.” Remember this line, for we will come back to it.**

To drive this truth home Jesus takes us back to the Flemington Market, back to the warehouse, back to the work places, and gives us an offensive parable where the entry into the end time judgment of the kingdom of God is likened to a payday scene where the human principle of “more work equals more money” is completely flouted; hence the title, ***“The Parable of the Unfair God.”***

## **Jesus Answers with a Parable full of Surprises**

### **Read Matthew 20:1-2.**

Here is the meeting of the rich and the poor. The rich landowner goes out early in the morning to the market place, where poor people are gathered waiting to see where food for them and their families will come from for that day. They are day laborers waiting to be offered a day’s work for a day’s wage.

The rich landowner is wise. He is out early after having done his homework and has worked out how many workers he needs to get the job done for the day.

He recruits and, before they head for the vineyard, they enter into some negotiation and wage bargaining and he ‘agrees’ to pay them one denarius for the day – which was very generous wage for the time. It is 6:00 a.m. and it is cool when they arrive in the vineyard, collect their baskets, which they strap on their backs – backpack style – and they begin the day.

Three hours later the master surprises us.

### **Read Matthew 20:3-5.**

It is the third hour; it is 9:00 a.m.

The master’s purpose for going out is not to recruit; he has a business plan and recruiting has already been taken care of. The text tells us that he just went out and as he did, he saw others standing there who had not been employed. This master is different; he is not driven by profit making, but is touched by the plight of the needy who are doing nothing.

Now these workers have no right to a full day's wage and they know it; this time there is no discussion about wages. "Trust me – I will pay you whatever is right." So the new group sets out for the vineyard, with no bargain, but just trusting in the fairness of the master.

Imagine that you are a hard worker who has bargained for your wages and started work at 6:00 a.m. The sun is up and you have started to sweat as you climb the hills and the basket is getting heavy. Now you see a whole new bunch of workers arrive; what would you think of them? Probably that they are not as serious as you are. It is like church; you are there as Sabbath school starts – always on time.

Three hours later, the master surprises us again.

### **Read Matthew 20:5.**

Sixth hour: Midday

Ninth hour: 3:00 p.m.

Moved by his concern and compassion for needy people, the master is still recruiting. It seems that his mind is not with a business plan anymore, but he is driven by consideration for the plight of people who will not have bread to put on the table for the night. There is no mention of wages, neither from the master, nor from the new workers. This master is relentless in his desire to meet the needs of people at the detriment of his own welfare and personal gain.

Remember that you are still the hard working people who started at 6:00 a.m. What are you thinking of those who arrive at lunch time and even at 3:00 p.m.? That it is ridiculous, isn't it? Those who arrive at midday are those who only come to church for the second half—for the divine service; those at 3:00 p.m. arrive just in time for the sermon to begin, no preliminaries. What do you think of those people?

As if we did not have enough surprises – this is now getting ridiculous.

### **Read Matthew 20:6,7.**

This is absolutely ridiculous – the eleventh hour—a 5:00 p.m. recruit for a 6:00 p.m. finish?

Now the master engages them in conversation: he wants to know why they have been standing there “all day” doing nothing. The master must have seen them since the morning; and each time he came back, they were still there, and again at 5:00 p.m. Their response was very telling: “No one has hired us.” They were unemployable; they were worth nothing in the eyes of every prospective employer who came to the market place. They had one thing in their favor: they did not give up; they are still taking their chances at that ridiculous hour. That was a perfect scenario for this particular master who had been full of surprises all day; this generous master had a way of showing up when people needed him most, when things were just about to fall apart. So the new bunch of workers are also invited to head to the vineyard.

These are those who come for the last hymn and for fellowship lunch. What would you think of them?

By the time they get to the vineyard, get the orientation, and grab their baskets – it’s the end of the day and the bell rings; it is the end of the day’s work. Now it is pay time.

Even Now, the Master is Not Done Surprising Us.

### **Read Matthew 20:8.**

Everybody is lined up, with the hardest workers at the head of the queue, of course. But the master instructs the foreman to reorganize the queue. “Will those who started work at 6:00 a.m. go at the back of the queue and those who just arrived come to the front?”

The master is reorganizing the line in such a way that what is about to transpire will be visible and evident to all; this distribution of wages, this verdict, this final judgment, if you will, will in fact be made manifest for all to witness and behold.

Obviously, the hard working people are not very pleased, but they reason among themselves that the master does not want to embarrass those who just arrived because they will just get some loose change and will become envious when they see the hard working ones get their full day's wage.

More surprise from the master.

### **Read Matthew 20:9.**

The workers who just arrived receive a full day's wages. They are confused and are probably disappearing very quickly, probably thinking that the paymaster has made a mistake. The hard working people are laughing at them, thinking that they are running away out of the embarrassment of the insignificance of their wage and they ask, "How much did you get?" The first one does not dare answer; the second one just shows one finger; the hard working ones are laughing their heads off and ask, "One pondion?" (One pondion is one twelfth of a denarius); but the answer comes back, "No, one denarius."

"One denarius? One denarius for one hour's work?" Immediately, the hard working ones begin to recalculate their wages. If one hour equals one denarius, then twelve hours equals twelve denarii; the party has started in the vineyard: they are making plans for new sandals, new tunics, and family holidays.

### **Read Matthew 20:10a.**

But the rest of the verse brings the first unpleasant surprise of the story.

### **Read Matthew 20:10b-12.**

You see, when the paymaster places one denarius in the hand of the hard worker and the paymaster says "next," no one moves; they begin to grumble like thunder and call for the master. How do you dare do that? How dare you treat hard working people like us the same way you treated those slackers who only labored for an hour – this is so offensive and unfair.

## **Read Matthew 20:13-16.**

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the LAST will be first and the first will be last.’”

Remember this saying? The young ruler saw himself as FIRST, he ends up last; the 5:00 p.m. workers saw themselves as LAST, they end up FIRST.

What is this about? What would you do if you were a hard working person in that vineyard on that day? What would I do? What did I do at the Flemington Markets?

## **This story is a stumbling block to our sense of fairness. It is truly scandalous.**

As a general rule in the parables, the king, the master, the landowner is always Jesus Himself. So the question is: “Is God unfair?”

## **What is the point of the story?**

The key to the story is found in the introduction of the parable:

***“For the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”***

This story is not about real work and real pay; it is about entrance to the kingdom of God today and the end time judgment of God. Entrance to the kingdom of God is not about how good you are and how many good works you have done; it is a gift of God. This is God’s way of providing eternal life. Eternity is a gift of God to all the undeserving children of the human race. Grace, God’s amazing grace, is the point of this story. All are equally undeserving of so large a sum as a denarius a day; it is given by the generosity of the Master to those who realize that they bring nothing to the negotiating table of salvation except their deep sense of their need of God’s grace. This is more readily accepted by those who are still at the market place at 5:00 p.m. and have a definite sense of their ‘unemployability’. For all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

### **In that sense, God is unfair when it comes to eternal life . . .**

If to be fair means to give us or to treat us as we deserve, how would it be with us if God dealt with us according to our

Broken promises

Hardness of heart

Insensitivity to the needs of others

Our prejudice, our pride

Impure thoughts and motives

Our envy and jealousy

YES—God is unfair—and we should rejoice that He is unfair! For He does not treat us as we deserve.

### **Psalms 103:8-13**

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ....

he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

### **Isaiah 53:5, 6:**

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

### **Ephesians 2:8-9:**

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.*

### **Desire of Ages, page 25:**

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. “With His stripes we are healed.”

We all have sinned.

We are spiritually bankrupt.

Christ died as our substitute.

We must believe it; admit to it; accept and trust in it.

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12-13).

The result is a spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit.

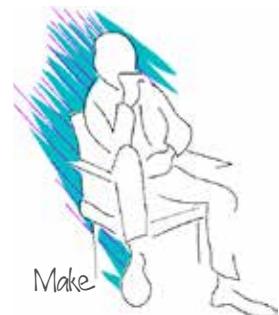
“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” ( 2 Cor 5:17-19).

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14,15).

## **Conclusion**

### **(Insert personal experience or use Blondin story)**

The story is told of the French tight-rope walker, Blondin, who announced that he was going to stretch a cable across the Niagara Falls all the way from the Canadian side to the U.S. side and walk across. Large crowds and the press gathered on both sides. As Blondin finished his first crossing the crowd applauded and jeered and declared him the greatest. Then Blondin took a special push bike with grooves



Make  
it real and personal.  
Share a story from  
your own life.

in the tines and pedaled across; again the crowd went ecstatic and chanted out his name. Then Blondin took a wheelbarrow and pushed it across the Falls, and this time the crowd went wild and said that there was nothing he could not do. Then Blondin silenced the crowd and asked if they thought he could cross the Niagara with someone sitting in the wheelbarrow; they all screamed that there was no doubt that he could do it. Then Blondin asked for a volunteer. There was silence in the crowd; there was no taker.

In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of God has drawn near to us; it is at hand.

Jesus says to each of us: "It is within reach – repent and believe – I will take you across to the other side. I offer you grace, forgiveness, and a new kind of purposeful life in the present and, as your Advocate in the end time judgment, an eternal glorious kingdom when I come again soon to take my people home."

## Appeal

What stands in your way? What keeps you from entering the kingdom of God today? ●



# Group Discussion Questions

## Day One

1. Where do you see the kingdom of God breaking into the world today?
2. What do you think of the idea that “as through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here”? How much heaven should we expect to be able to experience here?
3. What makes repentance such a difficult or scary thing? How do we embrace repentance?
4. Where is God drawing you into “Kingdom action”?

## Day Two

1. What is the difference between a fable and a fairytale? Why would the kingdom of God, as described by Jesus, seem like a fairytale?
2. Do you know anyone, like NFL Quarterback Tom Brady, that aches to know something more or something better than the broken reality of this world, or have you ever ached to experience something more in your own life? What would you tell a friend who was aching?
3. The reality that we see with our eyes can be so heart-breaking at times.

How does one live in the reality of the kingdom of God in the face of so many challenges and heartbreaks?

4. Is it possible to be stuck in the reality of this world as opposed to thriving in the reality of the kingdom of God? If so, how? What kind of quality of life do you think being “stuck” or overly influenced by the reality of our circumstances leads to?
5. What could you change today, what’s one area in your life where you could begin thinking differently, so that you could, like Paul, begin to live in the reality of the kingdom of God as opposed to the fable of the story of this world?

## Day Three

1. Have you ever waited for something that was not as good as you had hoped? How did you feel as you waited? Anxious, bored, excited? Share with the group how you felt and what you were waiting for.
2. What are ways that you as a group or a person can be the tangible hands of Christ in the world?
3. Is your church/group missional in it’s response to the Gospel? How can you be more missional in your approach?
4. The sermon spoke of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy. But what about Orthocardia? Orthocardia can be expressed as “the right heart.” Do you do these things: Justice, Compassion, Mercy, Healing and Proclaiming the Year of the Lord’s favor with “right-heartedness”? And what does that mean in your context?

## Day Four

1. How do you relate to the metaphor of “kingdom” in an age when most of the world does not live under the authority of a king or queen? Would God use the same metaphor today? How about president, prime minister, or governor? Is this language different in any way?
2. In what ways is membership in the country of God different than other kinds of membership?
3. What surprises you about how (and who) Jesus taught?
4. How can we make certain a seat is available to any and all?

## Day Five

1. “Secular society no longer listens to information to find truth, instead they look for truth incarnated in a person’s life.” What are the implications for the church of a statement like this?
2. How do we help people find in themselves the value they cannot see but we clearly recognize?
3. What are some local issues taking place in the community around your church that you should be involved in?
4. Talk about the people in your life who have influenced the way you see others in a positive way.
5. The most difficult thing that Jesus is asking us to do before the Second Coming is love a lost world! What does that love look like for the average Adventist Church?

## Day Six

1. What kingdom are you focused on – the one without or the one within? How can you tell?
2. Are there superficial structures that you are placing your faith in (like the city of Chattanooga)? Are there things you are relying on that are not firmly founded? What are they?
3. What would the kingdom of God look like now if it was visible?
4. Can you trust God with the things you cannot see or understand? How do you know?
5. Is there anything in your life blocking you from allowing the kingdom of God to fully explode in your heart? Have some silent prayer time for those things now.

## Day Seven

1. How has your understanding of the phrase “the kingdom of God” changed?
2. What are barriers to your being the mustard seed that grows to a mature mustard plant in your home/church/community?
3. Discuss with your group practical or tangible solutions to creating authentic community instead of the virtual world of Facebook, Google + and Twitter.

## Day Eight

1. How would you respond if someone was to ask you, "If Jesus was to return today would He take you to heaven?"
2. What would be the basis of your response to that question?
3. Why do you think the hardworking people in the parable were upset with the master?
4. Do you think that there will be people who will be upset like that when Jesus returns? Why?
5. If we are truly saved by grace, what place do service for God, character development, and obedience have in God's plan to save us and the world?