

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 24: The Rich Young Man; Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 19:16–20:16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the very nature of salvation: whether eternal life is earned by good deeds or received as a gift by a faith that forsakes all to follow Christ. The rich young man embodies the assumption that there is some good thing he can do to secure eternal life, and Jesus dismantles that assumption. He shows the man that his real problem is not a missing deed but a divided heart, and that following Jesus requires surrendering whatever rivals Him. When the disciples conclude that salvation is therefore impossible, Jesus agrees: with man it is impossible. Only God can save, and He does so by grace. The parable of the laborers then guards that grace from being turned back into wages. God gives eternal life not as fair payment for hours worked but as generous gift, the same eternal life to the lifelong disciple and the latecomer alike.

This passage also aims squarely at the formation of the student's heart, because the issue Jesus raises is not merely abstract. Every disciple has a rich-young-man place, some possession or comfort or security gripped too tightly to surrender. Every disciple is tempted to keep score with God, to grumble like the dawn workers when grace falls generously on those who seem less deserving. The lesson is meant to expose these idols and these grumbings, and to set the student free by the wonder of a God who can do the impossible and who is not merely fair but lavishly generous.

So teach for both. Let your students grasp clearly that they cannot earn eternal life, that it is God's gift to a faith that follows wholeheartedly, and that this grace is generous beyond fairness. And let them walk out willing to loosen their grip on whatever they have been clutching, and ready to rejoice rather than grumble when God pours out His goodness on others.

Question 1

Student Question:

The young man asks what "good deed" he must do to have eternal life, and Jesus redirects him first to God's goodness and His commandments, then to following Him (19:16–21). What is Jesus teaching about how eternal life is actually received, and why does He not simply give the man a deed to perform?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the young man's question, because it reveals the assumption Jesus must overturn. "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (19:16). He imagines eternal life as a

transaction, a sufficiently impressive deed that will secure his future. He is asking how to earn what can only be received.

Jesus' first move is subtle. "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good" (19:17). He gently redirects the man from his own goodness toward God's. Then He names commandments, and the young man, sincerely, claims to have kept them all. He is not lying as he understands it; he is simply blind to the depth of his own need.

The decisive word comes in verse 21: "go, sell what you possess and give to the poor... and come, follow me." Notice that the final command is not merely to give away money but to follow Jesus. Eternal life is not finally about a deed at all; it is about a Person. The young man wanted a task he could complete and check off. Jesus offered him Himself, which required surrendering everything else.

Help students see why Jesus does not simply hand the man a deed. To give him a deed would confirm his fatal assumption that he can earn his way. Instead, Jesus exposes the one rival to God in his heart, his wealth, and calls him to abandon it and follow. Eternal life is received by a faith that forsakes all and follows Christ, not purchased by a good work.

Keep the tone warm. Mark tells us Jesus loved this man. The call to surrender is never cold; it is the loving invitation of One who knows that what He asks us to release is far less than what He longs to give.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Eternal life as a gift received by following Christ, not a deed that earns merit (19:16–21)
- God alone as good; our own goodness cannot secure salvation (19:17)
- The call to discipleship as surrender of all rivals to Jesus (Luke 14:33)
- Faith that forsakes all and follows, rather than a transaction we complete
- The loving heart of Christ behind even His hardest commands (Mark 10:21)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the young man assume eternal life is something he can earn?
- What changes when we see that Jesus offers Himself rather than a task to complete?
- How does it reframe the gospel to hear 'come, follow me' as the heart of the invitation?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus named the one thing the young man could not surrender. What is the one possession, relationship, or comfort that you would find hardest to lay down if Jesus asked you for it today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self question takes the young man's sorrow and turns it into a mirror. He kept the commandments, he came eagerly, he was sincere, and yet there was one thing he could not surrender. The aim is for each student to find their own version of that one thing.

Help students understand that the issue is not wealth in itself but the grip of the heart. For the young man it happened to be money. For another it may be a relationship, a career, a reputation, a sense of control, a comfort they cannot imagine living without. The diagnostic question is simple: what could Jesus ask of me that would tempt me to walk away sorrowful?

Encourage honest, specific reflection rather than safe generalities. It is easy to nod along and assume we would give up anything. The young man surely assumed the same until Jesus named the one thing.

Move toward hope, not condemnation. The point is not to shame students for having attachments but to invite them to loosen their grip and discover that Christ is worth more than whatever they fear to lose. Naming the idol is the first step toward freedom.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The grip of the heart, not possessions themselves, as the spiritual danger (Matthew 6:21)
- Idolatry as anything that rivals Christ for the throne of our hearts (Colossians 3:5)
- Self-examination to uncover hidden attachments
- Surrender as the doorway to freedom and treasure in heaven (19:21)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one thing you would find hardest to lay down if Jesus asked?
- How can you tell when a good thing has become something you grip too tightly?
- What might you discover on the other side of surrendering it?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom, harder than a camel through the eye of a needle (19:23–24). Why does wealth pose such a particular spiritual danger, and what is Jesus warning every disciple about, rich or poor?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus uses a deliberately startling image: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom (19:24). Attempts to soften this, such as imagining a small gate called the needle's eye, miss the point. Jesus means it to sound impossible, because that is exactly His point, as the next verses make clear.

Help students understand why wealth is so dangerous. It is not that money is evil, but that it quietly promises what only God can give: security, significance, freedom, control. The richer we are, the easier it is to feel self-sufficient and to imagine we need nothing, including God. Wealth insulates us from the very sense of need that drives us to Christ.

This is a warning for every disciple, not only the wealthy. Even those of modest means can trust in their resources, their savings, their plans. The danger is the heart that leans on what it owns rather than on the God who owns everything. Jesus is exposing a universal temptation, sharpened in the rich but present in us all.

Connect this to the broader teaching of Scripture on riches (1 Timothy 6:9–10, 17–19). The love of money is a snare; the call is to set our hope on God, to be rich in good works, and to hold our possessions with open hands as stewards rather than owners.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The particular spiritual danger of wealth and self-sufficiency (19:23–24)
- Money's false promises of security, identity, and freedom (1 Timothy 6:9–10)
- The universal temptation to trust resources rather than God
- Stewardship and open-handedness as the disciple's posture toward possessions (1 Timothy 6:17–19)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus use such an extreme, impossible image for the rich?
- How does wealth, even modest wealth, dull our sense of need for God?
- What does it look like to hold what you own with open hands?

Question 4

Student Question:

Money has a way of quietly making promises it cannot keep: security, identity, freedom. Where have you found yourself trusting in your resources rather than in God, and what has that trust cost you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question presses the warning about wealth into the student's daily life. The aim is to surface the quiet, often unnoticed ways we transfer our trust from God to our resources.

Help students recognize the symptoms. We feel secure when the bank account is full and anxious when it dips, as though our security rested there rather than in God. We measure our worth by what we earn or own. We make decisions about generosity, risk, and obedience based first on protecting our financial position.

Name the cost of misplaced trust. Trusting in resources rather than God breeds anxiety, stinginess, and a divided heart. It can keep us from giving generously, from taking faithful risks, from resting in God's provision. It promises peace and delivers worry.

Move toward a better trust. Invite students to consider one concrete way they could lean on God rather than their resources this week, whether a step of generosity, a release of anxiety in prayer, or a financial decision made first in obedience rather than in fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trust in God versus trust in resources as a daily heart issue (Matthew 6:24)
- Anxiety and stinginess as fruit of misplaced trust
- God's faithful provision as the ground of peace (Matthew 6:31–33)
- Generosity as an act of trust and worship (2 Corinthians 9:6–8)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you notice yourself trusting your resources more than God?
- What has that misplaced trust cost you in peace or generosity?
- What is one way you could lean on God rather than your bank account this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

When the disciples ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answers, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:25–26). What does this reveal about the source of salvation, and what is ruled out by saying it is impossible for man?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a crucial doctrinal turn, so do not rush it. The disciples, watching the rich young man walk away, draw the right alarmed conclusion: "Who then can be saved?" (19:25). If even this devout, generous, commandment-keeping man cannot save himself, what hope is there for anyone?

Jesus' answer is the theological heart of the whole passage. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:26). Salvation is not a human achievement at any level. No deed, no amount of wealth given away, no record of obedience can earn it. Left to ourselves, salvation is flatly impossible.

Draw out carefully what this rules out and what it affirms. It rules out salvation by works, by merit, by our own goodness. It affirms that salvation is the work of God, who can do what we cannot. This is grace: God accomplishing what is impossible for us. At the same time, in the churches of Christ we hold this together with the rest of Scripture, which calls us to respond to that grace by faith, repentance, confession, and baptism, and a faithful walk. God's saving work does not bypass our response; it makes our response possible and effective.

Guard against two distortions. Against the idea that we save ourselves by works, Jesus says it is impossible for man. Against the Calvinist idea that God saves apart from any genuine human response, the broader New Testament shows that the gospel call is real and people truly respond (Acts 2:37–41). Salvation is God's gift, impossible for us to earn yet genuinely received by an obedient faith He empowers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as impossible for man and possible only with God (19:25–26)
- The exclusion of salvation by works, wealth, or self-achievement (Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Grace as God accomplishing what we cannot
- Grace received by a genuine, obedient response of faith, not earned and not automatic (Acts 2:37–41)
- Rejection of both works-salvation and a salvation that bypasses human response

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that salvation is impossible for man but possible with God?
- How does this guard us from thinking we can earn our way to heaven?
- How do we hold together that salvation is God's gift and that we must respond to it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter points out that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus (19:27). Where is following Jesus currently costing you something, and how do you wrestle with what you have given up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter, ever the spokesman, blurts out what the disciples are thinking: "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (19:27). There is genuine sacrifice behind his words, but also the first hint of keeping score. This self question invites students into that same honest place.

Affirm the reality of the cost. Following Jesus does cost something, often something real: time, money, relationships, comfort, ambition, reputation. The disciples had left boats, businesses, and homes. It is right to acknowledge what discipleship asks of us rather than pretend it is free.

Help students name their own cost concretely. Where is following Jesus currently costing them? A career compromise resisted, a relationship strained by their faith, generosity that pinches, time given up. Naming it honors the sacrifice and brings it before God.

Then point toward the way Jesus answers Peter, which the next question explores: the reward is real and overflowing, but the heart that follows for the sake of reward must be reoriented. For

now, let students simply be honest about what they have laid down and how they wrestle with it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The genuine cost of following Christ (Luke 14:28–33)
- Honesty about sacrifice as part of faithful discipleship
- The temptation to follow Jesus for what we can get (19:27)
- Bringing our sacrifices honestly before God rather than nursing them

Discussion Prompts

- Where is following Jesus currently costing you something real?
- How do you wrestle with what you have given up for Him?
- How can you keep sacrifice from quietly turning into a sense of being owed?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus promises that those who have left homes or family for His sake will receive “a hundredfold” and inherit eternal life, yet warns that “many who are first will be last, and the last first” (19:29–30). What is Jesus teaching about the rewards of discipleship and the danger of measuring our worthiness against others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus answers Peter with both lavish promise and sober warning, and the teacher should hold the two together. First the promise: those who have left houses, family, or lands for His sake will receive “a hundredfold” and “inherit eternal life” (19:29). God is no one’s debtor. Whatever we surrender for Him, He repays beyond measure, partly now in the family of the church and fully in eternal life.

Then the warning, which He repeats as the hinge into the parable: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (19:30; 20:16). Jesus is unsettling the very scorekeeping Peter’s question revealed. The reward is real, but those who follow in order to be ‘first,’ to outrank others, to be owed, may find the whole ranking overturned.

Help students grasp the doctrine: discipleship is genuinely rewarded, but the reward is grace, not wages, and it cannot be claimed by comparison. The moment we measure our worthiness against others, we have adopted the dawn workers’ accounting that the coming parable rebukes.

Encourage a healthy posture. We follow Jesus expecting His goodness, yes, but not jockeying for position or keeping a tally against fellow servants. The reward is sure; the comparison is deadly. Set this up well, because it flows directly into the parable at Q9.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The overflowing reward of discipleship, now and in eternity (19:29)
- Eternal life as inheritance, a gift to heirs rather than wages to laborers
- The danger of measuring worthiness by comparison (19:30; 20:16)
- Reward received as grace, not claimed as merit

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus' promise of a hundredfold reshape the way you view your sacrifices?
- Why does Jesus immediately warn that the first may be last?
- How can we expect God's goodness without slipping into comparison and scorekeeping?

Question 8

Student Question:

It is easy to start keeping score with God, comparing our service or sacrifice to others'. Where do you catch yourself quietly expecting God to owe you something because of what you have done for Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question targets the subtle sin the parable will expose: keeping score with God. Most of us would never say aloud that God owes us, yet the attitude lives quietly in many hearts. We have served, given, attended, sacrificed, and somewhere inside a ledger forms.

Help students recognize the symptoms. We feel resentful when our years of faithfulness seem unnoticed while a newcomer is celebrated. We compare our service to others and feel either superior or shortchanged. We expect God to bless us in proportion to our effort, and feel cheated when life does not cooperate.

Name why this is so dangerous. Scorekeeping turns grace back into wages and turns a child of God into a hired hand demanding pay. It robs us of joy and breeds the grumbling of the dawn workers. It is, at root, a failure to remember that everything we have is itself a gift.

Move toward freedom. The cure for scorekeeping is gratitude: remembering that we are debtors to grace, not creditors. Invite students to notice where the ledger is forming and to trade it for thankfulness that God has been generous to them at all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The hidden sin of treating God as a debtor (Luke 17:7–10)
- Comparison and resentment as fruit of a wage-mentality
- Grace remembered as the cure for scorekeeping
- Joy and gratitude as marks of a heart resting in grace

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you catch yourself expecting God to owe you for your service?
- How does comparison with others feed resentment in your walk with God?
- What would change if you saw yourself as a debtor to grace rather than a creditor?

Question 9

Student Question:

In the parable, the workers hired at dawn receive the same wage as those hired at the eleventh hour, and when they grumble, the landowner asks, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (20:1–16). What is this parable teaching about the grace of God, the difference between fairness and generosity, and how we should respond when God is lavish toward others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson, and it carries the central doctrine: the generous grace of God. Take your time and let the parable do its work. A landowner hires workers at dawn for a denarius, the standard day's wage (20:2). Then he hires more at nine, at noon, at three, and finally at five in the afternoon, when only one hour of work remains (20:3–7).

The shock comes at payment. The landowner pays everyone the same full denarius, beginning with the last hired (20:8–9). The dawn workers, seeing this, assume they will receive more, and when they too get a denarius, they grumble: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (20:11–12). Their complaint sounds reasonable by the logic of fairness.

Here is the heart of the parable. The landowner has not been unfair; he paid the dawn workers exactly what they agreed to (20:13). The grumbling arises not because anyone was cheated but because the latecomers were treated generously. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (20:15). The Greek behind 'begrudge' is literally 'is your eye evil because I am good?' Their problem is not justice; it is envy of grace.

Draw out the doctrine carefully. God is not merely fair; He is generous. Fairness would give the latecomer one twelfth of a denarius. Grace gives him the full day's wage. This is the gospel: the latecomer, the thief on the cross, the deathbed convert, the one who comes to Christ after a wasted life, receives the same eternal life as the lifelong disciple. Eternal life is not a wage scaled to our hours of labor; it is the gift of a generous God, the same gift to all who come, by a faith that forsakes all and follows. None of us earns it; all of us receive it.

Then press the application. How do we respond when God is lavish toward others? The temptation of the long-serving disciple is exactly the dawn workers' grumbling: resentment that grace falls on those who seem less deserving. Jesus calls us instead to rejoice in His generosity, to be glad that the God who was generous to us is generous to others too. Warn gently against

the evil eye of envy, and call your class to marvel that they serve a Master who gives far beyond what anyone could ever earn.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The generous grace of God, who gives beyond mere fairness (20:1–16)
- Eternal life as a gift equal to all who come, not wages scaled to our labor
- The latecomer received fully by grace, like the thief on the cross (Luke 23:42–43)
- Envy of grace as the sin of the dawn workers, ‘is your eye evil because I am good?’ (20:15)
- The call to rejoice rather than grumble when God is generous to others
- Grace received by a faith that forsakes all and follows, never earned by merit

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between God being fair and God being generous?
- Why do the dawn workers grumble, even though they were not cheated?
- When have you been tempted to resent God’s generosity toward someone who seemed less deserving?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage, from the man who could not let go to the workers paid by grace. Name one specific thing Jesus is calling you to release, or one way He is calling you to rejoice in His generosity, this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole passage and press it toward one concrete response. The lesson has moved from the rich young man who could not let go, through the impossibility of saving ourselves, to the lavish generosity of God who gives eternal life as a gift. Now invite transformation rather than mere agreement.

Two directions are open, and students may go either way. Some need to name the one thing they have been clutching and take a real step to release it, as the young man could not. Others need to repent of the dawn workers’ grumbling and learn to rejoice in God’s generosity toward others. Help each person find which word is for them.

Press for the specific. A real answer might sound like, “I will set up regular giving I have been avoiding because I was clutching my savings,” or “I will stop resenting how God has blessed my brother and start thanking Him for it,” or “I will surrender this ambition that has become my idol.”

Close in worship. The wonder of this passage is that the God who asks us to release everything is the God who gives a hundredfold and eternal life, the God who is not merely fair but generous

beyond imagining. Lead your class to loosen their grip and to rejoice, because they serve a Master whose generosity they could never earn and will never exhaust.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of surrender and joy in the generous grace of God
- Concrete release of idols as the fruit of grasping grace
- Rejoicing in God's generosity toward others as a mark of a transformed heart
- The lifelong formation of a heart that holds all things with open hands

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one thing Jesus is calling you to release this week?
- Where is He calling you to rejoice rather than grumble at His generosity?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?