

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

With the Coronavirus COVID-19 impacting the airline industry, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce this week announced his intention to forego his salary for 6 months.¹ A salary survey highlighted that his 2018 package of \$23.88M was the highest in Australia.² That is nearly \$46000 per week. By comparison, the Melbourne Institute calculated the poverty line income for the March 2019 quarter at \$994.68 per week (or \$51,700 pa) and that those who are only receiving Centrelink benefits, earn less than this.³ It is difficult to reconcile the disparity in incomes. However, it is also concerning when we read that the gender pay gap means that women are, on average, paid 13.9% lower than men to do the same work, and that that gap increases to 31% in financial and insurance services.⁴ So when we come to today's passage, we can easily relate to the issues of pay disparity, especially if there is seen to be any form of bias or favouritism.

GETTING STARTED: Kids are quick to highlight if they think parents are playing favourites or dispensing unequal consequences or blame, with the call: "that's not fair!" What is one situation, where someone in your family or workplace, has deemed something to be unfair or inequitable? Was their judgement of the situation, reasonable?

READ: MATTHEW 19:27-30, 20:1-28

❗ In Matt 18:1-5 and 19:13-15, we find two passages about Jesus and children. In these verses, Jesus says "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" and "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Little children lack an understanding of the rules of the game of life, that is played by adults. For the rich young ruler in Matt 19:16-30, the game revolved around "he who dies with the most stuff, wins." For the unforgiving servant in Matt 18:23-35, the game resolved around forgiveness only being dispensed, to those who deserved or earned it. By contrast, Jesus demonstrated that his game was about going after and rescuing the one lost sheep who was totally lost. Forgiveness and mercy are unearned and are repeatedly dispensed. Self-sacrifice, grace and generosity are the new normal.

TEAR APART THE TEXT

- 🗨️ What promises did the landowner give to each group, about how much they would be paid?

 - 🗨️ At 5pm, the landowner asked a group of people: 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' What was their response? How do you think you would have felt if you were in their situation and someone asked you that that question? How would you have felt, when you had the opportunity to have some work and earn some money?

 - 🗨️ What do you think would have been the manager's response when he had to pay all the groups of people the same amount, "the usual daily wage"?

 - 🗨️ How do you feel about the people who complained, '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.'?

 - 🗨️ How do you feel about the response of the landowner: "'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"
- ❗ In Matt 20:12, the first employed complained "you have made them equal to us". The landowner's response indicates that they were accusing him of not just being 'wrong' but 'unrighteous' in how he treated them. The Greek word that NRSV translates as 'generous' actually means 'good'. The landowner highlighted that he had the prerogative to choose how he spent his own money. He consciously chose to ensure that those who had not been able to get work, were also given the means by which they could feed their families. The people who had worked all day had earned what they had been promised. Those who came later were paid the same, because of his goodness to them.

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/qantas-ceo-alan-joyce-ditches-part-of-his-24-million-pay-slashes-flights-by-almost-25-2020-3>

² <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/qantas-chief-alan-joyce-tops-ceo-pay-table-20190916-p52rta.html>

³ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/3121686/Poverty-lines-Australia-March-Quarter-2019.pdf

⁴ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data/fact-sheets/australias-gender-pay-gap-statistics>

https://www.security4women.org.au/boosting-womens-workforce-participation/gender-equity/genderpaygap/?gclid=EAlalQobChMjZCt7ub6AIVBqyWCh0HwAEBEAAYASAAEgIWIPD_BwE

☞ Some of us who went to Sunday School as children, learnt songs such as ‘God is good to me’ and ‘God is so good’. In Ps 34:8, we find the challenge to “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” What does it mean for you, that God is good? And that God is good to you?

☞ How do you feel about the possibility that God can be ‘good’, generous and merciful, even to people who have committed terrible sins and atrocities, if they repent? Is there any sin that God cannot or will not forgive? How would you feel if a person who committed gross atrocities, repented, and we then become “one in Christ Jesus”? (Eph 4:1-6, Gal 3:26-28, Jn 17:20-23) Is that offensive to you?

☞ Matt 20:1 starts with the words: “For the kingdom of heaven is like (a landowner) ...” What do we learn about the kingdom of heaven, from the way the landowner acted and treated people?

☞ Matt 19:30 and 20:16 highlight that “the last will be first and the first will be last”. Brown indicates this saying is a “warning against presumption of reward and status ... to communicate that the kingdom will upset human status categories and assumptions. God’s grand generosity may prove offensive to human sensibilities about fairness and worthiness.”⁵ How do you feel about this?

17 While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 18 “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; 19 then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.”

☞ This is the third – of four times – that Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. Read the other accounts in Matt 16:21, Matt 17:22-23 and Matt 26:2. What additional information do we find in this passage from Matt 20:17-19?

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. 21 And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”

ⓘ Parents naturally want the best for their children and sometimes, the aspirations of the parents, are realised in the successes of their children. In Matt 20:20-21, we find the mother of James and John, kneeling at Jesus’ feet and asking for a favour for her sons. Not long before, Jesus had brought a child before them and said: “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Previously, he had taught about the need to take up our cross and follow him. Mrs Zebedee had obviously missed these lines – or else, Jesus’ words had fallen on deaf ears.

☞ What does the response of the disciples, to this request, tell us about how they interpreted this mother’s request?

☞ In Acts 12:2, we read that Herod “had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword”. John, though, died in Ephesus, after a period of being exiled on Patmos and church tradition indicates he endured great suffering. Why do you think Jesus asked them “Are you able to drink the cup ...”, rather than “are you willing to suffer and die for me?” Wouldn’t that have been a fairer question?

25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

ⓘ In the last part of this passage, Jesus highlights that greatness in the kingdom of heaven, is connected with serving. Great gentile leaders were tyrannical and ruthless. By contrast, slaves had the lowest status in a household. Following Jesus means replicating his example of self-sacrifice and service.

APPLICATION: In what ways are the values and priorities of the Kingdom of Heaven different, to the values and priorities in our society? Which one of these differences, is most applicable to you?

☞ HEAD – What have you learnt from the study this week?

♥ HEART – What has challenged you, personally?

✋ HANDS – What are you going to do about it this week?

⁵ Brown, J. (2015) Matthew. Teach the Text Commentary Series. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks), p229.