



The Workers in the Vineyard

What, in a word or two, is the parable of the workers in the vineyard about? Before reading any further, take a moment to re-read Matthew 19:23-30 & 20:1-16 and think about this question. The parable of the workers in the vineyard is about _____.

Background & Context¹:

Matthew 20:1-16 is a true-to-life parable. In the ancient world, day laborers would show up in the market place each morning hoping to be hired, hoping to exchange their time and energy for a denarius, a small silver coin that was the minimum daily income required to keep a small family fed and housed and clothed. It was subsistence pay at best. Usual estimates are that an adult in ancient Palestine needed about half a denarius a day to live and that an income of 200 denarii per year marked the poverty line.

The workday was about twelve hours – from sunrise to sunset. The complaints of those first hired – that they have borne the burden and heat of the day (v. 12) – are pointers to the difficulty of the work and the Palestinian sun. Employers needing workers would typically go to the market place early in the morning, around 6 am, to hire laborers for the day. But it would be unusual for a wealthy landowner to locate his own workers. Usually, the manager would have hired the laborers, just as he would have been responsible to pay wages (cf. 20:8). More than likely, the manager would not have returned to the market place to hire additional workers at the end of the day and offered the same wage. He would be fearful of his landowner's reaction to such an unwise investment in labor.

What is remarkable about the employer in this parable, however, is that he keeps going back to the market place throughout the day — at 9 am, at noon, at 3 pm, and even at 5 pm — and when he sees others standing idle, he offers them work as well.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (369-70)

Hearing the Parable²

The story begins with a landowner needing workers to harvest in his vineyard. He hires workers in the first hour of the workday (about six am). In quick succession, he hires those who have been waiting for work at 9am, noon, and 3pm. Finally, he hires some workers at 5pm who haven't been able to find work — these workers will only work one hour before the end of the day arrives and payment is made.

All of these hires are a prelude to the key scene of the parable, in which the landowner pays each group of workers. Jesus tells the story so that the “last hour” workers are paid first and the “first hour” workers are paid last. This detail is the prelude to the story's conflict — the people who labored for twelve hours are made aware of the landowner's generosity in giving a full day's wage to those who have worked only one hour. Even though this is the same wage they have been promised (20:2), they expect to be paid more given this generosity shown to the last hour workers. The long-standing workers are surprised and disappointed, and they grumble (20:11).

It is here that we, the readers, likely experience the discomfort of the plot twist. **Doesn't it seem supremely unfair to pay the same wage for the work of twelve hours as for one hour?** Imagine the corporate executive's reaction to this parable: If reimbursement is not commensurate with hours worked, then how will I motivate my employees? And if I can't motivate my employees, how will I sell my product, serve my clients, and turn my profit? Likewise, imagine the reaction of the committed worker who has put in the long hours.

If we have been identifying at all with those first-hour workers, we might very well exclaim with them: “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” (20:12). It's just not fair. If that's how it's going to be, why shouldn't we just dally and do what we want most of the day and punch in at four o'clock?

Recall that the parable began with, **“the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner ...”** (20:1). So, it is fair to ask the question: **Are God's ways really like this?** Is this kind of maddening equality, regardless of what one has contributed to God's kingdom, really a part of the new reality God is inaugurating in Jesus? For Matthew's Jesus, the answer is 'yes.' God's generosity is an insult to those who think about God's benevolent rule in categories of status, privilege, and what one has earned.

This framework of generosity for understanding God and God's ways is what is emphasized at the conclusion of the parable. **“Friend, I am doing you no wrong ...”** (Matthew 20:13). The specific language rendered here as “wrong” can also be translated “unjust.” The landowner disavows any injustice on his part. Then he claims that it is his right to use his own resources in whatever way he wishes, providing the parting shot: **“Or are you envious because I am generous?”** (20:15).

The provocation of the parable centers on **God's generosity and grace that is given to all equally.** God's generosity sits at the center of a kingdom reorientation of values. Grace reigns. Or as James writes, **“mercy triumphs over judgment”** (James 2:13). God's deep generosity toward others can actually trip us up if we think of the kingdom in terms of limited amounts of grace being distributed based on 'deservedness.'

Jesus' conclusion to the parable mirrors the statement introduced at Matthew 19:30, which leads into the parable: **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last”** (20:16). The point of this closing word is not to suggest that God's ways are simply or only about a *reversal* of the status quo. The line from the parable is telling: “you have made them equal to us” (20:12). This surprising equality marks the reality of God's work and God's desire for the people of God.

² This section was written by Jeannine K. Brown and excerpted from her commentary on Matthew (185).

So, the parable is really not about the “laborers in the vineyard.” In fact, this is not even a story about the growth of the vineyard. Nor was there any significant attention on the activities of the workers. We hear the complaints of those who have toiled all day long, but the story was really not about them either.

Rather, Jesus’ parable highlights the generosity of God. As the ultimate “landowner,” God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God’s eyes. In Jesus’ earlier words: God’s perfection is exemplified in God’s rain on the just and the unjust (cf. 5:48). Again, the landowner’s question in the parable is Jesus’ punchline for the story: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

In spite of our Western democratic ideals, we live in systems that are characterized by status differences and privilege that result in valuing some people more than others. But **God’s ways are much more generous than ours**. Just as Matthew highlights that God’s kingdom will not result in a stratified system of *haves* and *have nots*, so we should live in the church in a way that makes clear the surprising equality among the people of God based on God’s amazing generosity.

Applying the Parable³

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? How will it change our own?

- ♦ **This is a parable about the kingdom of God. And God, it turns out, is not “fair” by our standards.** God does not play by our rules. God does not give us what we deserve. And thank God for that! For if each of us got exactly what we deserved, where would we be? In fact, God lavishes grace and mercy on all of us, no matter how late we have come to the vineyard.
- **Jesus uses the parable to address Peter’s earlier question, “We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get?” (19:27).** Jesus directs this parable against attitudes of envy, jealousy, or any form of comparison among his disciples. The sequence in the story sets the listener up for a surprise. Expectations arise at the sight of such generosity to the most recent workers. “If these guys who only worked for one hour get the same amount I agreed to for the whole day, just imagine what I will get for working 12 hours!” But as the story unfolds, the listeners share in the tension and the feeling of unfairness. They worked longer hours and in the heat of the day. This seems unjust. The world operates on the principle that those who work the longest and the hardest receive the most pay. But in God’s kingdom, the principles of merit and ability are set aside so that grace can prevail. God was fair with those first hired, paying them the amount that was agreed to, while choosing to be even more generous with those hired last.
- **In the parable, each of the workers is dependent upon the landowner,** for each of them rolled out of bed that morning unemployed. They owed everything to the vineyard owner who sought them out and gave them work, who gave them a livelihood and a purpose. Likewise each of us receives our life and purpose and all that sustains it as a gift from God, not as something earned. How easily we forget that, and begin to think that somehow we deserve all that we have.
- ♦ **Second, this parable is also about coveting and envy, about our frustration with the grace of God as it applies not to us, but to others.** It illustrates part of the issues we have with grace and mercy. We have a tendency, as the parable illustrates, to covet and to be resentful of what others receive from God. The owner of the vineyard asks those who have worked longest and (presumably) hardest for him, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” The point is that God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness are God’s to give away as God sees fit. When we forget that all we have is a gift, we so easily become resentful of God’s generosity to others.

³ Snodgrass, pp. 375-79.

- **As a direct result, we may covet God's power to forgive and God's control over who is forgiven and how.** This parable is perfectly matched to the story of Jonah, who runs away to avoid delivering the message of forgiveness that God sent him to proclaim. Jonah complains (complains!), "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing," and surely this cannot be for *them*? It is ironic that Jonah, who had earlier declared that "deliverance belongs to the Lord" (2:9, a deliverance he himself experienced), rejected the good news of who God is for others.
- **Part of the time such grace is no problem for us. We cherish the free and loving acceptance of us that it assures. The problem of grace tends to come when others enter the picture.** Sometimes we prefer that God deal with us according to grace — but with others according to what they deserve. In spite of knowing the amount they had agreed to work for, the original workers resent what the later workers receive. So they confront their employer. Do they have a point? Absolutely. But it is not the point of this parable, which is the grace of the owner, and through his character, the grace of God. A grace that supersedes our notions of justice and seeks the same gift, the same life for all.
- ♦ **Third, this parable of the laborers in the vineyard is about *the first and the last*.** This parable is bracketed by a well-known statement of Jesus: "Many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first" (19:30), or even more emphatically, "The last will be first and the first will be last" (20:16). This parable occurs between these two statements and so obviously illustrates the principle Jesus taught.
 - **Notice the flow of the parable as the workers are compensated for their labors.** The last are literally first in that they are paid first. And the first, who have labored longest, must also wait the longest to get theirs. But notice as well that the first who are now last do not receive nothing or less, they receive the same, as the laborers themselves say, "you have made them equal to us..." The scandal of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God's gifts. And the scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God's gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure.
 - **What does this parable say to our ideas of reward?** Jesus' announcement of the kingdom included metaphors for judgment and discussion of reward. Reward is not a bad motive; it's a way to talk about what pleases God and assures that following Christ is not a fruitless endeavor. The disciples, like most humans, were into calculating reward and seeking privilege. Peter's question was "What do we get for following?" and he was assured that the reward is great. But does the promise of reward create status and ranking? The request of the sons of Zebedee is for a higher ranking, but Jesus rejects presumptions about status (20:20-28). Key to interpreting the parable is v.10: those hired first thought they would receive more, yet the parable breaks any assumption connecting reward, work, and perceptions of what is owed.
- ♦ **An obvious place where our thinking must engage the parable is with issues of envy, justice, and goodness done to others, not with the call to the vineyard.**
 - **Why is goodness often an occasion for anger?** Why do we find it so difficult to rejoice over the good that enters other people's lives, and why do we spend our time calculating how we have been cheated? The life of God's kingdom with its focus on communal love cannot be experienced as long as we are comparing ourselves with others and calculating what is due us or being envious of what others receive.
 - **True justice — at least God's justice — seeks mercy and ways to express love.** If the parable is about the goodness of God, then it asks that we **give up envy and calculation of reward** and, rather, **both embrace and imitate God's goodness.** That will mean that we give up the quest to be first, knowing that God's standards are different, that what appears to be first will be last.

Discussion

1. Who is the best employer you ever had? What made this person the best?
2. With which group of workers do you personally identify—with those hired at 9AM, at 12PM, at 3PM, or those hired at 5PM? What are the challenges (or dangers) of thinking of yourself as a responsible worker, hired early in the day. What is the danger of comparing your own situation with someone else's?
3. Was anyone underpaid or cheated? Was anyone overpaid? Why then did the workers complain?
4. Does this parable make economic sense? Does it in any way fit with employers or workers in our world today? How does our cultural values resist the idea of grace and generosity of the landowner in this story?
5. In what ways is this parable similar to the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Compare the attitude of the workers first hired to that of the elder brother.
6. Discuss the feelings of envy and jealousy. Where do they come from, what do they feel like, what are their cause, and how can we handle them appropriately as disciples? How does focusing on God's grace in our lives evict envy and jealousy from our hearts?
7. Thinking back to the question asked at the beginning of the lesson, now that you've read Matthew 20:1-16, what is the parable of the workers in the vineyard about? What attitudes and actions does Jesus seek to change in us by telling this parable?