

9. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

The Parables of Jesus

Warm-up Question: Who was your best boss, employer or teacher? What made him or her the best in your opinion?

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ⁷“‘Because no one has hired us,’” they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ ⁸“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ ⁹The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²“These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ¹³“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶“So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:1-16).

The Landowner’s Passion for His Harvest

Throughout Scripture, the Lord refers to His people as a Vineyard. He lovingly tended it, pruned it, and watched over it:

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight (Isaiah 5:7).

This landowner has a passion for reaping the harvest, for there was a time factor to the gathering of the grapes. In the land of Israel, most of the grapes are harvested before Sukkot (The Feast of Tabernacles), which falls in our calendar between September and October. It is around that time that the rainy season starts. A lot of rain coming early before the grapes were picked from the vine could dilute the flavor of the grapes. It could also cause cracking of the skin of the grapes, giving rise to microorganisms that would rot the fruit of the vine. In our parable, the landowner saw that the grapes were ripe and they needed to be harvested. Notice that the landowner did not leave the enlisting of workers in his harvest to a servant. The landowner cared so much that he was up at the crack of dawn and down at the market when the workers started arriving. He cared

about His harvest.

The day was calculated into twelve hours set by the position of the sun; obviously, there were shorter hours during the winter when the sun didn't get up so high. Daybreak was at 6 A.M. with the sun setting at 6 P.M. The third hour was 9 A.M.; the sixth hour was noon, and the ninth hour was 3 P.M. The eleventh hour was 5 P.M. By that time, the sun was nearly down, and little light left of the day.

In that day, if a person did not have any land to farm, they were dependent on being hired daily. The farm laborers would appear at the city market where they hoped that an employer would come by and hire them for the day. Those who labored as harvesters were the lowest class of laborers because, if they didn't work a day, their families didn't eat that day. God had stipulated to Moses that a day laborer was to be paid at the end of the day:

Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight (Leviticus 19:13).

At the time of Jesus, the wage of a Roman foot soldier was a *denarius* a day, so for an ordinary day laborer, a salary of a denarius was good pay. They immediately were enlisted to work for such an amount. A denarius, though, was a small amount of money so meager that it only provided a family enough food for a day. Those that were grape pickers and harvesters were on the lowest rung of the financial ladder in that day.

Why were laborers still waiting to be hired later in the day? Why would the landowner pay good money for less work? What does this say about man? What does it say about God?

Those hired later had not missed work opportunities because they were lazy, they were there because no one had employed them at the break of day. These men were still waiting at the labor exchange market because they were desperate and needed to care for their families. The landowner was compassionate for their needs and saw the desperation of those still waiting to be hired late in the day. All those hired at 9 A.M. and later were not told what they would be paid: “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right” (Matthew 20:4). Perhaps the landowner did not talk wages because if those appointed early in the day found out the landowner was going to pay those coming later the same pay, they might have eased up in their labor due to thoughts of jealousy.

This parable tells us something about the Landowner, a picture of the Lord. It reminds us that God seeks us out in the slave market of sin. Jesus said, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Our God cares greatly about His harvest and longs that all those saved would go to work in his vineyard. Workers are greatly needed:

He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2).

He cares about His harvest because He cares about people. He does not want any to perish, but that all would come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). We must labor in any way we can to bring in the

harvest. Eternal lives are at stake. God's heart is toward His people, and His nature is one of love and grace: ⁸“The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made” (Psalm 145:8-9).

Notice that although the workers were called to work at various times of the day, they were all called. This call reminds us that we come into the Kingdom at His invitation. No one comes into the kingdom on his or her own, and we do not come on our terms. Once we hear His call, we are all commissioned to work in His harvest, an act of grace from beginning to end. The wages referred to in this passage cannot be seen in the same way as an earthly wage because we could never earn what is freely given to us.

The Context of the Parable

Unless we look at the context of the parable, we will not understand or interpret it correctly. As we have said before, the chapter divisions and the verse numbers were put in at a later date and were not a part of the original text. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in chapter twenty carries on Jesus' discussion with Peter in chapter nineteen. Peter, the apostle, had been shocked at the answer that Jesus had given the rich young man after he had asked the Lord what he still lacked. It started Peter wondering about rewards and what would be a fair reward for his sacrifice of earthly things.

²¹Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. ²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” ²⁷Peter answered him, “**We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?**” ²⁸Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰**But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first** (Matthew 19:21-30. Emphasis mine).

Notice Peter's thoughts in verse twenty-seven. Behind his words, there is the self-serving thought and attitude of “What's in it for me.”

How does the Lord reassure Peter in Matthew 19:28-29? Why is it dangerous for us to compare ourselves to one another?

The Lord stated that there would be significant rewards for those who have followed Him in this life, but He went on to say that those who are first will be last and many who are last will be first (Matthew 19:30). The parable we are studying makes the same statement (Matthew 20:16) to let

us know that Jesus is correcting the self-serving attitude he saw in the disciples.

The Interpretation of the Parable

The landowner represents God. The laborers are the Lord's servants, (i.e., those who have entered into the covenant of Christ). The vineyard represents God's kingdom, the sphere of God's rule and reign. The workers represent those in the kingdom called to help reap the harvest. The day of work could represent the lifetime of a believer, with the end of the day being the end of our lives. The contracted denarius payment is the reward that everyone in the kingdom of God will receive, i.e., that which God has promised—the gift of eternal life. If we consider the vastness of God's grace and mercy toward us, the concern in the minds of the workers over the fairness of wages seems ridiculous. It is human nature to desire fairness, but thank God that He gives us mercy instead of "fairness." If fairness and justice are what we want from Him, who among us could stand before Him? Even the work that we do in the kingdom is work that God has prepared ahead of time for us to do.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

The laborer who began at 6 A.M. failed to be thankful and was blind to the needs of others by his self-interest and lack of compassion. We must be careful about our attitudes as we serve the King of Kings. Some of us have entered into the new life in Christ at the dawn of day, i.e., as young children. Those who do so spare themselves much pain, regret, and wrongful actions that occur among those brought in at the midday hour of their lives. As for myself, I came to Christ at age twenty-three after living like the prodigal son, experiencing the drought of soul and feeding the pigs (Luke 15:11-32). I was never a pig farmer, but my venture into sin led me into some very messy situations. It took much grace from God and many years to get free from a wrong, self-serving heart attitude that made their way into my soul, my mind, will, and emotions. I have envied those of you who were brought up in a Christian home with loving parents who corrected you and showed you the way of Christ. There is much uprooting of weeds to be done by those that enter into life at the noonday of their life. “It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth” (Lamentations 3:27).

Some of you that entered the kingdom of God at an early age cannot remember the day that you came to Christ, and you envy those of us who were convicted of sin and turned to the Lord at a later age in life. Perhaps, you wonder if you ever crossed over into the kingdom because you cannot remember the date and time. I have a friend of mine who was living in Holland for a period. He got on a train in Amsterdam intending to go to his home in the suburbs. Unfortunately for him, he fell asleep and woke up in Paris. He had crossed the borders of Belgium and France before waking up many miles from home. He was not aware of crossing the border, but he knew that he was in a different country. That is like many of you who can't remember crossing the border between life and death. You are aware inside your heart of hearts that Jesus is yours, and you are His for you have a witness in your spirit that you are a child of God. Do not worry if you cannot remember the exact time that you passed from death to life. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children” (Romans 8:16). If you are not sure, then you can be assured by sincerely repenting of sin and turning to the Lord Jesus and asking Him to come into

your life and forgive you your sin.

Be wary, though, those of you who have entered into life in Christ at the 6 A.M. time of life, that you think you should have more of the blessings of God upon you. I believe this is the warning that Jesus gave Peter, that there will come others who enter the kingdom of God at a later time in their life who will surpass Peter in effort, gifting, and anointing, men such as the apostle Paul, who indeed seem to overshadow Peter in fruitfulness. Read through the Book of Acts and you will learn little about Peter after Paul's conversion in Acts 9.

Most people come to Christ in their youth or teen years. Maybe, this would be the 9 A.M. hour of the day in the parable. If you are in your teens or early twenties and if you have not yet given your life to Christ, why not? What is holding you back? Are the bonds of sin already holding you down, causing you to waver as to your final destination? I encourage you not to let any more time be wasted. Consider Christ's claim on your life. Look to His death on the cross for your sake, and receive the gift of eternal life which he has promised. He promises all of His children this same eternal life! Determine to obtain it now, that you may have everything to look forward to at the end of the day's labor.

[At what stage of your life were you called? Share what difficulties you had with ungodly values and habits in your early life.](#)

It's Never Too Late!

Many reading these words find yourself at the middle stage of life, (i.e., the noonday time of the day) thirty to forty years of age. For you at that age, you may feel that it is already beginning to get late, but as long as you have the present moment, it is not too late. Many people at this stage of life come to Christ because of some difficulty of life that has awoken them to their need of a Savior. You cannot blame God for the challenges that have come upon you, but if there are lean times to your soul, then let your difficulties lead you to Christ. You have heard of the term "middle age?" In our society, people spend vast amounts of effort and money to hold on to their youth. People do not want to age! The Baby Boomer generation is famous for trying desperately to hold on to its youth. Why is this? Our society tends to think that the best part of our lives is in our earlier years! All the messages we see in the media reinforce this thought. George Bernard Shaw once said: *"Youth is a wonderful thing. It's a shame to waste it on young people."*

How often have you thought, "I wish I could go back in time with the knowledge that I have now acquired?" Contrary to the world's thinking is the fact that, in God's kingdom, age is not a factor. We are vitally important to the Lord at every age and every stage of our lives. To God, our stage of life is not relevant when He has a job for us to do! Maybe, it has something to do with the fact that He dwells in eternity? His perspective is different! After all, think of what God did in the lives of Moses and Abraham in their later years. Do not be fooled into thinking you can retire in the kingdom of God! He will always have a job for you to do. If you have come to Christ later in your life, do not be filled with regret. Ask God for a fresh vision of what He wants to accomplish in you and through you even though you may feel it is late in the day. Even at 3 p.m., it is not too late to go into the vineyard and do what you can to bring in the harvest. Your part is a part no one else can play.

Walt Whitman said it very well in his poem from the book Leaves of Grass:

*“O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring;
Of the endless trains of the faithless—of cities fill’d with the foolish;
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light—of the objects mean—of the struggle ever renew’d;
Of the poor results of all—of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;
Of the empty and useless years of the rest—with the rest me intertwined;
The question, O me! So sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?”*

Answer.

*That you are here—that life exists, and identity;
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.”*
— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

“That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.” This poem reads like a verse in the book of Ecclesiastes. Like Solomon, Walt Whitman was surveying the vanity of life and questioning the meaning of it. He expresses what many people feel, especially later in life when people have had time to do a lot of reflection and observation. However, the poem ends with a positive affirmation that life goes on and that everyone has a contribution. God has a specific way that He wants to use you to glorify Him, even in the later part of your life; at any and every stage, you may “contribute a verse.”

This Landowner, our picture of God, has not given up on you, your stage of life does not matter to God. He is still looking for you at 5 p.m. with just one hour of daylight left. No one goes looking for workers at that time of day, but our God has not given up on you! He comes into the marketplace and finds you and very graciously invites you into His vineyard. We stagger at such grace that gives to this laborer the same as those who have worked all day. Moses had entirely given up on life at eighty years of age when the Lord called to him from the burning bush. He had excuse after excuse as to why God should not use him at eighty years of age. God used him significantly in his senior years. There are those who have known a relative or friend that came into the kingdom of God on their deathbed. While there is still time, there is an opportunity. The thief on the cross gives great comfort to those that are sick and face death and turn their face to the Heavenly Father in repentance on their deathbed. They too will find the contracted price of the gift of eternal life. The same eternal life is offered to all who accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.

There is another “layer” to this story, (i.e., another way that we can interpret this parable). The day can also be seen as the duration of time over the last two thousand years of the Church age as many workers through history have labored in the fields. I’m thinking of the historically great names of the apostles, also Stephen, Phillip, Barnabas and those that began their labor at the 6 A.M. time of the early church. We can name those that labored later in the day as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wycliffe, John Wesley, William Booth, William Wilberforce, William Carey, David Livingstone, Charles Finney, George Whitefield, Hudson Taylor, and the list goes on to

our present day. We may be in the twilight hours of the day now. I believe that the shadows are lengthening and that God is searching for more workers to finish up the great harvest that is ahead.

Do not think for a minute that one cannot do much work at this late stage of the day. If a man, such as Paul, the apostle was living in our day, how would he use technology to preach the word of God and to build up the Body of Christ? Joshua Project statistics (joshuaproject.net) say that the worldwide population stands (March 2014) at 7.06 billion people. Of that amount, 2.94 billion is as yet unreached. Most of those are in India, South East Asia, and the Middle East. Those of us in our senior years can be tempted to judge harshly new methods of reaching people using technology because it is not like our earlier years. I do believe too, that in our day there is a more significant revelation of the Holy Spirit in which the church of Jesus Christ is now walking.

What does Jesus mean by His statement that those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first? How does God's grace contrast with the values we see in our society today?

The Holy Spirit is teaching the church of today concerning the power that is available to every worker that labors in the vineyard. At one point in the history of the church, only an ordained trained minister could pick grapes. Those of us who came into the kingdom years ago were taught that we needed the training to read the Grape Pickers Manual, for it could not be understood without specialized teaching. We had to sit around the grapevine and watch the professional grape pickers at work and see how it was done. We are beginning to see, especially as we know what the Holy Spirit has been doing in the vineyard fields in Asia, that He can use common laborers—and I put myself in that category. We can all pick grapes; we don't need to go to Grape Pickers Manual School. If you can go to one of those schools, all well and good, but some of the mightiest servants of God have not gone to the grape pickers' school. In these last days, God will use everyone that is willing and obedient to work in His fields (Isaiah 1:19). Consider where Jesus chose the original twelve disciples. He didn't go to the Yeshiva's (Hebrew Seminary) of Israel. He chose ordinary men like you and me. Individuals that the world considered to be the last choice! There will be many who are deemed last by this world's standards, but who will be first when they arrive in the heavenly kingdom. There will come a time at the end of the age when we will stand before the Lord, and what a day that will be! For all of us that have entered into a blood covenant relationship with the God of heaven by the blood of His Son, it will be the most glorious day in eternity.

³¹But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before Him (Matthew 25:31-32a)

When that day comes, there will be many surprises in store. There will be people who were unknown and hidden in this world, (i.e., people who have labored for Christ in obscurity) given a place of honor and high reward in the kingdom. The eternal rewards given cannot be compared to the work we do for God in this earthly realm. "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done" (Revelation 22:12). Those who we may think would be up at the head of the table in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb because of their more significant-than-life ministry could be less prominent than we would

expect! It is also possible that many young men and women who are reading these words today who will go on to do great works in these 5 P.M. hours of the day, perhaps even more significant than any we have seen yet. We know that as the darkness in this world gets darker, at the same time, the glorious light of the Gospel will shine brighter. After all, didn't Jesus save the best wine for last at the marriage supper in Cana? I believe that those used in these last days will do great exploits for God (Daniel 11:32). For these people working in the harvest late in the day, this statement would undoubtedly apply: the last will be first! Of course, our joy will be to stand before Him when He appears in His glory.

Let me return to the question that Peter asked Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you. What, then, will there be for us?" What Peter was saying was, "What do we get out of this?" It may have been tempting for Peter to compare his life to others and think about the reward, but Jesus wanted him to serve in the kingdom just for the joy of being in the kingdom of God and not for the prizes. Many a man in this world who have earned great awards and acclamation will find himself in a lower place in the kingdom of God if his intentions are selfish. Once again, we see Jesus getting right to the heart of the matter with Peter, offending his mind to reveal his heart as He tells them this parable. It is a paradox of the Christian life that he who aims at reward loses it and that he who forgets the reward for the joy of serving finds it.

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:39).

I want us to focus for a moment on the graciousness and the compassion of the landowner as he picked these workers late in the day to work in His harvest. When asked why they were standing around, their reply was, "No one has hired us." It may have been that they were not in the marketplace early enough. It could also be that they had physical limitations, so they were not hired earlier. Perhaps some were older and did not appear as robust as some of the other workers, so they were passed by with the thought that they may not be as useful in the harvest. The landowner, representing God the Father, did not consider their physical limitations or energy. He did not pass over them because they would not be as productive. His grace is sufficient. He will empower His saints in the work that He gives them to do, regardless of their age, education, energy or skills. His passion is to bring in the harvest. He will empower them according to their willingness to work in His vineyard and their obedience. They will work side by side with those working "all day" in the vineyard. The joy of being part of bringing in the harvest is what will be common among them. It is never too late to start following Christ. It is never too late to find your purpose in the kingdom and your place in the harvest.

Prayer: Father, I pray for everyone to whom the enemy has whispered that they are too old or not useful. Many feel that You have passed by them. Help each one to see the lies of the enemy. For each reading these words, I pray that he or she allows no more time to go by and that today is the day they hear the call of divine love to come and work in the Landowner's vineyard. We are thankful to be in Your kingdom and to be a part of Your divine plan. Amen.

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