

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Title: The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Truth: Salvation is God's gracious gift; it is equally bestowed on all who believe.

Date/Location: Sunday January 29, 2017; Wed June 22 & Sun June 26, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

We left chapter 19 wondering about the meaning of “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” In the context the Lord makes a promise that the disciples will rule over the 12 tribes of Israel. They will also receive much more than they have given up to follow the Lord. This last/first swap may seem to be that followers of Christ are seen as the lowest of the low (1 Cor. 4:13) but that they will be first in God’s kingdom. And that is true in general—from other passages of Scripture.

But the parable in Matthew 20 takes the idea in a bit of a different direction—in terms of those who have labored long in the Lord’s work and those who have labored only a short time. Since the idea is repeated in verse 16, we know that it refers to the parable’s teaching about receiving the same wages no matter how long the labor was done. I believe it refers to those who are saved later (in life?), and those who are saved earlier, and how their outcomes look similar in terms of eternal life. It does not concern the world’s estimation of the believer as a lowly person and the later increase in that person’s standing.

Like many other parables, we see the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven is like." But precisely how is it like? It is not just like someone going out early in the morning to hire laborers! There is more to it. The kingdom of heaven is like someone going out and hiring laborers multiple times during the day, and paying them at the end of the day in a very generous fashion but all the same wage, and the last first and first last, and many are called but few are chosen.

We have to explore all of this to see if we can gain a deeper understanding of what is written. We should also remind ourselves of the preceding context regarding the rich young ruler, and also of

Peter's question in 19:27 in which he asked what kind of "return" the apostles would have as a result of following Jesus. Notice 19:30 and 20:16.

I. The Parable

- A. A landowner has a vineyard that needs harvesting or some other work like pruning or adding on to it. So, he went out around 6am to hire workers from the pool of those available in the marketplace (v. 1-2). These workers do not have a stable job already, and they are low on the socio-economic scale. He set an agreement with them that he would pay them a denarius for the day's work. This was a very good wage for a day's work—Roman soldiers were paid this amount per day. The denarius at this time was a silver coin with the image of Tiberius' face on the obverse (the front, or side on which is the main image, usually a head of a person), and on the reverse (the back) was an image of him robed and seated on his throne.
- B. Evidently, after he got those men settled into their work, the landowner went back to the marketplace at 9am (v. 3-4) and found men who were idle, because no one had hired them. (Do not think that these men were idle in the sense of lazy. They were actively looking for work.) So the landowner hired them too. He must have needed a lot of workers! What is interesting is the omission from their conversation. There was no agreed-upon wage! He said "whatever is right I will give you." And they trusted him, and went to work. This man must have had a good reputation among the workers there, for they trusted his word.
- C. Verses 5-7 explain that this scenario was repeated at noon, 3pm, and again at 5pm, which is the 11th hour. What was amazing to the landowner was that there were workers still in the marketplace—thus showing they wanted to work—but no one had hired them! Perhaps they had worked a little bit elsewhere in recent days and had finished those jobs, but had nothing new. The owner hired them as well and pledged to give them a fair wage. They didn't care what they were paid, as long as they were paid. They wanted to work!

1. I take this opportunity to commend to you the value of labor. We call this idea the “work ethic” that has in many ways been lost in our land. God gave work to Adam in the garden. It is not a bad thing. It is actually a good thing. People are meant to work. It is refreshing to see these men staying in the marketplace all day, trying to find work. The same should be our attitude—not one of sitting around and taking a government welfare check. Christians *work*—at whatever kind of job they can find, and they do not complain about it.
 2. I would also commend the landowner here because the last hires that he made were basically pure charity. He wasn't going to get much work out of them, but he wanted to help them and their families. Of course, they might have (and should have) worked like a house afire (very quickly and efficiently) because they wanted to get a lot of work done while they could.
- D. When the workday was done, about 6pm or maybe a bit longer in harvest season until it became dark outside, the owner had his farm manager call the workers to pay them. Note that this was in accord with the Law of Moses and the words of Jesus, by which we know that workers had to be paid promptly and they are worthy of their wages (Lev. 19:13, Deut. 24:15, Jer. 22:13, Mal. 3:5, Luke 10:7, 1 Tim. 5:18, James 5:4).
- E. It is interesting that the last ones hired were called first to be paid. This is not a very significant point, but it sets up the situation where the first workers see what the later ones received.
- F. Those who worked starting at 5pm were paid a full denarius. Although the text does not say that the workers who started at 3pm, 12pm, and 9am received the same, we are led to believe that they did also. Now, it could be the case that some who were hired at 9am worked hard all the rest of the day, even harder than those who were hired at 6am, and so the denarius was not at all unexpected. But those who worked only an hour or a few hours couldn't possibly have done as much work as the earlier ones.
- G. The difficulty arose when those who were hired at 6am came to receive pay. They saw what had been paid out to the others, and their expectations grew that they would be paid more than they

had initially agreed. But the owner gave them what he agreed to give them and so they received a denarius for their work.

- H. They became disgruntled and complained against the owner because, they said, “You have made them equal to us who worked the whole hot day!” They were charging the landowner with being unfair.
- I. In verse 13, he responds to their charge of inequity and defends himself against a charge of wrongdoing. They themselves agreed with him for a denarius, and that is what they all got. He adds further that he can do what he wants with the other laborers and with his own money. That’s none of their business. (Incidentally, this text helps make the case for private property rights from the Bible. It also shows that life is not always “equitable” and that is just the way it is.)
- J. In fact, he was not being evil, but he was being generous. He could have given less pay to the later men and been just as fair and square as could be. But he actually gave them a benevolent bonus for their work. They probably had families with mouths to feed, and needed work, and they had tried to get work but could not. He was a gracious man to help them, but these complainers were trying to make him out to be evil! It was their jealousy that was the sin, not his generosity! Strange how people can do that—turn *their sin* into an accusation against a righteous person.

The master gave the later workers more than they deserved, at least measured by the amount of time that they worked; but he gave the earliest workers exactly what they deserved and agreed upon for their wages.

II. The Lessons of the Parable

The parable ends in verse 16 with this statement, “the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.” We can see the obvious jealousy of the first workers, and the generosity of the landowner. But if our analysis stops there, we fall far short of understanding the parable. Those moral lessons are not the fullness of what Jesus intended to convey. He intended to

convey truth about the kingdom of heaven, entry into which is synonymous with salvation (John 3:3).

Let us first think about the characters in the parable. The landowner represents God and/or Christ, and the workers represent people who are called by God to be saved and to serve Him. The denarius represents the final reward of eternal life. The workers were first brought under the care of the landowner; then they labored; then they were rewarded. Believers too are first called by God, then they serve, then they receive their rewards, primary among them the full blessings of eternal life.

A. The first lesson, about the last and first switching places, is tied to the story in that no matter how long the workers worked, they got **the same reward** in the end.

1. Eternal life, which we all look forward to, is equally bestowed on all Christians alike, no matter how "good" they were or how long they were saved. Some of us were saved at age 4, like Dr. Raymond Saxe, and labor 90 years for the Lord. He was blessed with the beginnings of eternal life when he was saved and throughout his earthly sojourn, and he received another installment of that life on Monday, January 23, 2017. He labored the whole day long and got the reward that he understood the Lord to be offering him.
2. There are other people, however, who play at sin much of their lives. In the words of the parable they sit around until late in the day, wasting their lives doing nothing of significance, and then they come to Christ. Maybe then they have only half their life left, or a quarter, or only 10%. The thief on the cross had lived 99.9% of his life without God and only at the very end was he saved. He received the same reward of eternal life as Dr. Saxe. Others are saved but are very slow to mature and don't make a lot of progress on the road of sanctification. But they too receive the same reward.
3. I am purposefully ignoring other revelation that speaks about rewards for faithful service; that reward is a different matter than what Jesus is speaking about here (1 Cor. 3:13-15, 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 16:27; Romans 14:10-12; Rev. 22:12). That

reward does vary depending on the faithfulness of the recipient in this life.

4. The seeming “inequity” evaporates when we consider that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, and that not even one of us deserves anything from the Lord. We all fall so far short of God that the difference between people is insignificant. That He gives us a denarius as a reward for a whole day’s work or only 1 hour of work is graciously His choice. He is the King, and we are His subjects. We certainly do *not* have any right to complain at God for what He chooses to do. He knows best. We cannot argue about fairness, because immediately we would be caught up short. We would realize that what is fair is that we don’t receive anything; we are left to sit in the market all day long with no help from God, and we are destined to die that way forever. From beginning to end, the landowner was gracious. Let us be thankful, not complainers!

5. The last being first and the first being last does not focus on a swapping of positions. That would be the case in other contexts that speak about those who are abased will be exalted and those exalted will be abased. Here it is that last and first come in a “tie” when compared by the heavenly reward they receive— all the same.

B. The second phrase, about many being called but few being chosen, is found in Matthew 22:14 in the parable of the marriage feast. Its placement here is debated.¹ Many are called by the preaching of the gospel of Christ, but God has chosen only a few. Only a few respond properly with repentant faith.

1. The way is broad that leads to destruction, and many people there are that go into that way, thinking that they are going to be fine. But they go down the wide way directly into the mouth of destruction.

¹ You will not see the phrase in the NIV, ESV, or NAS because they believe it is not in the most accurate Greek manuscripts. You can sense why the translators had a trouble with this because it does not seem to fit with the prior context. It seems to be an abrupt change of subject.

2. Those who find the narrow way that leads to life are few (Matthew 7:13-14). They experience a more difficult road than those on the broad way, which has a certain ease and “flow” to it that is hard to resist.
3. The parable in Matthew 22 is about how the kingdom of heaven is like a king arranging a marriage for his son, and many invitations being sent out to this festive occasion. But the messengers were abused and the invitation was treated lightly. Only a few people responded favorably. One fellow even snuck in even though inappropriately dressed. The point is that the invitation to salvation is broadcast widely (many are called), but only a small number are actually saved (few are chosen). The reason that the “chosen” language is used is simple: God chooses those to whom He wills to give mercy (Romans 9:15). When God does so, it is perfectly consistent with the will and desire of the person at the time it occurs because God awakens them to righteousness.

A person so chosen will desire God’s mercy and will want to love God.

A person not so chosen will voluntarily reject God’s mercy, and will be culpable for it.

It is difficult to understand and explain much beyond that, except to say this: God is good, and God is in charge of all things, even *you*.

C. Lessons about God in the Parable

1. The landowner had plenty of money to pay all the workers. I found it interesting that five-point Calvinist John MacArthur said this about this notion: “Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world, from the Fall of Adam until the day of judgment. If any person is not saved it is because he will not be saved. Man’s sin can never outstrip God’s grace...”² The particularist book *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* explains “All Reformed theologians have agreed on

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (Mt 20:13). Chicago: Moody Press.

the infinite *inherent* sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ: sufficient in itself to redeem the whole world and many worlds besides” (426). There is no shortage on God’s side in terms of what He can provide.

2. Furthermore, God seeks sinners. Like the landowner, He goes to the marketplace repeatedly. He was not compelled to do so but did anyway.
3. God sets the terms of salvation. The owner agreed with the earliest workers that they would get a certain wage. With the others, they just trusted him to give them a good wage.
4. God does not turn any aside who are willing. If you were willing to work, the landowner hired you. If you are willing to be saved, God will save you (John 6:37). We need not concern ourselves at this point with the underlying causes of a person’s willingness. It is enough to note that the person has changed from being unwilling to being willing. Are *you* willing to be saved?
5. God is compassionate and gracious. He wants to help those who are lost. Some of those workers were probably less desirable than others; maybe older or less skilled or capable, yet the owner helped them.
6. God is sovereign. He can do what He wants with what is His. He is in charge.
7. God is generous, not unfair.
8. God uses workers in His vineyard. They serve in all kinds of capacities to maintain and grow the product of the vineyard—disciples in churches. Are you joyfully laboring there, or are you doing just the minimum to get by?

D. Lessons about Ourselves in the Parable

1. We too often pay attention to how others are living and serving God (or not) and compare ourselves to that. We should focus on being thankful to God, and serve Him the best we can. We need to be humble and thankful.
2. There are two kinds of workers. The first worked basically for the wage; the latter workers labored for the master and were

content to take what he thought was right. What kind of worker for God are you?

3. Notice that all the workers did some work. They exhibited some "fruit" even if they started at 5pm. In the same way, every true believer shows some fruit. Even the thief on the cross, in his dying moments, opened his mouth in witness to the unrepentant thief.
4. Receiving God's grace is better than getting His justice! God gives more than we deserve, so it is best not to bargain with God, because as you do, your outcome moves farther from grace and gets closer to justice!
5. Our thinking about fairness needs to change. Any kind of greed and jealousy needs to be removed from our hearts. This parable opens a window on those feelings. In the matter of salvation, a 99-year old man who becomes a Christian right before he dies has just as much eternal life as the person who lives for God 80 years after being saved at 19.

This does not mean, though, that you can put off the decision to follow Christ, for you have no idea when your day may come, and it could leave you zero time to speak to God about your soul.

Nor does this mean that faithfulness is inconsequential. It is *very* consequential, with rewards given to those who have faithfully served (see Matt. 25:14).

6. Remember that none of us are worthy. We are not "better" than those who are lazy or got to work late. Let us expunge the "who is greater" attitude from among us (Luke 22:24, also Matt. 20:24).
7. You cannot get *more* of eternal life than someone else. It is an infinite sort of thing, so if you get it, you get it, and everyone else who gets it gets the same. It is a gift of God's grace, and as infinite as it is, it cannot be sub-divided so you get more for being a Christian longer than someone else! But just think of it—*eternal* life. Infinite, blessed, healthy, God-honoring, God-worshipping *life forever*.

Conclusion

Dear friends, we have a great God. If we are still sitting in the marketplace waiting to be hired, we need to take up the offer of employment by God Himself. And then, no matter how long we have been "working" for God (living for Him), we need to keep on until the end of the day, no matter how hot and sweaty we might be. And we should thank Him all the while!

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