

## **The Parables of Jesus Lesson 21**

### **The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**

This parable again speaks to the difference between the Kingdom of God and the ways in which the world (and even religion) operates. Whether someone has been in church their whole life or just recently met Christ, this story raises the question: *Is God fair?* Jesus intentionally challenges the natural sense of 'fairness' and an 'earning' mentality to reveal his radical grace. This parable is not about economics or labor relations; it's about how grace empowers the kingdom. Jesus shows that God's generosity disrupts human categories of merit and reward, inviting us to see salvation not as wages earned but as grace given. And also to rejoice at the generosity and grace that God has shown us and other, knowing that none of us are deserving of his grace.

#### **The Text of the Parable**

Matthew 20:1-16 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' <sup>5</sup> So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> About 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?' <sup>7</sup> "Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' <sup>8</sup> "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.'

<sup>9</sup> "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> "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.'

<sup>13</sup> "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup> "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

#### **Background and Context**

In Matthew's arrangement in his gospel, we can go back even to chapter 18 to see how Jesus is flipping the idea of 'who belongs' in the kingdom. In Matthew 18:1-5, The disciples ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus responds by placing a child in their midst. In 18:10-14 Jesus tells of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to rescue the one. Also in 18:21-25 we have the parable of the Unforgiving Servant showing us that God's grace is immeasurable and undeserved, so we cannot calculate or rationalize it.

In Matthew 19:13-15, Jesus welcomes the little children and says "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." In 19:16-22 we see a rich man who thinks he can 'earn' his way into eternal life (what good thing must I *do?*), but finds out that when faced with the cost of surrender, he walks away. Then to conclude the chapter, Peter then asks: "*We have left everything. What will there be for us?*" Jesus promises that those who have left all will receive reward, but He ends with this powerful truth: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (19:30).

That line leads directly into Matthew 20:1-16, where Jesus illustrates the principle with the vineyard story.

## Exegesis of the Parables

When we begin to look at the parable, we need to note a few things:

First the **Economic Context**: Day laborers in the first-century were at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. They had no job security, no guaranteed income, and were dependent on being hired daily. A denarius was considered a fair day's wage for a laborer, just enough to feed a family.

Next we see the **Religious Context**: Jesus is speaking to Jewish listeners steeped in a covenantal mindset of reward for obedience. Many believed that long-standing faithfulness to God and adherence to the Law guaranteed greater standing in God's kingdom. The disciples had just asked Jesus (Matthew 19:27), "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" This parable comes as part of His answer, reframing their ideas of reward.

Then there were the **Cultural Expectations**: In Jewish tradition, righteousness was often viewed in terms of strict fairness: obedience equals blessing; disobedience equals punishment. Jesus challenges that, showing God's grace goes beyond fairness, and show that it's generosity often offends human pride.

**v. 1-2**: Here we see the context where the landowner of a vineyard goes out early (probably 6am) to hire workers to work for the day in his vineyard. The pay is for a denarius for the day's work. This is a 'fair' wage for a days work, and no one is underpaid, and all agree to work for this price.

**v. 3-7**: At 9am, noon, 3pm, and 5pm the landowner saw day laborers who were just standing around doing nothing, and he hires them at each time to go and work in the vineyard, and he will 'pay them whatever is right'.

**v. 8**: Here when evening comes, the owner calls his manager and says, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' This instruction sets up the theme of 'reversal' from 19:30 (the last shall be first...). Jesus is showing a point to illustrate the kingdom and also to set the hearts of the other workers.

**v. 9**: The shock is that those who were hired late in the day were paid a denarius, the same as the workers who began at 6am. We were not told what they would make, only that it would be 'whatever is right', not necessarily 'what they worked for'. This shows the extreme generosity of the landowner.

**v. 10-12**: When the early workers saw this they expected to receive more since they have been working longer, when they didn't, they grumbled and did not think it was 'fair', even though they originally agreed for what they would make. The phrase 'you have made them equal to us' reveal the heart of the first workers. They thought they deserved more because of the effort they put in.

**v. 13-16**: The landowner declared he was not unfair because he paid what was agreed, then says that 'I wanted to give' the others what he did, this was an act of generosity and grace. The early workers should not be envious over the generosity of the landowner. Jesus then returns to the point, 'the last shall be first and the first will be last.' Those who think they deserve more will end up last, and those who joyfully received the masters grace will be first.

When looking at the parable from a covenantal standpoint, it can speak to the inclusion of the 'outsiders' and Gentiles into the kingdom over the Jews. The Jewish people had covenant with Yahweh and certainly felt a sense of superiority over the other Gentile people, and a sense of 'earning' through the law. When the New Covenant age is inaugurated, everyone would be included the same way: by grace through faith. There would be no distinction between Jew and Gentile in the kingdom.

When the Pharisees would try to shut people out of the kingdom and expect to be rewarded more for their religious works, it was only revealing their distant heart from God and a lack of understanding of his grace.

## Principles from the Parable

So we can see that these two parables, including the instruction in the middle, gives us a lot to digest. So here are some concluding principles for these parables:

**1. Grace is a Gift, Not a Wage:** Salvation is not something earned, but it's a gift. Whether someone comes to Christ at age 7 or 70, the gift of eternal life is the same. We must guard against spiritual pride. Longevity in faith doesn't entitle us to more of God's love than the newest believer.

**Romans 4:4-5** "Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God... their faith is credited as righteousness."

**Ephesians 2:8-9** "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... not by works, so that no one can boast."

**2. God's Generosity Offends Human Fairness:** Our natural instinct is to measure, compare, and expect a reward according to our works, but God's ways disrupt that idea. He gives the same grace to the latecomer as to the early laborer. Instead of resentment, rejoice in God's generosity toward others.

**Titus 3:4-5** "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

**Romans 2:4** "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

**3. The First Will Be Last, and the Last First:** In the kingdom, God upends human expectations. The proud are humbled; the humble are lifted. We must live with humility, knowing that our place in God's kingdom is not based on seniority but on His grace.

**Luke 23:42-43** – The thief on the cross is promised paradise at the last hour.

**1 Corinthians 15:9-10** Paul: "I am the least of the apostles... But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."

**4. God Seeks and Calls Until the End:** Notice how the landowner kept going out until the last hour, calling workers. God relentlessly seeks people until the final moments of their lives. Therefore we should never give up on those who seem far from God because it's never too late for grace.

**Luke 15:4-7** "Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

**2 Peter 3:9** "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise... Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

**5. The Joy is in Serving, Not in the Comparing:** The workers saw their labor as 'work', as a duty, but serving in the kingdom is a delight. The problem wasn't the wage, but the comparison. Resentment grows when we look sideways instead of upward. We should find joy in serving Christ, not in measuring our reward against others.

**Colossians 3:23-24** – "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

**6. Equality in Christ:** This shows us that there is no superiority based upon the Old Covenant. The Jewish people would come to Christ the same way that the Gentiles would, through faith.

**Galatians 3:28-29** – "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ

**Colossians 3:11** – "Here there is no Gentile or Jew... but Christ is all, and is in all."