THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1–16

Key Verse: 20:16

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Do you care about social justice? Do you want to see people treated equally and fairly? Of course Jesus did. But in today’s passage he tells a parable that seems to turn fairness on its head. It’s interesting to note that this parable is recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel. It must have been especially meaningful to Matthew. There have been so many different interpretations of this parable. But Jesus introduces it as an illustration of the kingdom of heaven. What was his point? What does he want us to learn? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Verse 1 begins with the word “For.” It tells us that this parable is closely connected with what had just happened. When Jesus mentioned how hard it is to enter the kingdom, Peter protested: “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” (19:27) Jesus promised the Twelve a special reward (28). He also promised a general reward for all who sacrifice to follow him (29). He wants his followers to be confident of God’s reward. But he concluded in chapter 19 with a mysterious saying: “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first” (30). At the end of today’s parable he repeats this saying. But he flips the order. In 19:30 he begins with the first who become last. In 20:16 he begins with the last who become first. So how does today’s parable help us understand this saying?

In his teaching Jesus often used parables to illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like. He said the kingdom is like a mustard seed, or like yeast, or like a hidden treasure, or like a merchant looking for fine pearls, or like a net to catch fish, or like a man sowing good seed, or like a king settling accounts with his servants, or like a king preparing a wedding banquet for his son, or like ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. Jesus used things from ordinary life that people of his day could relate to, to help them grasp a specific spiritual truth about God’s kingdom. What does he say this time?

Read verse 1. The main figure in this parable is a landowner. And this landowner owns not a wheat farm, but a vineyard. Many people in Jesus’ day had a small personal vineyard on their own small plot of land that they worked for themselves. But this man seems to have had a large vineyard that was supposed to make him a lot of money. In agriculture there’s a sowing season, then a reaping season. In between there’s not a lot of work to do. But especially in reaping season, timing is crucial. If the farmer waits too long, what he’s grown can rot on the vines. One day, this landowner went out to his vineyard and saw that it was just the right time to harvest the grapes. So he suddenly needed a lot of workers. In that agricultural society many lived as temporary workers during harvest seasons. They were not rich; they lived a “hand-to-mouth” existence. In between seasons they may have made things by hand to sell, or worked in construction or as servants in people’s homes. But they really needed the temp work at harvest in order for their families to survive. We see in verse 3 that, in order to get hired for the day, people would gather in a town’s local marketplace. The local landowners would get the day workers they needed there.

In verse 1 we notice that this landowner went out early in the morning to hire workers. In verse 8 we see that he had a foreman, a supervisor of his workers. But he didn’t send out the foreman early in the morning; this landowner goes out himself. In Greek, the term for “early in the morning” is literally around 6:00AM, when the sun comes up. People would work from sunrise to sundown, which was about twelve hours. They started so early so they could have sunlight to see what they were doing, and also because it was not so hot. In any case, this landowner was responsible for his vineyard, and diligent.

What happened early in the morning? Look at verse 2. Evidently there were people already there in the marketplace at sunrise, hoping to get a job for the day. In Jesus’ time, a denarius was the usual daily wage for a day laborer. In our time, it might be something like minimum wage, say $10-15 per hour, which, if it’s a 12-hour shift, would amount to about $120-180. It would be hard work, but it was good money to buy food and essentials for a family. Some landowners might try to be vague with their workers about the pay so as to save money. But this landowner promised these workers a fair amount of money.

Read verses 3–5a. We’re not sure why the landowner goes out again to the marketplace at 9:00AM. In fact, he may have had enough workers for the day already. Maybe he went there to get some beverages or snacks, but noticed some people standing there doing nothing. This is what stands out. The landowner seems to feel badly for these people. Maybe they overslept and couldn’t get there by 6:00AM. But he understands how much they need the daily income. It seems he hires them not because he needs more workers, but because they need work. Though he’s a rich man, he’s socially aware, and generous. Again, he makes an agreement with them to pay them whatever is right. He’s trying to be a fair employer and contribute to the local economy.

Read verse 5b. This landowner seems not only diligent, but maybe even obsessed. There could be many reasons why he did this. Maybe some of the early morning workers couldn’t handle the heat in the middle of the day and left the job. Maybe those he hired weren’t working hard enough, and he was worried he wouldn’t get all the grapes harvested by the end of the day. It’s unusual to be hiring people at noon and 3:00PM, but it might be understandable.

But then things get quite strange. Look at verses 6,7. It’s 5:00 PM. There’s only one hour left. Nobody with any business sense would be out there at that time hiring workers. But this landowner shows up again and asks the people standing around, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” Who are these people? We haven’t noticed them before. Maybe they’ve been hiding in the shadows. Honestly, they didn’t seem very eager to work, or they would’ve made themselves known. Maybe they only pretended to go there to get a day job, but had no intention of working; they only wanted to tell their wives that they tried. Maybe they just felt like hanging out with friends in the marketplace that day. Or maybe they just didn’t look like very good workers—too weak or too sickly. How do they answer the landowner’s question? They say, “Because no one has hired us.” They might be saying they’re victims of job discrimination. But whether they’re lazy or victims doesn’t seem to matter to the landowner. He tells them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” They may not get much done in an hour, but this landowner seems to want to help them make even a little money. At this point, though, he seems more interested in the workers in the marketplace than in his own vineyard.

The beginning phrase of verse 8, “When evening came…” is literally 6:00PM. The sun is going down, and people need to get paid for the day. The owner tells his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” Why would the landowner want to start with the last ones hired and end with the first ones? Maybe he wanted to just get rid of those who worked only for an hour. Or maybe he wanted everyone to see what he would pay those people.

Read verse 9. It was shocking! Those who’d worked only an hour received a denarius—pay for a full day’s work! It showed how incredibly generous the landowner was. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more (10a). They were excited while waiting in line, thinking, “Wow! This landowner must be really rich! I can’t wait to see what he gives me!” But when they got their pay, they also got a denarius—the same pay, it seems, as everybody else, regardless of how long they’d worked.

What happened? Read verses 11,12. It’s just not *fair*! In this parable Jesus was appealing to all peoples’ inborn sense of fairness. Even children have it. The disciples, especially Peter, were listening closely at this point. Read verses 13–15. Though he was grumbling against him, the landowner calls this man, “friend.” He’s not treating him the way he deserves. When they started out that day of work, these people had had a fair agreement with the landowner. In fact, they were happy to be getting paid a denarius and having the chance to work. They became disgruntled only when they saw others who had worked less getting paid the same as them. Were they being greedy? In verse 15 the landowner calls them “envious.” In Greek it literally says, “Do you have the evil eye”?

It’s a classic example of jealousy. At first it seems to be a matter of being unfair. But jealousy really has its roots in not accepting God’s sovereignty. Like this landowner, God gets to do what he wants, because he’s God. He gets to show his sovereign grace to whomever he wants. We shouldn’t become envious of others because of what God has given them. As Ephesians 4:7 says, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” The real problem of these workers seems to be that they didn’t understand the landowner’s heart. God loves to show grace to people who really don’t deserve it. While working for God, we need to be his friends. We need to be not so self-centered. We need to understand God’s heart. We need to rejoice when we see him showing his grace to undeserving sinners. When we see evidence of God’s grace in others’ lives, we need to be glad and encourage them (Ac11:23).

This parable teaches us that God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace. The Bible calls it “the home of righteousness,” where God will root out everything that causes sin and all who do evil (2Pe3:13; Mt13:41). But it’s also a place where those who’re least deserving are treated with special honor and God’s great mercy. It’s not a place where the self-righteous brag about their rewards from God and gloat over others. This must have been moving to Matthew the former tax collector, who experienced firsthand the pain of being around self-righteous people who thought he didn’t deserve to be included among the Twelve apostles.

So, to be a member of his kingdom, we need to know his grace personally. It’s our “ticket in.” Paul wrote: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst” (1Ti1:15). Only when we begin to see how truly sinful we are can we appreciate his grace. For those who’ve lived a decent, moral life, it’s especially hard to know the grace of Jesus deeply. As Jesus said elsewhere, “Those who have been forgiven little love little” (Lk7:47b). We shouldn’t be confused: we don’t need to go out and sin greatly in order to appreciate his grace; we just need to let God’s word show us the real condition of our hearts. And we need to hold onto the gospel, that no matter how faithful we’ve been or how hard we’ve worked or how much we’ve suffered, we never earn our standing with God; rather, we all “are justified freely by his grace” (Ro3:24).

But it’s hard to keep a sense of his grace in our hearts when we work hard and have been faithful. We start thinking we deserve something or have earned something. Jesus promised his followers a reward for following him. But the best reward is the gift of God’s grace. Apostle Paul worked so hard to spread the gospel of Jesus, and he suffered probably more than anybody. But God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you…” (2Co12:9a). We need to be happy and fully satisfied in our souls not with human blessings or recognition or a fruitful ministry, but with the wonderful gift of God’s grace. Heaven is the place where God’s grace fully satisfies everyone—there’s no grumbling, no envy, no jealousy.

Also, we learn from Jesus’ parable that we need to be working for God in his vineyard not to prove something or earn something, but simply in response to his grace. If the workers who’d been hired first had kept a thankful heart for being hired and receiving the fair pay they’d been promised, they wouldn’t have gotten angry about what others received. We need to remember that we never deserved to be hired in God’s vineyard in the first place. We never deserved to work for him and serve him. It’s only by his amazing grace that he chose us and enables us to serve him. So we should work for God and be faithful to him simply because of his grace. As Apostle Paul said, “No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1Co15:10b).

Read verse 16. God is very serious about our living by his grace. Those who think they are first will be last. And those who think they are last will be first. People may not see what we’re thinking in our hearts, but God does. It’s the same as Jesus’ teaching, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Mt23:12). As the Bible says elsewhere, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (Jas4:6; cf. Pr3:36). God wants us to live and work for him with the heart of an unworthy servant (Lk17:10).

Praise God who’s so gracious toward undeserving people! Praise God who allows us to work for him! May he deepen our awareness of his grace. May he help us work for him out of genuine gratitude for his grace. And may he help us rejoice to see his lavish grace in others’ lives.