

9. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16
The Parables of Jesus

There is a tendency among some Bible teachers to focus their teaching only on what Jesus did for us at the cross. As wonderful as it is to be reminded again and again of the redemption payment paid by Jesus at the cross, I wish it could be balanced out by teaching of the return of Christ and what we should be doing while we wait. Many of the parables of Jesus concerned the harvest time at the end of this evil age and how we wish it were here already. The parable we are looking at today is about a landowner yearning for an abundant harvest, an event to which all believers in Christ should be looking forward.

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 Yearning to Bring in the 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 bringing in a full harvest of grapes, for there was a time factor to the grape picking. Most grapes are harvested in Israel 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 picking the grapes 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 vine's fruit. In our parable, the landowner saw that the grapes were ripe and needed harvesting. The landowner did not leave the hiring of workers to servants; he cared so much that he was down at the market when the day laborers arrived. He cared about His harvest.

The day was calculated into twelve hours set by the sun's position. 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, with 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 their families didn't eat that day if they didn't work. God instructed 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).

The farm laborers and the landowner would negotiate their pay before working. 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 considered as good pay. The landowner immediately enlisted workers for such an amount. However, a denarius was a small amount of money, so meager that it only provided a family with enough food for a day. The grape pickers and harvesters were on the lowest rung of the financial ladder.

Why were laborers still waiting to be hired later in the day? Why would the landowner pay good money for less work? Why would he keep coming back to the labor market?

Those hired later did not miss work opportunities because they were lazy; they were there because no one had employed them at the break of the day. These men were still waiting at the labor exchange market because they were desperate and needed to feed their families. The landowner was compassionate for their needs and saw the desperation of those still waiting to be hired late in the day. With those employed at 9 A.M. and later, he did not negotiate on their wage, instead he said, **"You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right"** (Matthew 20:4). The farm laborers were not in a position to bargain; whatever they were paid would be better than nothing. Perhaps the landowner did not talk about wages because if those appointed early in the day found out the landowner would pay those coming later the same pay, they might have eased up in their labor due to thoughts of unfairness.

It seems unusual that a man would still be looking for work at 5 P.M.; perhaps it speaks of the desperation of the worker to feed his family. Why would the landowner look for workers to labor only for one hour? This parable tells us something about the Landowner, a picture of the Lord. It reminds us that God seeks us out, no matter the time left in the day. Jesus said, **"For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost"** (Luke 19:10). Our God cares greatly about

His harvest and longs that all those saved would labor in his vineyard to rescue others. 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).

The Lord 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 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).

Although the workers were called at various times of the day, they were all called. This call reminds us that we come into God’s Kingdom at His invitation and do not come on our terms. Once we come into Christ's kingdom, 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 can never earn that which is freely given.

The Context of the Parable

Unless we look at the parable's context, we will not understand or interpret it correctly. As we have said before, the chapter divisions and the verse numbers were put in later and were not a part of the original text. In chapter twenty, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard carries on Jesus' discussion with the apostle Peter in chapter nineteen. Peter was shocked at the answer Jesus gave the rich young man when he asked the Lord what he still lacked. It started Peter wondering about rewards and what would be a fair reward for his giving up 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 thought and attitude of “What’s in it for me.”

How does the Lord reassure Peter in the passage above? (Matthew 19:28-29). Is it a good thing to compare ourselves to others?

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 wants each of us to focus on what we are called to do in His vineyard. None are more important than others.

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 kingdom workers helping to reap the harvest. There are two ways of interpreting this parable:

1) The day 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 workers' minds 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, who among us could stand before Him? Even the work 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 have entered into new life in Christ at the dawn of day, i.e., as young children. When they do, they spare themselves from the pain, regret, and sinful acts often experienced by those brought in at the midday hour of their lives. Much uprooting of weeds must be done by those entering into life at the noonday of their lives. **"It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth"** (Lamentations 3:27).

Some of you who entered God's kingdom at an early age cannot remember the day that you came to Christ. 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 lived 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 he was in a different country. Like many of you who can't remember crossing the border from your old life into the new, 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 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, 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.

Those of you who have entered into life in Christ at the 6 A.M. time of life should be careful not to think you should have more of the blessings of God upon you. I believe this is the warning that Jesus gave Peter, that others will enter the kingdom of God at a later time in their life that will surpass Peter in the effort, gifting, and anointing to bring in the harvest. Men such as the apostle Paul seem to overshadow Peter in fruitfulness. As you read through the Book of Acts, Peter is hardly mentioned after Paul's conversion in Acts 9. The emphasis is on the advance of the Gospel to other nations.

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 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 waste any more time. Consider Christ's claim on your life and receive the gift of eternal life he has promised. Determine to obtain it now so that you may have everything to look forward to at the end of the day's labor.

[At what stage of life were you called? Share some of the difficulties, ungodly values, and habits that seeped into your soul.](#)

It's Never Too Late!

Many reading these words find themselves at the middle stage of life (i.e., the noonday time of the day) thirty to forty years of age. You may feel it is already beginning to get late for those of you at that age, but as long as you have the present moment, it is not too late. Many at the noonday stage of life come to Christ because of some difficulty that awakened them to their need for a Savior. You cannot blame God for the challenges that have come upon you, but if you have gone through lean times, then let your difficulties lead you to Christ. You have heard of the term "middle age?" People spend vast amounts of effort and money to hold on to their youth in our society. People do not want to age! The Baby Boomer generation is notorious 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.*"

Contrary to the world's thinking is the fact that, in God's kingdom, age is not a factor. We are valuable to the Lord at every age and stage of our lives. Our stage of life is not relevant when He has a job for us to do! After all, think of what God did in the lives of Moses and Abraham in their later years. Do not let the enemy fool you into thinking that you are too old and God cannot use you! He will always have a job for you to do. If you have come to Christ later in 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 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 its meaning. He expresses what many people feel, especially later in life when people have time to reflect and observe. 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 latter part of your life; you may "contribute a verse at any and every stage."

This Landowner, our picture of God, has not given up on you and is still looking 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 comes into the marketplace to find you and very graciously invites you into His vineyard. We stagger at such grace that gives this laborer the same as those who have worked all day. When the Lord called Moses at eighty years of age, he had excuse after excuse as to why God should not use him. God used him significantly in his senior years. Some have known a relative or friend who came into God's kingdom on their deathbed. While there is still time, there is an opportunity. The thief on the cross gives great comfort to those who are sick and face death. If he could receive forgiveness at the 5:59 P.M. time of life, there is hope for all to find the gift of eternal life.

The Day Represents the Church Age Interpretation

2) There is another "layer" to this story (i.e., another way that we can interpret this parable). The day can 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 apostles and Stephen, Phillip, Barnabas, and those who began their labor at the 6 A.M. time of the early church. Those who labored later in the day were 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 the great harvest ahead.

Do not think 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 God's word and build up the Body of Christ? Joshua Project statistics ¹ say that the worldwide population stands at 7.9 billion people (June 2022). Of that amount, 3.3 billion people are as yet unreached. Most of those are in India, South East Asia, and the Middle East. Those in their senior years can judge harshly new methods of reaching people using technology because it is not like previous years. I do believe, too, that there is a more significant revelation of the Holy Spirit these last days 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 revealing God's power to the church of today, the power available to every worker that labors in the vineyard. At one point in the church's history, only an ordained trained minister could pick grapes. Those who came into the kingdom years ago were taught that we needed the training to read the Grape Pickers Manual, for they could not understand it without specialized teaching. We had to sit around the grapevine watching the professional grape pickers at work to see how to harvest the grapes. We are beginning to see, especially as we learn what the Holy Spirit is 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 most fruitful servants of God have not gone to the grape pickers' school. These last days, God will use everyone 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 of Israel (Hebrew Seminary). He chose ordinary men like you and me. Individuals that the world considered the last choice by this world's standards, but who will be first when they arrive in the heavenly kingdom. At the end of the age, all believers will stand before the Lord, and 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 unknown and hidden people in this world (i.e., people who have labored for Christ in obscurity) that are given a place of honor and high reward in the kingdom. The eternal rewards 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 their more significant—than—life ministry could be less prominent than expected. It is also possible that many young men and women reading these words today will go on to do great work in these 5 P.M. hours of the day, perhaps even more significant than any we have seen yet. We know that as the twilight and darkness approach, the glorious light of the Gospel will shine brighter. I believe that those used in these last days will do great exploits for God (Daniel 11:32), and

¹ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/statistics

people working in the harvest late in the day, this statement would undoubtedly apply: the last will be first!

Let us return to the question that Peter asked Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you. What, then, will there be for us?" 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 has earned outstanding awards and acclamation will find himself in a lower place in the kingdom of God if his intentions are selfish. 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 to focus for a moment on the landowner's graciousness and compassion 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." The landowner, representing God the Father, did not pass over them. His grace is sufficient. He will empower His people in the work He gives them, regardless of their age, education, energy, or skills. His passion is to bring in the harvest. He will empower each according to their willingness to work in His vineyard. They will work alongside those working "all day" in the vineyard. The joy of being part of bringing in the harvest is what will be shared 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 valuable. Many believe that You have passed by them. Help each one to see the lies of the enemy. For those reading these words, I pray that they allow no more time to go by and that today is the day to hear the call of divine love to come and work in the Landowner's vineyard. We are thankful to be in Your kingdom and be a part of Your divine plan. Amen.

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