

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20:1-16
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A fundamental lesson is imparted to us by our Lord in this fascinating parable, found only in Matthew and in none of the other gospel accounts. Entry into the kingdom of heaven is based on God's grace and not our merit. Salvation is the free gift of God and it is up to Him to give it to whomever He pleases in whatever manner or conditions He pleases and at whatever time He pleases. It is not up to us to question His methods or motives, but to respond to His gracious invitation to come work in His vineyards and fields.



At least three additional lessons are imparted in the parable, and I am sure many more as well. But for our purposes I will briefly address the following three lessons which are taken from the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard: First, God's actions are not based on favoritism but on His desire that we might live, (v.13). Ezekiel 18: 23 tells us, "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?" So His motive is not to ensure equal pay for equal work, but to give as

many as will respond to His invitation the chance to accept and live eternally. [Illustration: American artist Briggs Co, (active 1868-1930) "Laborers for the Vineyard Hired the Third Hour" from his series "The Laborers in the Vineyard." Transparency on glass from the collection of Louis Walton Siple, Gift to The 3M Company.]

Second, we are clearly taught in the parable not to envy anyone else for their spiritual blessings, (v. 15). We will be looking at the so called "evil eye," or envious eye, as it is called—the darkness which comes over a person who is envious of the blessings of others, whether spiritual or material.

Third, we are taught in this parable not to give up on being hired or to lose hope that we will eventually prove to be useful for a particular situation or task. Being available for duty, even if one is not selected in the beginning, can result in tremendous rewards later on.

Here, then is the Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. 5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' 9 "When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 "When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 "When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered and said to one of them, ' Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last shall be first, and the first last."¹



The central message is a clear revelation of God's grace for salvation. Jesus leads the listeners on by degrees until they come to the end of the story and a marvelous revelation of God's free gift of grace for salvation which He gives instead of rewards for works. Our faith is not a works based faith. We are saved to perform good works, but not saved by performing good works—a key difference.

Those who are looking for other central messages in this parable might invent them, but they are not to be found. Therefore, we may confidently say that this parable deals

with salvation by God's grace. So then, this parable is not about resolving union and management disputes. It is about salvation. It is not about equal work for equal pay. It is about redemption. It is not primarily about persistence (though we may certainly draw some secondary lessons here, as we shall shortly see), it is about salvation by grace through faith.

Separating the parable into its component parts we uncover some interesting revelations. First there is **the work day**. It is 12 hours or so, counting breaks and a short lunch. Basically, field hands worked dawn to dusk. Our notion of an eight hour day has its origin not here but with the modern labor movement. The landowner finds and hires the first laborers "early in the morning." The work day started at 6:00 AM. These laborers might have come much earlier in the hopes of securing a day job and the denarius which would be their reward. But even after hiring the workers at the first of the day, the landowner went back to the market place and hired additional workers; at the third hour (9:00 AM), the sixth hour (12 Noon), the ninth hour (3 PM), and the 11th hour—about 5:00 PM.

We can certainly wonder at the fact that he would hire laborers at the 11th hour, with only one hour to go. Perhaps he underestimated the work that had to get done that day. Or perhaps he overestimated the laborers he had already hired, believing that they would be faster in accomplishing what needed to be done. But to spend more than a moment considering that question would be a waste of time. The parable is not about labor practices or employment policies, it is about salvation. Some are saved and brought into the kingdom at the very last hour. Let us hope that there will be many people so "hired."

¹ All scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated version, (NASU).

Next we might examine **the marketplace** itself—the town square. Here is the place where business was conducted, contracts were ratified, and hiring of laborers transacted. It was to this spot that the laborers came, early in the morning, looking for work. As a commentator once noted, every man's soul stands ready to be hired. We are all in one way or another, seeking employment by some person or call in our lives.

In fact, it is at the gates of the city that twin calls are issued; one by wisdom and one by the woman of folly. Consider the message of Proverbs 9:

Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom has built her house,
She has hewn out her seven pillars;
2 She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine;
She has also set her table;
3 She has sent out her maidens, she calls
From the tops of the heights of the city:
4 "Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!"
To him who lacks understanding she says,
5 "Come, eat of my food
And drink of the wine I have mixed.
6 " Forsake your folly and live,
And proceed in the way of understanding."

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Another call is also being issued at this town square, and that is the call of folly. The calls are very similar. The results of selecting one call over another makes the difference between life and death.

Proverbs 9:13-18

The woman of folly is boisterous,
She is naive and knows nothing.
14 She sits at the doorway of her house,
On a seat by the high places of the city,
15 Calling to those who pass by,
Who are making their paths straight:
16 "Whoever is naive, let him turn in here,"
And to him who lacks understanding she says,
17 "Stolen water is sweet;
And bread eaten in secret is pleasant."
18 But he does not know that the dead are there,
That her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

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We all visit the public square in one way or another. Perhaps it is to shop, to work, to travel. It may be the internet, the halls of government or the shops and stores. When we go out of our homes we hear the two calls—wisdom and folly. We are all faced with daily decisions in the town square. Joshua of old held forth the choice in stark relief when he issued his challenge to the people:

If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. Joshua 24:15 NASU

The owner of the vineyard comes now into our field of view. Here is the landowner. Without him and his desire to hire laborers, there would be no story and indeed no hope of work. The landowner is God. “The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell in it,” we read in Psalm 24:1. He owns us; we are not our own. We are His. First Corinthians 6:20 tells us that we do not belong to ourselves but “we are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body.” God is our maker and redeemer. He has a great family, and those who have been “hired” are in it. The good news is this: everyone has a chance to be hired. God is not willing for anyone to perish. Once hired the work is a blessing. Matthew 11:29-30 tells us that the burden of the Lord is in no way onerous: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

We will work while it is day before the darkness of the end of the age descends. The time will be short—and then we will fly away.

God hires laborers—not because He needs us. Rather, His motive is to save us from a life of indolence and poverty. We are hired to work His harvest fields and vineyards. Will He discharge us once hired? Never. Will we ever be spiritually unemployed again, once we have repented and become His? Not in a thousand eternities. How long will we be His? As long as we live we will serve him. He will never let go of us, we would have to defiantly quit the work declaring that we no longer love Him and count His blood an unclean thing.

How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10:29 NASU

The agreed upon wage. The laborers are offered the standard wage—a denarius. This is the normal wage for a foot soldier or day laborer. But at the end of the day there is an unusual occurrence which any of the audience of our Lord did not expect and perhaps even first-time readers in our day do not expect. Those hired at the 11th hour receive a denarius. So do those hired at the ninth, sixth and third hours. But when those hired first came “each of them also received a denarius.” They are upset and grumbling for the obvious reason that last hires

received a full day's wage—otherwise they would not have been grumbling. The wage was fair; but for everyone to receive the same wage for unequal work? That is more than they can handle. Paid fairly, even in their own estimation, they nonetheless deem themselves to be unfairly treated.

Why did the landowner hire those still unemployed and standing around at 5:00 PM in the first place? After all, they had been there all day long. He had seen them at the very first hour when he went out. Perhaps it was because he underestimated the work to be done and was now hiring furiously to get the job done. Or perhaps (and more likely) he had overestimated the skill and productivity of the workers already hired. The reasons for his actions are secondary to the actions themselves. The first workers are furious. The last are astounded. They were in the marketplace all day long—and when all hope was gone they were hired and rewarded the same as all others hired. These last laborers did not go home at noon, concluding that being hired was impossible, or even at the ninth hour—3:00 PM. They were still standing there at the eleventh hour—5:00 PM.

Some see times of life in the times the laborers are hired: The first hour—a call to serve God as a youth, like Jeremiah. The third, sixth and ninth hours—the calling of God comes in one's youth up to mid-life. The eleventh hour—a call comes very late in life. These are those who are called to the Lord in old age; their days far spent. Whether this bit of interpretation merits our deep thought is debatable. It is interesting, we can say that, but it is not the point of the parable. Clearly there is hope of salvation regardless of age.



Evening comes and with it the end of the work day and a time of reckoning-up. This is clearly an allusion to the time of judgment. The amounts paid by the landowner show us that salvation has been His free gift all along. We are not and shall not receive any greater salvation than to be saved from death and hell, whether we are saved for decades before we die or only minutes. All who come to Him receive these wages. [Illustration: "Householder Orders Steward to Call the Laborers," See previous illustration for citation.]

This parable does not address the concept of the works done by believers once saved being judged at the Judgment seat of

Christ. I touch on the subject only to note that those things we are now doing as believers will be evaluated by the Lord when He returns. Our salvation will not be evaluated—He has paid the price for our sins and that is final. But some who have been building with wood, hay and stubble, will see their works burned up. Others are building with more durable materials: gold, silver and precious stones.

But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.
1 Corinthians 3:10-15 NASU

But returning to the point of the laborers being paid all the same amount: One can only imagine the hopes of those who were hired first beginning to swell as they saw the workers who had been hired earlier receive the sum they themselves had been promised. And when they did not receive double or treble what the last men received, their heart attitude was revealed.



Their complaint? The “last men” have worked only one hour, and that in the cool of the day! And yet, they are treated the same as themselves who have borne the heavy burden all day long, enduring the scorching heat of the day. These workers do not think they were underpaid, but that the others were overpaid. Their underlying spiritual problems are greed and jealousy.

But the vineyard owner offers his explanation as follows: First he uses a friendly approach toward them: “Friend,” he says. This is certainly a rebuke, but with equal certainty it may be declared that it is indeed a mild one. “I have done you no wrong,” he correctly states. He is not being unfair—cheating them—defrauding them. Provided the owner keeps his agreement he has the right to do with his money as he pleases. God does as He pleases. It is not our job to correct His ways or theology.

Then the owner gets to the underlying problem behind the complaint of those who are objecting to his generosity. “Is your eye envious . . .” he says. The New King James translation puts it this way, “is your eye evil . . .?” Evil means “envious.” The evil eye is the envious eye.

Proverbs 28:22

22 A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth
And does not know that want will come upon him.
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Thus the Lord exhorts us to be careful with this temptation to be dissatisfied with what we have, or to become jealous over what others have.

A summary of the central lesson learned:

God's gift of salvation is in fact a gift; it is not and never can be earned. It is distributed on the basis of His graciousness and merit, never on our own. This is contrary to the way it works in the world, as the laborers hired first illustrate. In the world the one who works the hardest and longest gets the most pay. The person who works little receives little. But though the world's system works well for paying earthly wages, it is not the way the kingdom works. In the kingdom Amazing Grace prevails. Grace makes the last first and the first last and teaches us that salvation cannot be earned by our labors whether short or long.

A summary of the additional lessons learned:

First, God's actions are not based on favoritism but on His desire that they might live, (v.13). Second, we should never develop the "evil eye," envying others for their spiritual or material blessings, (v. 15). Third, don't give up on being hired or useful for a particular task. Remaining available for a task to the eleventh hour, whether in the world or the kingdom, can have huge rewards.

