

Matthew 20:1-16



Paraphrase of the Parable

This parable of the Lord Jesus describes an owner of a vineyard who needed a lot of work doing in his vineyard. He went out early in the morning and hired labourers, agreeing with them that their pay would be a penny for the day. He set them to work in the vineyard. Evidently there were yet more tasks

to be done, so at the third hour – equivalent to our 9.00 am, the man went to the marketplace and saw men standing around idle. He hired them also, saying *whatsoever is right I will give you*. He repeated this again at midday and again mid afternoon at 3pm, the 9th hour. For some reason as the day began to draw into evening, at the 11th hour – about 5pm, he went back to the marketplace yet again, and found men idle and he said why have you been standing here all day doing nothing? They replied – no man has hired us! The owner of the vineyard told them go work in my vineyard, *and whatsoever is right, that shall you receive*. Finally the day drew to a close, and the time came for all the men to be paid. The owner called his manager, and said pay the men, but begin at the last hired and then down to the first ones. This the manager did, and he began by paying the men who began working late in the day a penny, and so the wages distribution continued. Then it came to the turn of the men who were first recruited to work in the vineyard to be paid, they were looking forward to receiving a lot more than a penny. They had

been watching and assumed that since they had worked a lot longer, they would therefore receive a lot more money. But they also received a penny. They complained to the landowner about this, it wasn't fair. You have made those who only worked for one hour equal to us, who have worked through the hardship and burning heat of the day! But the owner replied Friend, I am not treating you unfairly. Didn't you agree with me to work for a penny a day? Take what is yours and go. I want to give to this last man the same as I gave to you. Am I not permitted to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

This was the story that Jesus told – a parable. He concluded the parable with the statement: *So the last will be first, and the first last.*

Context

This parable connects to the context about the supposed worthiness of each individual versus the personal sacrifice each has made. This is seen in the previous chapter where Peter applying his logic to Jesus' teaching: *Go sell all that you have and follow me...* responded: *Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?* If all the young man concerned needed to do to be saved was to give up his possessions and follow Jesus— well, he Peter, and these his fellow disciples, they had done much more than that and had so voluntarily. Jesus confirmed that rewards would follow, but we note in 19:30 the phrase which connects to our parable: *But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.*

Peter showed how he had assumed that the reward offered, related directly in proportion to what the person had given up or sacrificed. He assumed that the reward was earned and deserved in some way. Jesus did not directly challenge Peter about this, but left it there for the disciples to work it out in the giving of this parable. It was a question of motivation. What was it that motivated men and women to follow Jesus? For rewards? For what they could get out of it? That

if they worked really- really hard, they would get more reward than even a man who had great possessions and gave them all up. This motivation is intrinsically selfish. Doing something good but being motivated not for the sake of doing good, but by what can be got out of it.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

This is not referring necessarily to an order of attendance or who will be raised to life first at the resurrection, but relating to the quality of the character in God's estimation. The justice and estimation of man is inherently flawed, as we can see by Peter's thinking and the thinking of the men who agreed to work for the set wage.

It is important to connect this parable to the context of what Jesus had been saying earlier, because some people extract a wrong meaning from this parable.

Wrong Meaning

Some believe that just as everyone receives the same – a penny a day, the same wages, the same reward, that all those who have toiled in Jesus' vineyard will all be alike in their status in glory in the Kingdom to come, that those who have just believed and been baptised but then passed away without the opportunity of faithful stewardship will rank equally with those who have borne the burden and heat of the day through a long life of trial and tribulation. But clearly in other parables Jesus explains otherwise, teaching in the parable of the talents that those who multiply the pound or talent given to them in hard work in preaching the gospel and living it, multiplying the gifts of the Spirit, that some would receive two cities to rule over, others five, others ten. Revelation 22:12 *And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.* 1 Corinthians 3:8 *Now he that plants and he that waters are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.* See also 2 Corinthians 9:6

But the wage given to the labourers in the vineyard cannot be referring to the reward of eternal life, for why would those who look enviously upon others, or those who murmur and complain be deserving of eternal life? Jesus adds the most important words, which are very important for us to think about. 20:16: *So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.*

Jesus was saying that not all who labour in the vineyard are chosen.

Suggested Interpretation

- The penny for a day wage is the Calling, the invitation of the Gospel.
- The owner of the vineyard is the Father. The God of heaven who is determined to produce a bountiful harvest.
- The steward in this parable is the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The workers all of them to a man are casual workers. They are not on the same level as the steward. They are just hired for the day. They have been hired on conditions. There is no guarantee of ongoing employment. There is no speak of hiring for tomorrow, until this day is done.
- The penny given to all those who labour in the vineyard whether grudgingly, lazily, enviously, under false assumptions – all of them is the gift of life, is the means to live, but can also be understood as being the promise of the resurrection. It is the same resurrection.

Working in the vineyard of God, is a privilege and an honour. The men waiting in the marketplace they needed no directions or description – they knew about this vineyard already. Only God has control of that vineyard. He has determined a magnificent harvest, but the selection of the vines, the method of growing, pruning, and watering are all his. Only he gives the increase. Only he decides the timing of the harvest, who works in the vineyard and so on. He is Sovereign.

The election of the first group of workers was unique. Only with them did he enter a covenant, a contract - a specific amount. They were selected at the beginning, early in the morning. They had an advantage, as they were given more information, - what they would receive if they worked the full day, but if they did not, they would not receive. Perhaps this group represents the nation of Israel. Through the covenant given to them they knew exactly what the outcome would be, they also had the advantage of greater familiarity of the vineyard, choosing the easiest tasks, the vineyard was all theirs for a while.

But eventually, the Lord would choose others (Gentiles) to carry out further tasks that the previous group had not managed by themselves. As the day of probation passed, the Owner of the Vineyard was busy, making repeated visits to the market place. But still the work was not yet complete. Even at the 11th hour, yet more men were hired and went through the narrow way, the strait gate into the vineyard, which became quite full of men. As the last workers entered the vineyard as the day began to end, some workers may well have stared, thinking what are these doing coming in at such a late time, there is only one hour left! But there is no need to question God. Only He knows if and when a great storm is brewing, and there is a limited time to get the harvest in. God only entrusts his business and even the most delicate matters to his Steward – like paying the labourers! But who is to say all the tasks in the vineyard are of equal value? Some may be needed to secure the fencing or hedges. Others to water the silverlings for half a day. Harvest may take a good portion of the day. But lighting the bonfire of the unfruitful prunings is a task that does not take long at all, but is still important. There is toil and labour for the ages, but as the times of the Gentiles comes to an end, there is still unfinished business as far as God is concerned.

The market place

When the Owner of the vineyard went to the marketplace, he found men who were idle. *Why stand ye here all the day idle?* Of course, the Almighty has an objection to idleness, and wastefulness.

Proverbs 19:15 *Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger.* God is not willing that any should perish, and so the opportunity to have purpose and direction in life has been made available, (it was the Bible preached in marketplaces that bestirred the reformation not the apostasy from the pulpits!) See Ecclesiastes 9:10: and Hebrews 6:12.

But to these men who were invited to work in the vineyard, the Sovereign Lord never agreed to pay a penny for the day. To these latecomers no such contract or covenant was drawn up. Instead they were expected to rely not on a finite number – which was just a shadow of things to come – like the law given to the Jews. Instead to these languishing in the marketplace he said verse 7: whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. They obeyed the call. They went into the vineyard not expecting a fixed payment. Instead they went in faith – relying on the justice and equity of the landowner, trusting that he knew what was right, and that was good enough for them!

The way these men eagerly went to work, not knowing what they were going to be paid, but considered it better than hanging around the marketplace doing nothing appealed to the owner of the vineyard. He liked that attitude.

Time to be Paid

The evening drew on. Light fading, the owner gave his steward the command to call the labourers and pay them their due, but begin at the last and then finish at the first. The giving of the wages was open and transparent. The ones who were hired first, watching, displayed a mindset, which is typical of human nature. Why did the owner choose to make the payments in this way? Wasn't it provocative,

designed to wind up the ones who had worked the longest? If you choose to be generous to one set of people and not another, would you deliberately do it front of everyone, why not be discreet?

We are used to working with sinners, and so pragmatism and discretion is required in the working environment. But God does not have to work with sinners and refuses to tolerate sin, or sinful thinking. True and righteous are all his ways. At any rate, it is moments like these where God tries the hearts, and where all is revealed to him.

Like the Jews who strongly objected to the preaching to the Gentiles, through envy, and jealousy, those first hired at the start of the day objected to anyone receiving a better deal than they. Instead of being glad for them they resented it: this attitude Jesus condemned – see Matthew 23:13: *But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.*

Jesus reminds his disciples, that they are all unprofitable servants, because they have only done that which they have been commanded to do. Those called first who were resentful towards others, although chosen first, their characteristics were last rated in God's estimation. Would they be granted a permanent role in the Vineyard? Very unlikely.

Those who were last in the vineyard, who came without hope of much reward at all, and doubted their own usefulness at such a late hour, who had been despised, but trusted that they would be given that which was right, would have been filled with amazement at such generosity, how much they would have appreciated the greatest opportunity, what loyalty and determination to please they would have felt.

To the Complainers

To those who complained, they were sent away. Take that thine is, and go thy way: *I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?* Depart from me. I never knew you.

The warnings and lessons are clear.

Brother Terry