

Jesus' Parables in Chronological Order

Parable #34 ~ Matthew 20:1-16 ~ Workers in the Vineyard ~ Scripture

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³“About the third hour 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 the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶About the eleventh hour 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.’

⁹“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour 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 men 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, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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.”

Parable #34 ~ Matthew 20:1-16 ~ Workers in the Vineyard ~ Discussion

1. What do you think of deathbed or death-row conversions to faith in Jesus?
2. Who is the best employer you have ever had? Why?
3. What wage was agreed upon by the landowner and workers early in the morning? (Vs 20:2) What wage was agreed upon by those hired later? (Vs 20:4)
4. What explanation did the last group of workers give when asked why they were standing around doing nothing? What else might they have been doing? How do you see this as applying to you or others today?
5. What did the landowner tell the foreman to do at the end of the day? (Vs 20:8)
6. Was anyone underpaid or cheated? Why then did the workers complain? Was anyone overpaid?
7. Does this parable make economic sense? Does it in any way fit with employers, unions, and government regulations in the world we live in? How do our cultural values resist the idea of grace?
8. With which group of workers do you personally identify—with those hired at 9:00 a.m., at noon, at 3:00 p.m., or those hired at 5:00 p.m.?
9. What's the danger of thinking of yourself as a responsible worker, hired early in the day? Why is it dangerous to compare your own situation with someone else's?
10. How does it make you feel to know that heaven will include murderers, child molesters, swindlers, and crooked politicians that put their trust in Christ only minutes before their death?
11. What would happen if God gave each of us what we deserve?
12. How can focusing on God's grace in our lives keep us from becoming jealous of others? In what way can you thank God every day for his grace in your life?

Parable #34 ~ Matthew 20:1-16 ~ Workers in the Vineyard ~ Leader's Notes

1. What do you think of deathbed or death-row conversions to faith in Jesus?
2. Who is the best employer you have ever had? Why?
3. What wage was agreed upon by the landowner and workers early in the morning? (Vs 20:2) What wage was agreed upon by those hired later? (Vs 20:4)

A full days labor at vintage time (in September at the harvest of the grapes when day laborers would be needed) was about 12 hours long. The landowner's own workers would have started work at 6:00 a.m. Three hours later, the landowner saw that he needed more workers and hired some at 9:00 a.m., who would know that they had to work 9 hours to earn a denarius, a fair wage for a full days labor. The landowner then hired more laborers at 12 noon, 3:00 p.m., and finally at 5:00 p.m. to help finish up. To these workers hired later on, the landowner didn't state a specific wage, but said he would pay "whatever is right."

4. What explanation did the last group of workers give when asked why they were standing around doing nothing? What else might they have been doing? How do you see this as applying to you or others today?

The last group said, "no one has hired us." As Leopold Fonck says, "they may have been guilty of a little negligence in seeking work, but nevertheless, the master engaged them." What do you think the guys that hang around across from Morristown railway station do if they aren't hired first thing in the morning? Of all the men that come in from Dover each day, what percentage do you think get hired? If they don't get hired first thing, what do you think they should do? What would you do if you were in a similar situation?

5. What did the landowner tell the foreman to do at the end of the day? (Vs 20:8)

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.' This was deliberate. If the ones hired first had been paid first, they would have left and would not have seen that the latecomers received the same payment (one denarius) as they (the early hires) had been promised. For the lesson of the parable, it was necessary that they should be witnesses.

6. Was anyone underpaid or cheated? Why then did the workers complain? Was anyone overpaid?

Observe that nobody was cheated! Not a single worker was underpaid. While it may be argued (based on human, subjective, economic comparisons) that some were overpaid, nobody was cheated. The complaint of the early workers offered no evidence of wrongdoing. But their complaint wasn't unjustified either. However, it was a complaint born in hearts of jealousy, not objective reality. The early hires received less than they expected but the many later hires received more. We should rejoice in the good others receive. But do we?

The landowner had the right to "overpay" the late workers. He said "whatever is right you will receive." He determined what was right, not based on ordinary human accounting, but grace. His overpayment of the late workers was his choice and nobody could argue he didn't have that right.

7. Does this parable make economic sense? Does it in any way fit with employers, unions, and government regulations in the world we live in? How do our cultural values resist the idea of grace?

Jesus' story makes no economic sense, and that was his intent. It does not in any way fit with today's employers, unions, and government regulations. Jesus was giving us a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day's wages. No one was cheated; all the workers got what they were promised. But discontent arose from the scandalous mathematics of grace.

Jesus says right at the start, this parable is about the kingdom of heaven. As such it points to a great truth: it may and will happen that many who were called last will be first in the kingdom of heaven, while the first called will be last. Our reward in Christ's kingdom will not depend solely on the greatness, fatigue, and length of our work, but above all and primarily on the free will and favor of God. He will apportion grace to every one as it may please him. The measure of grace that each of us receive depends solely and alone on God's benevolence.

8. With which group of workers do you personally identify—with those hired at 9:00 a.m., at noon, at 3:00 p.m., or those hired at 5:00 p.m.?

9. What's the danger of thinking of yourself as a responsible worker, hired early in the day? Why is it dangerous to compare your own situation with someone else's?

Significantly, many Christians who study this parable identify with the

employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as responsible workers, and the employer's strange behavior baffles us as it did the original hearers. We risk missing the point of the parable: that God dispenses gifts, not wages. None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell. (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*).

Think of what this means today. We are called by God at different hours of the day, that is, at different times in our lives, to the service of God. Look at people in the Bible: some were called at birth like Samuel, or Isaac or Jacob; some were called while they were young Joseph, David, and Solomon; others were called in their middle years like Noah and Jonah; and still others not until they were much older. So it is with us.

St. John Chrysostom adds that another purpose of this parable is to stir up the zeal and encourage those who come (or return) to God in old age to realize they would not have any reason to expect less than those who started as youngsters. You can gain everything, even in a short time. Everyone can attain the same result at any age.

And, of course, this parable like so much of Jesus' teaching, emphasizes humility.

10. How does it make you feel to know that heaven will include murderers, child molesters, swindlers, and crooked politicians that put their trust in Christ only minutes before their death?

11. What would happen if God gave each of us what we deserve?

As I said above, God doesn't reward us according to merit—thank goodness—for we just don't come close to meeting God's requirements for a perfect life. If we were paid on the basis of our works, we would all end up in hell.

12. How can focusing on God's grace in our lives keep us from becoming jealous of others? In what way can you thank God every day for his grace in your life?