

Sermons on Matthew

The Parable of the Laborers

Matthew 20:1-16

With Study Questions

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“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ⁻²⁻ Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ⁻³⁻ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁻⁴⁻ and said to them, ‘_ You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁻⁵⁻ So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁻⁶⁻ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing __ idle, and said to them, ‘_ Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ ⁻⁷⁻ They said to him, ‘_ Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘_ You also go into the vineyard, __ and whatever is right you will receive.’

⁻⁸⁻ “_ So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘_ Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ ⁻⁹⁻ And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ⁻¹⁰⁻ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ⁻¹¹⁻ And when they had received *it*, they __ complained against the landowner, ⁻¹²⁻ saying, ‘_ These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ ⁻¹³⁻ But he answered one of them and said, ‘_ Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?

⁻¹⁴⁻ Take *what is yours* and go your way. 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 my own things? Or __ is your eye evil because I am good?’ ⁻¹⁶⁻ __ So the last will be first, and the first last. __ For __ many are called, but few chosen. _” (Matthew 20:1-16)

The Context

This parable follows the conversation recorded in the end of chapter 19 between Jesus and a rich young ruler who thought he could somehow earn his way into heaven. After Jesus reveals the impossibility of working our way to heaven Peter wonders if there are any benefits to following Jesus and asks the question “**what shall we have?**” (Matthew 19:27b)

Jesus, as we discussed earlier, reveals that the benefits of sacrifice for His name's sake are innumerable both in this world (Mark 10:30) and eternal life—even though the benefits in this world should not be thought of as immediate or individual (since virtually all the apostles died for their faith). Nonetheless the gospel (even though accompanied by persecution—Mark 10:30) will yield redemption throughout history which will change and bless the world.

In the previous chapter Jesus completes His answer to Peter by stating, “**But many *who are first will be last, and the last first***” (Matthew 19:30). And in the final verse of this parable we read “**So the last will be first, and the first last**” (Matthew 20:16). So the bookends of this parable appear to be indicating what the parable is about. Jesus is explaining the whole ‘last will be first and first will be last’ model.

Jesus instructs us by way of a parable or a parallel story where something we do understand is used to help us grasp something we don't yet understand. The parable Jesus uses is a parable about a landowner who hires workers for his vineyard and their attitude toward his remuneration of them.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard (Matthew 20:1).

Hiring Laborers

That the landowner (who we should understand to be God) is hiring laborers (winning converts) clues us into recognizing that the kingdom of heaven, at least here, is not referring to the hereafter. There will be no winning of converts in heaven. The activity of labor Jesus speaks of in this parable is what you and I will do today as a Christian, as a citizen of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19).

What Jesus is speaking of in this parable are the activities, endeavors, labors and sacrifices that we as Christians are called to make in the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Matthew will end this gospel with a record of the Great Commission where Jesus calls us to make disciples, to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach disciples to obey His commands (Matthew 28:19, 20).

There are times and places in history where the faithful pursuit of these labors cost people their homes and lives. In our particular time and culture the faithful pursuit often amounts to our time, finances, prayer, obedience and willingness to engage our neighbor regarding things of

significance—like the state of their soul before God. It may also include the thoughtful dedication to things which foster fellowship with one another.

Laboring toward the advancement of the kingdom of God consists of a variety of things. In our particular church, it might include the following: teaching Sunday school, helping organize and support the radio ministry or newspaper columns as outlets for the gospel message, organizing times for Christian brothers and sisters to sit, eat and fellowship with each other, working with our young people, making sure the lights in the church work, taping the message to give to others, organizing a time of prayer, leading worship, serving as elders, deacons and trustees to assure the proper functioning of the church, helping at the mission, organizing camps and dinners, caring for children whose parents are imprisoned, inviting people to your house for fellowship, keeping the church looking nice, delivering meals to those in need.

Our labors might be part of an organized form of service or informal and spontaneous. Whatever they might be, labors for the advancement of Christ's kingdom should all be viewed as valuable and we should all, at some level, be laboring. That is what we, in accordance with the parable, have been hired for.

For we are _His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ⁻³⁻ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁻⁴⁻ and said to them, ' _You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you. _' So they went. ⁻⁵⁻ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁻⁶⁻ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing __idle, and said to them, ' _Why have you been standing here idle all day? _' ⁻⁷⁻ They said to him, ' _Because no one hired us. _' He said to them, ' _You also go into the vineyard, __and whatever is right you will receive _.' (Matthew 20:2-7)

A Fair Payment

In verses two we see the landowner agreeing to pay the workers a denarius a day, which would have been a standard day's wages. In verses three through seven we see the landowner hiring workers at other times in the day: the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour and the eleventh hour, promising to pay them a "right" or "just" (*dikaion*) amount. This we would understand as people coming to faith at different times in life.

It is interesting that Jesus refers to these people as idle (*argous*) (meaning lazy, useless or indifferent) prior to their conversion. Not to read too much into a secondary point of a parable, but the labors of the ungodly amount to naught.

For they shall soon be cut down __like the grass, and wither as the green herb (Psalm 37:2).

So we have in the kingdom of God, those who labor their entire lives and those who only labor only from the eleventh hour on. A comparison might be made between those who are raised in the church, in godly homes who seek to walk faithfully all their lives and those who lived in rebellion against God for many years coming to faith much later in life. Then we see payday.

_So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ' _Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first. _' (Matthew 20:8)

Payday

The owner of the vineyard organizes payday in such a way that the ones hired last are paid first. This is, no doubt, to set the groundwork for a lesson. But what are the wages? Although eternal life is certainly included in the wages, it should not be restricted to that. Keep in mind, the context demands we understand the blessings Jesus speaks of to, at very least, include blessings in the present time:

So Jesus answered and said, " _Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother __or wife or children or _lands, for My sake and the gospel's, ⁻³⁰⁻ __who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and

children and lands, with __persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 20:28-30).

So the wages, although including eternal life, also include any and all blessings which come as a result of the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Now we hit the crux of the matter.

And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ⁻¹⁰⁻ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ⁻¹¹⁻ And when they had received *it*, they __complained against the landowner, ⁻¹²⁻ saying, ' _These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day. _' (Matthew 20:9-12)

Complaining About the Wages

Even though those who were hired first were promised a denarius for their work, they made the assumption, having seen the eleventh hour workers paid a denarius, that they would receive more. When they received what they were promised, they complained about their hard work and how the eleventh hour workers were made equal to them even though they had done a much smaller portion of the work.

Their complaint doesn't seem unreasonable. Would not any one of us have the same complaint? If I promise my children a dollar to clean up the back yard and three of them work all day and the fourth one shows up and devotes fifteen minutes to the project, the Cedars of Lebanon could not withstand the gnashing of teeth which would accompany equal subsidization of all four.

Here we see the common "Here's my problem with Christianity" grievance: "A person can be a killer their whole life then confess faith in Christ right before he dies and go to heaven."

A couple of quick answers: God will not be mocked. A person with such a duplicitous heart should not think God will honor his clearly hypocritical profession. Secondly, there is an assumption in that question that the person who comes to faith late in life got away with something; as if it were better to live a hedonistic and licentious life. But finally, and more germane to our text, is the assumption that the person who had been in the faith longer, was somehow accumulating, by his own labors the favor and blessings of God.

Jesus finishes the parable with this explanation.

But he answered one of them and said, ‘_Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ⁻¹⁴⁻ Take *what is yours* and go your way. 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 my own things? Or __is your eye evil because I am good?_’ ⁻¹⁶⁻ __So the last will be first, and the first last. __For __many are called, but few chosen._” (Matthew 20:13-16)

An Inconsistency?

A few observations here: The first workers received precisely what they were promised—there was no injustice. Secondly, the wages are determined by the owner since all things belong to him. Third, the envy they experienced at the blessings of another is addressed with a rebuke.

In the final analysis the owner of the field gets to do what he wants because the field belongs to him. Yet at the same time it does appear to be inconsistent with what Jesus taught elsewhere, that “**_the laborer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:7)**. The owner of the field may have the right to do as he wishes with his own things, but it still appears inequitable.

All this because of our unquenchable sense of entitlement.

A Sense of Entitlement

We tend to draw black thick lines between what we do and what we receive; and at a certain level that is legitimate. When I pay for my groceries I have a reasonable expectation that the grocer will recognize my right to put them in my car, take them home and eat them. There is a man to man relationship which places a demand on us to be equitable. When the commandment says “**Thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20:15 KJV)** there is an assumption of ownership in order for that command to be obeyed.

But the Christian should never countenance this consumer mentality when it comes to our relationship with God and His providence. God can never, in any respect, at any time, in heaven or earth, be our debtor. God can never owe us. And even the wages spoken of in this parable are a mere accommodation to our weakness of understanding. There is nothing we

can bring to the table that in any way obligates God to shower His blessings.

If I work an eight hour day, my employer is required by the law of the land and the law of God to compensate me. But should God open the earth and swallow my place of employment along with my attending salary, He is in no way duty-bound to make up for what was lost. The man who cries for fairness with God is a man crying for judgment. For the only obligation God has toward man in order to maintain His own just character is to judge man. The text clearly explains,

He -will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished (Exodus 34:7b NASB)

Conversely, when Peter asks, “**what shall we have**” and Jesus explains that those who follow Him receive untold blessings in heaven and earth, it should never be thought that we’ve somehow earned those blessings—doing so will cause us to question the blessings of others which appear might appear unduly generous when one considers how menial their labors appear to our own. Such a worldly and shortsighted mentality generates a spirit of discontent and manifests the ignorance of recognizing that

_Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, __with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17).

Thankfulness to God

When we thank God for the meal and for the hands that made it we are not splitting our gratitude between parties, as if half our thanks go to God and the other half to the cook. We are thanking God for both. And we thank God because at some level we recognize that we don’t deserve His bounty. We might say thanks to someone who gives us what they owe us as a courtesy. But true thankfulness is a thankfulness which recognizes unmerited favor.

The landowner isn’t giving these workers what he owes them. If that were the case, the ‘all day’ workers would, although not cheated, at least have a legitimate question. But their question is not legitimate because God supplies our needs, not according to our merit but according to “**His riches in glory by Christ Jesus**” (Philippians 4:19b).

If God were to compensate us according to our works the wages would be death:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁻⁵⁻ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4, 5).

We can never make the Father our debtor, but in a certain sense Jesus can. Later in this chapter Jesus will teach,

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many
(Matthew 20:28).

When Jesus went to the cross of Calvary He paid a debt that we could not pay and the Father honored this ransom payment. And because of Christ and because of Christ alone those who follow Jesus find favor in the eyes of God and blessings from His hands.

Questions for Study

1. What is the context of this parable (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is a parable (pages 3)?
3. Is this parable talking about heaven? Explain (pages 3, 4).
4. In what respect are Christians to be laborers (pages 3, 4)?
5. Who do the different workers in this parable represent (page 5)?

6. Are the wages spoken of in verse 8 heaven? Explain (pages 5, 6).
7. What was the complaint of the workers (pages 6, 7)?
8. What is a common grievance about people coming to faith late in life? How would you answer that (page 7)?
9. Is Jesus being inconsistent when He says elsewhere that the labor is worthy of his wages (page 7)?
10. How does a sense of entitlement come into play (pages 7, 8)?
11. Does this parable teach that we don't have to be fair in our payment of others? Explain (page 8).
12. Can God ever owe man anything (pages 8, 9)?
13. If God were merely fair, how would that affect us (page 9)?
14. Discuss Matthew 20:28 and what that means to us (page 9).