

Series: Parables from the Master Story-Teller
Sermon: The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16
Speaker: Pastor Dan Curnutt
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Good morning. Last week we had a wonderful demonstration by our five year olds. They came up here on the platform and recited for us the books of the Bible as well as the Ten Commandments. They did a really good job. Do you remember what Pastor Mike said afterwards? He suggested that today we ask some of our adults to come up here on the platform and do the same thing. So, I'm looking for a couple of volunteers!

OK, if I don't get volunteers I'm just going to have to pick two of you to come up here and do it for us. I'm waiting

Well, I'll be kind and let you off the hook. BUT, let's be honest how many of you were looking for the closest door and a way to slip out unnoticed. Yeah, I understand, because I would probably be right there with you. But the Bible tells us in II Timothy 2:15 that we are to be workmen who show ourselves approved. I'm excited by what the five year olds learned and it gives me encouragement to keep on in my learning, to keep improving myself so as to be a better workman.

Today we are going to look at another Parable of Jesus - one about workers. This one comes from Matthew chapter 20. It's entitled, The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The parable is 16 verses long and I will read it for us out of the New International Version.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He 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. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About 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. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When 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? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the

same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don'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."

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As we consider this parable I want to point out something that I hadn't really paid much attention to before. This parable is part of a series of parables that start back in Chapter 18. It comes after the Disciples had asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). Jesus called a small child to himself and used the child as an example of our need to become like a child in regards to being able to enter the Kingdom.

Jesus follows that parable with several others. In Chapter 20 we come to the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The parable is used as a tool to introduce the conclusion, found in verse 16, that "the last will be first, and the first will be last." That's a powerful statement, especially to a disciple who was concerned with who was the greatest.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a Landowner:

As we begin the parable we have a correlation that Jesus is going to draw between the Kingdom of Heaven and a Landowner who needs to hire men to work in his vineyard. I've thought a lot about heaven in the past, but I would never have thought about it in these terms. So, what is Jesus trying to tell us here?

God is a landowner who has a vineyard that needs work done in it. I like to think that maybe it was harvest time. Recently we have been going through harvest time here in Kansas. When our team left for Guatemala, Amber Thornton joined us. Amber had been an intern with the FrontLine two summers ago. I asked her what her husband Mick was going to be doing while we were gone. She told me that he was driving truck for the wheat harvest in Oklahoma. He was excited, because he loves doing this. It also looked like it was going to be a good harvest this year.

I thought about the field just across from my house. Our neighboring farmer has three things he is doing with several hundred acres. Directly across from us is grazing land for about 40 head of cattle on it. Then there is a large corn crop. But beyond that is a wheat crop. Just the week before I left for Guatemala the crop turned its harvest gold. The heads of grain looked great and were standing up straight and tall and proud.

Now when I got home I discovered that the wheat crop near us was not yet harvested. Because of a lot of rain and the delay in harvest it was no longer standing straight, tall and proud. Instead it was bent over, looking kind of shabby and the color was no longer as vibrant as it had been. It was obvious that the crop needed to get harvested and now, but there was no worker in sight.

I started thinking about this parable and about Butch, my neighbor whose crop it was that needed harvesting. Butch needed all the help he could get to bring in the harvest. Time was of the essence. He was calling everyone he could think of to come help and get it harvested before he lost everything. Time was of the essence.

Maybe that was what this landowner in the parable was facing. Time was of the essence. He hired workers first thing in the morning; he hired additional workers at the third hour (about 9am). He also did this at noon and 3:00pm. Then again at the 11th hour, at 5pm. I think this shows the landowner's commitment to the harvest. He knows the scope and the importance of the task, thus he continues to invite workers to join him in the harvest.

You ask why I think this, it doesn't tell us this in the text. But let's turn to John 4:35, where we see Jesus talking to his disciples and telling them that, **The Fields are Ripe for Harvesting, John 4:35, "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."**

The Landowner is looking at the fields and sees that they are ripe for harvesting and he wants to capture as much of the grain as possible before the crop is lost. This landowner is on a mission and he wants to get the work done.

Let's look at the John passage for a minute. This is a scene where Jesus had sent his disciples into town to purchase some food, because they were hungry after a long walk. Jesus sat down by a well and when a Samaritan woman came out to draw water she encountered Jesus, The Living Water.

The disciples came back and saw Jesus talking to her. They were a bit confused as to why Jesus would be talking to the woman. She leaves to go tell the townspeople about Christ. The Disciples ask Jesus if he wants some food, he says he has food to eat that they know nothing about. Obviously that confuses them even more. What could this food be? Jesus then tells them that his food is to do the will of his Father in heaven (he who sent me). That's when Jesus says, open your eyes and look at the fields for they are ripe for the harvest. Jesus was talking about the people that needed to hear the Gospel message. The disciples were to be the workers who would go out and gather in the crop.

Let's look at a second issue. **How many workers does it take to bring in the crop?** In Matthew 9:37-38, we read, "Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Having just come back from a missions exposure adventure I can't help but resonate with that verse. The harvest is plentiful and the workers are few. In Guatemala even though missionaries have been there for over a 100 years there are still thousands of people who don't know Jesus. Yes, the church has been planted and indigenous pastors are being trained, but still there is a shortage of workers in that field.

That's true for all the countries around the world. Everywhere we could stand to have thousands of more missionaries and pastors to tell people about Jesus. Remember the great commission, Christ calls us to go into all nations and make disciples.

Well, I have gotten a bit away from our parable. I have taken us on a certain path with this parable and need to come back to some other pertinent points.

The landowner hired lots of workers to go out into the vineyard. He had lots of work that needed to be done. He kept hiring people throughout the day. When it came time for payment of the workers,

which was done every day at the end of the work day he had the foreman call the workers together. He told the foreman to begin by paying those who had come last.

When the foreman paid those 11th hour workers a denarius (which was the wage he had agreed to with the first hour workers) everyone started to get a bit excited. But then the ninth hour worker received the same, then the sixth and then the third and finally those hired at the first of the day got paid the same, one denarius.

How do you think you would feel if you had been that first worker who began working early in the morning? I asked that question of some of my FrontLine students last Sunday night. Their reaction was the same that mine would have been. They said, “You’ve got to be kidding, I’m only getting paid one denarius? I deserve more!”

Isn’t it amazing that the parable is so down to earth. The workers react just the same way we would today.

Let’s not forget that this parable comes after the disciples have been worried about who is the greatest in the Kingdom. It also comes after Peter in Chapter 19 verse 27 asked Christ, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” This was in response to the Rich Young Man who found it to hard to follow Christ under the terms that He had set out.

Jesus gives us this parable to deal with several attitudes that we often have as workers. Gary Inrig in his book on “The Parables” mentions three conditions that he sees in these workers;

“First: We need to beware of the danger of a commercial spirit;

Second: The Lord is warning against the danger of a competitive spirit;

Third: There is the danger of a complaining spirit;”²

I would like to address each of these points for a moment

The first one talks about our need to be careful regarding attitude towards wage agreements. The first workers had made an agreement with the Landowner to work for a specific wage, a denarius, for the day’s work. The other workers we are told did not have a wage agreement. Instead in verse four we see the second set of workers hired and told, “Go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.” The third, fourth and fifth set of workers don’t even have a mention of any type of wage.

So, the point is this, the Landowner was not unfair to the first workers. He paid them exactly what they had agreed to. The contract was sound and he fulfilled it to the letter. The second, third, fourth and fifth set of workers received a blessing by getting a wage that the Landowner wanted to give. He was generous and most likely grateful for their help. But still to many of us it feels awkward that everyone received the same wage for the differing amounts of work that was done.

Second, we need to beware of a competitive spirit. Gary Inrig says this in his book.

“When the twelve-hour workers saw the one-hour workers and compared themselves to them, ‘they expected to receive more.’ When their eyes focused on what others had received, they were unable to receive their own wages with joy. Saul delighted in his victory over the Philistines but when he heard David praised more highly than he had been, his heart turned to stone (I Samuel 18:1-16). Nothing is less appropriate in disciples than comparison and competition.”³

It’s a terrible thing, but often times missionaries and pastors get caught up in the competitive nature of numbers in ministry. When I was with World Impact I worked for twenty-five years and can basically count on one hand the number of young men that I think maybe I had a productive influence on. But then here comes another missionary and they can show a dozen successful relationships in a shorter amount of time. It’s hard not to compare and be jealous, or envious, or frustrated that you haven’t done as well.

I had to learn that numbers were not the issue. What God was after was a heart committed to serving Him and doing the best job possible and leaving the results up to Him.

Don’t let a competitive spirit get in your way and ruin your vital ministry.

Third, beware of the danger of a complaining spirit.

Let me quote again from Gary Inrig; “They (those who had worked twelve hours) began to grumble against the landowner. Such grumbling, the Lord reveals, is an attack on the goodness and generosity of God Himself. Furthermore, it exposes the corruption of our hearts.”⁴

Why did these men grumble? Better yet, why do we grumble (against God) at times? I think the answer is so obvious, we are selfish people. We are looking out for ourselves. This is so true in our culture here in America. We are told time and again to look out for number one, ourselves. If we get hurt, we are the victims.

Here in this parable we are feeling that the first hour workers are the victims, they have been wronged. They should have received a bonus, more pay, more benefits, a longer lunch break, anything. But instead they got treated just the same as the other workers.

God is not trying to show favoritism to any one person over another. God desires that the work of the Kingdom get done. He desires that each of us does our job, but that we do it with a good attitude. He desires that we forego comparisons and focus whole-heartedly on following Him (John 21:20-22).

We started out this section by thinking about Peter’s question, “What then will there be for us?” The answer, blessings from heaven that we can’t even begin to imagine.

Let's not lose sight of the fact that we are servants of the King and we serve Him out of love, not out of consideration for what we are going to gain. God then will bestow on us blessings in accordance with His generosity.

Let's also not forget that God in Matthew 7:11 states, "If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask of Him." God desires to give us much more than what we need or ask, so let God bless you for your efforts by letting Him write the contract for the amount of pay.

Let's always remember that we never get from God what we deserve. Remember, "the wages of sin is death." Romans 6:23. That's what we deserve. "But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is the blessing that God gives to us that is undeserved. How cool is that.

If the day's wage, the denarius, is an eternal gift, how can an eternal gift to the early worker be anything less than pure grace? And how is that eternal gift any less than the eternal gift given to the 11th hour worker? The gift is the same for both workers, and it's a gift of grace.

The parable ends with us hearing what the disciples heard and probably didn't like. Those who come along at the very end and do just 1/12th the work are going to receive the same pay as those of us who started working early in the morning. Is that fair? Is it right? Well, it doesn't necessarily feel right to us.

This ending, "the first will be last and the last will be first" may have more to do with our attitudes than anything. If our attitude is one of selfishness, such as, "I deserve the best pay", then we are going to be sad when we get to heaven. But if our attitude is, "I'll serve the Lord with Joy and Gladness no matter what, then we will receive rewards in heaven that we can't imagine. Jesus told us to store up for ourselves treasure in heaven. Let's be careful not to get selfish here on earth, but instead learn to have a heavenly view towards our work and our life.

God's ways are not our ways. God's a mystery to us in why He does things the way He does. But I do know this, It is God's desire that none should perish, but that all should come to repentance. We see that in II Peter 3:9. That scripture tells us, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

So, it comes as no surprise to me that The Landowner would continue to hire workers and send them out into the field, even at the 11th hour so that He could harvest as much of the crop as possible before it is too late.

Which worker are you most like? Are you the first hour worker who ends up grumbling about the inequity of the work, or are you like the 11th hour worker who is grateful for a compassionate loving God who accepts us even at the 11th hour and gives us a chance to work and receive a great blessing.

So, what are our application points for this week?

The harvest is ripe and workers are needed, are you willing to go into the field and help the Lord with his harvest?

Our service is for the King of Kings and the wages are set. . . . do you agree to do the work or not? I like Larry Richards comment about this part of the parable, he says,

Like each of the workers in Jesus' parable, we have been invited to serve in His kingdom. What is important is our response to the King when He calls us to our individual tasks. Greatness is not measured by how long or hard we may work trying to gain a reward.⁵

If you agree get started
If you don't agree, why not?

Are you living like the Landowner?

Generous with your resources

Desirous that none should perish but that all should come to know Him, *II Peter 3:9*, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Please join me in prayer.

¹*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, ©1984 . Zondervan: Grand Rapids

² The Parables, Understanding what Jesus meant, by Gary Inrig, Discovery House Publishers, © 1991, page 183

³ The Parables, Understanding what Jesus mean, by Gary Inrig, Discovery House Publishers © 1991, page 184

⁴ The Parables, Understanding What Jesus Mean, by Gary Inrig, © 1991, Discovery House Publishers, page 185

⁵Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. 1987. *The teacher's commentary*. Includes index. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.