

# The Parable Of The Workers In The Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

Key Verse: 20:15

**“Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”**

In chapters 18-20 of Matthew's gospel we have heard Jesus' teaching about life in his kingdom, and applied it to our Christian community. Jesus is the center of our community. Even though we are a Christian community, we are not yet perfect. So there are conflicts and problems. One cause of this is the tendency to compare our blessings and works with others. When we do this, we easily fall into pride and become judgmental, or into a sense of injustice and then complain and grumble against God, hate others, and despair. Either way we cause trouble in the Christian community and make other people unhappy. This all comes from being self-centered instead of God-centered. At the root this stems from not knowing who God is. If we know God and see everything from God's point of view, we can be thankful always. We can be happy and be a blessing to others. In today's parable, Jesus teaches us who God really is. This parable is bracketed by Jesus' words in 19:30: **“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,”** and Jesus' words in 20:16: **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”** Basically Jesus directed this parable at the twelve disciples who had left everything to follow him. They felt superior to the rich young man who loved money more than Jesus and went away sad. Jesus encouraged them and gave them great promises of eternal life and abundant blessing in this life as well. But he also gave them a warning not to be proud, but to have a humble attitude and be thankful for God's grace always, to the end. Let's listen to Jesus' parable, learn who God is, and discover a secret to living a happy life and forming a healthy Christian community.

## **I. God hires workers for his kingdom (1-7)**

Matthew's gospel is rich with parables. It contains 16 in all, more than any other gospel. Among them, nine are unique to Matthew, including today's parable. Matthew seems to be a great storyteller, which is surprising for a former tax collector who majored in accounting. It happened when he learned the deep grace of Jesus, who often taught through parables.

Look at verse 1. **“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.”** Usually, when people think of the kingdom of heaven, they imagine streets of gold, pearly

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gates, mansions, and angels singing in chorus. Surprisingly, Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who hires workers. The landowner represents God. This parable teaches us mainly about God's character. In this first part, we can learn three things about God.

**First, God takes the initiative to hire workers for his kingdom.** We can imagine that this landowner was wealthy, with a vast estate. The vineyard must have been very fertile, producing abundant harvests. Usually rich landowners do not go out and hire laborers to work in the fields. Rather, it is the unemployed who come to the landowner begging for jobs. Landowners usually entrust hiring to their foremen, who selects only the best workers, and send the others away empty-handed. But this landowner got up early and went out personally to hire workers for his vineyard. He continued to go out during the day--again at nine, noon, three and five. The landowner was eager to hire workers for his vineyard and took the initiative to get them.

Before time began, God made a plan for world salvation (Eph 1:4). He began to announce this plan right after the Fall, in Genesis 3:15. God has carried out this plan step by step since then. After the flood of Noah's time, people began to spread all over the world. They lived without God and worshiped idols. There seemed to be no hope for mankind. But God did not give up his plan. He began world salvation work by calling one man Abraham. In succeeding generations, God called Isaac and Jacob. It was God who called Moses to save his people from bondage in Egypt. In the time of Judges, God called Samuel and raised him as a spiritual father of the nation. God called a shepherd boy David from tending the flock, and made him a shepherd of his people Israel. In the darkest times, God called prophets like Elijah. Elijah was so distressed about the spiritual condition of Israel that he said, **"The Israelites have rejected your covenant, and torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too"** (1Ki 19:14). He thought everything was over for God's salvation work. But God answered, **"Yet I have reserved 7,000 in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him"** (1 Ki 19:18). God was doing great things by his own initiative, which only God knew. In coming to this world, Jesus expressed God's initiative. After proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, he called people diligently: **"Follow me...."** The Risen Jesus called Paul as an Apostle to the Gentiles. Most of us here realize that we were called by God, who took the initiative to seek and choose us. Yesterday, Steve Stasinis said that the only explanation for him being in Chicago UBF as a leader is that God called him. Thank God for his calling. Our times seem to be dark. Sometimes we feel that we

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are all alone. But God is working very hard to choose and call people for his own purpose and glory. Once Jesus said, **“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”** (Jn 5:17). God still works to call people. Let’s learn to see God’s initiative in calling people from darkness to light and participate in what he is doing.

**Second, God gave mission.** Look at verses 2-4. **“He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’”** At that time, there were many people who survived by working as day laborers. They needed to find a job every day. They hung around the marketplace hoping that someone would hire them. If they were hired, it was a happy day and they could give their family members something to eat. But if they were not hired, it was a very sorrowful day, and their household went hungry. To them, being hired to do something was a matter of life and death. Spiritually speaking, the unemployed in the parable are not simply those who do not have a job. They are those who have no mission from God. Throughout her history, Israel was referred to as the “vine” or “vineyard” of God (Isa. 5:1--7). More broadly speaking, the world is the vineyard of God (Gen 2:8). So the analogy of working in a vineyard represents working for God's kingdom in this world. Therefore, being hired is comparable to receiving a mission from God. When God made mankind, he gave us a mission. He did not make us to be like animals, which live merely by instinct - constantly consumed by the task of hunting food just to survive. God gave man holy mission to work with him to rule the world. However, since Adam’s fall, the relationship between God and man was broken. The relationships between people, and between man and nature, were also damaged. Man lost mission and was cursed to work the ground for three meals a day. Jesus came to restore our relationship with God and our holy mission. Jesus wants to restore God’s world completely, including the relationships between people, and between man and nature. Jesus calls believers to his mission of helping to restore broken relationships (Ro 1:5). This is a glorious mission. In the parable, doing nothing means not having this glorious mission. People without mission may be very active. But in the end they are caught in an endless repetition of meaningless activity, and this drives them crazy. On the other hand, those who have a mission from God find the meaning of life. They are happy to work hard and sacrifice to fulfill their mission. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gives us a glorious mission to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. Our specific vineyard is the college campuses of America and the world. Raising spiritual leaders among college students by teaching them the Bible is a core value of our ministry. Before

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having a mission from God, even though we worked hard and ate good food, we were like the people doing nothing. This is why many say, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." But now we have a mission from God that gives us the real meaning of life. There is no retirement from this mission. We can retire from our careers, but not from our mission. Dr. Joseph and Esther Chung, after retiring from practicing medicine in the United States went to Uganda as missionaries. They find deep meaning and joy in this mission. They are happy to serve Ugandan young people with the gospel while eating Ugandan sweet potatoes. These days, Ugandan women refer to Missionary Esther Chung as "Mom," not "Grandma." Thank God for giving us a glorious mission.

God not only gave us a mission, but also provides for the needs of those who serve him. The landowner agreed to give each worker a denarius. This would meet the need of him and his family for that day. Likewise, when we carry out God's mission wholeheartedly, God provides all our needs. Matthew 6:33 says, "**But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**"

**Third, God's compassion to save even one more person.** A striking fact of this parable is that the landowner returned to the marketplace again and again to hire workers for his vineyard. To do so early in the morning and at nine, or even at noon, is understandable. But to do so at three p.m. and again five p.m. seems crazy. Hiring someone for one hour at the end of the day is inefficient and unproductive. Why did the landowner do so? It was not to maximize his profit. Rather, out of his great compassion, he provided jobs for people who needed them. He hired people in order to save them. Oskar Schindler was a Nazi businessman during World War II. At the beginning of the war, he skillfully hired many Jewish workers for his factories because it was cheap labor. But as the war progressed, he began to grow in compassion for the Jews. His motive changed from making money to saving people. He hired workers for his factory in order to save their lives. At the end of the war, he used all the money he earned to buy the release of more than 1,100 Jews, saving them from the gas chambers at the Auschwitz concentration camp. In gratitude, they made for him a ring, extracting their teeth to obtain gold. When they presented it to him, he began to weep and said, "If only I had saved more. I could have sold this car and saved ten more. I could have sold my gold pin--yes, that would have saved two more." All that mattered to him was to save one more person at any cost. He revealed the heart of God. Out of his great compassion, God wants to save one more person. God's work is done with compassion, not a business mind. Of course, we should be good stewards of God's blessings. Yet in dealing with people in God's kingdom we must have God's heart, God's mind,

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God's compassion. God's heart's desire is to save even one more person (1 Ti 2:3-4).

## II. God pays each worker a denarius based on his covenant (8-16)

God's vineyard has been opened widely for anyone and everyone to go and work for him. However, in the parable, the workday comes to an end at six p.m. We live in a time when the vineyard is still open. But closing time will come. After that, the chance to work in the vineyard will be gone. Then comes the time to settle accounts.

Look at verse 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.’”** The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. Legally speaking, they should only receive one-twelfth of a denarius, for they worked only one hour out of twelve. They never expected to receive a full denarius. But the landowner, out of his generosity, gave them a full denarius. He did not pay them based on their works, but gave them a generous gift to meet their needs. Most likely, he was mindful of their family members. The workers were overjoyed. It was much more than they imagined. They jumped and danced and shouted, “Thank you, Landowner!”

Look at verses 10-12. **“So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These 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.’”** Their grumbling seems reasonable. From their point of view, they worked harder and suffered more and deserved a greater reward. However, they had forgotten that it was a great privilege to work in the vineyard. When they forgot the owner's grace and became self-centered, they also became self-righteous. If they had seen this from the landowners' point of view, or from the other workers' point of view, they could have found reason to be happy and thankful. But in their self-centeredness, they only complained and grumbled against the landowner. Such people do not know God's heart or care about others. Jesus' parable anticipates the complaint of the Jews as they saw Gentiles enter God's kingdom by grace alone.

How did the landowner respond? Look at verses 13-15. **“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work**

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for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Objectively speaking, the landowner was not unfair. He honored his original agreement and paid a denarius to those hired first. The denarius refers to salvation and eternal life. God gives salvation and eternal life to sinners by his grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 say, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast."** God carries out his salvation work based on his covenant grace. God's covenant promises flow through the Bible from the beginning to the end. God made covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Israel, David and Jesus. The covenants with Adam and Moses and Israel were conditional. They are marked by the words, **"If you obey me..."** (Ex 19:5). Man's obedience was required for these covenants to be honored. The covenants with Abraham, David and Jesus concern God's promise of salvation and are unconditional. They are marked by God's words, **"I will..."** (Gn 12:2; 2 Sa 7:12). This is the covenant of grace.

According to this covenant of grace, God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save mankind from their sins. God did everything for our salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection. Even though he did everything for us, God does not force us to accept his covenant. He asks our agreement, which is trusting in him and having faith in his promise. God wants us to make a decision of faith to accept his generous offer. Based on this covenant agreement, God grants us eternal life. Anyone who receives this grace receives eternal life as a gift. The same gift is given equally to all who believe. It does not depend on any human works, but on God's grace. So we should not compare our works with others. No one can boast. We can only thank God.

This covenant grace is based on God's sovereignty. Almighty God can use his power however he pleases. He did not have to use his power to save us from our sins. But he chose to do so out of his mercy and generosity. God intervenes in history to call undeserving people by grace. God does this to carry out his good purpose to bless mankind with salvation. As we see this worked out in our times, we should thank God always. We should not compare our lives with others and ask God, "What are you doing?" We should not complain to God when an undeserving person receives grace, for we are all undeserving people. All we should do is be thankful and trust God.

God is always good. God is always generous. God is always trustworthy. God is always faithful. God is always just. Knowing who God is gives us true

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happiness and a deep sense of stability. Let's live based on God's covenant of grace with us and be thankful always.