

Week 8 – The Laborers in the Vineyard – Matthew 20:1-16

Scripture Reading: Matthew 19:16-30

Introduction

The victory by **the U.S. Women's Soccer team** [soccer.jpg] at the recent World Cup tournament brought a great deal of attention to a lawsuit filed by some of the players on the women's team demanding to be paid the same as male soccer players

Without getting into the merits of their complaint, the whole matter was a headline issue for a brief time and many people aligned, opined, and maligned on both sides of the issue

As humans we have an innate sense of fairness and we instinctively react negatively when we believe we have been treated unfairly

Just spend some time casually observing **a group of kids at play** [not fair.jpg] and see how long it is before you hear someone exclaim "That's not fair!" in response to some action on the part of one of their playmates

And quite often a disagreement will then ensue over the definition of what fair actually means

Sadly, **even as adults we can't seem to agree** about what is fair and what is not because we can't even agree on what "fair" means

For some "fair" means **equality of outcome even if it means penalizing one and giving another an advantage** while others believe that "fair" means **impartiality and evenhandedness regardless of the resulting outcome**

And that doesn't even take into account how our view of fairness can be very different when we're talking about what we consider to be fair for ourselves as opposed to what is fair for someone else

Our parable this morning is all about fairness [fairness.jpg]

And, as the parables are prone to do, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard forces us to consider if our concept of fairness is the same as God's

The parable itself isn't complicated; Jesus told it in a straightforward manner without any additional explanation and it contains a simple story that nevertheless challenged conventional thinking then just as it does today

It's pretty easy to identify what the symbols in the parable are meant to represent

Clearly, the landowner represents the Lord, the vineyard represents his kingdom, the laborers represent believers who serve in the kingdom, and their wages represent the rewards one receives for faithful service

The only twist in the story that gives the parable its teaching value is the way the landowner compensates the laborers at the end of the day

Please open your Bibles to **Matthew 20:1-16** and follow along as I read the passage in its entirety – Jesus says:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

Let's begin by looking at the **anatomy** of the parable where we will consider its **flow** and **what prompted Jesus to tell it**

I. The Anatomy of the Parable

A. The flow of the parable

Again, there are no real challenges to understanding the parable

It's a straightforward story of a landowner who goes to the place where men congregated to be hired for day labor just as still happens in many places today

We are told that the landowner went to the hiring place "early in the morning" which means he probably went before dawn so that he could have laborers working as soon as the sun came up

It was common in those days for a man to be hired to work from dawn until dark and 12-hour work days were the norm

One of my dad's younger brothers was a self-employed handyman and some years ago told me he was finding it difficult to hire anyone to help him with his business because no one was willing to work half days

I was kind of surprised and thought maybe I had misunderstood so I asked him if he only worked half days only to have him reply,

"Well, Bill, don't you think 12 hours is enough for any man to work?" – 12 hours is half of 24 I guess...

Anyway, those first workers who were hired no doubt knew that they were being hired for the full 12-hour day

Then, last week when we considered the parable of the talents we saw that a denarius was the typical wage paid for a day's common labor and as we see here that is exactly the wage that was agreed to by the landowner and the laborers

For whatever reason, the landowner then proceeded to make four more trips to the labor pool to hire additional workers as the day progressed – perhaps he had an abundance of work but we aren't told why

The Jewish day began at 6am and we see that he went again at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours which would have been at 9am, noon, 3pm, and

And each time he hired more laborers and he told them that he would pay them "*whatever is right*" without specifying exactly how much that might be

The Jewish day ended at 6pm and since these were only day laborers the custom was to pay them at the end of each day's work and we see that is what happened in our parable

The landowner instructed his foreman to pay each laborer but he instructed him to begin with those who were hired last and then pay them in reverse order finishing with those who were hired first

And the order is significant because it sets up the confrontation

When I was a youth I hired myself out to various farmers at hay-baling time; and on occasion I would be hired without specific compensation being determined up front and, like the workers in our parable, I would trust the farmer to be fair

And I can still remember standing in a line at the end of a long, hot day waiting to see how much the farmer was going to pay me

It was a real bummer to see him pull one of those little rubber coin purses out along with his wallet because you knew it wasn't going to be a tremendously lucrative day because coins were factored into the labor rate

So I can picture these laborers all watching very carefully and expectantly as they waited to see what they would be paid

And when those who had only worked an hour received a denarius – a full day's wage! – It's easy to see how those who had been hired first would expect that the landowner would pay them even more

It's easy to imagine their thoughts and how excited they must have been thinking about how they were going to surely make out in light of the amount the last guys hired actually got paid

While they might not have expected to be paid twelve denarii they probably thought it would be perfectly reasonable if they would receive four or maybe even two denarii

They just never expected to be treated equally – and that was their complaint “...*you have made them equal to us...*”

So, if the landowner was only going to pay them the agreed upon denarius then, in their minds at least, he should pay the others a whole lot less and if he was going to pay the others a denarius then he should pay them a whole lot more After all, they had worked all day and as they protested they had “*borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat*” and it would only be fair for them to earn more than the others – especially those who were hired last

And that’s the way we think it should work, right?

It’s easy for us to sympathize with those first laborers and it really doesn’t seem *fair* to pay them the same as those who had worked less – especially those who had worked only an hour at the end of the day when it would have been cooler

But notice that the landowner didn’t make any excuses for or even try to explain his pay scale

He simply asked them **three questions**

The **first question** reminded them that he had been completely fair with them and paid them exactly the amount that had been agreed upon before the workday started – *Did you not agree with me for a denarius?*

The **second question** reminded them of the universally accepted truth that a man can do what he wishes with the things he owns – *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*

The **third question** rebuked them for being jealous of his generosity to the others – *Or do you begrudge my generosity?*

And the only reason he gave for being generous with the others who worked fewer hours was “*I choose to*”

Then Jesus ended the parable with the admonition “*So the last will be first, and the first last.*”

I want you to notice that that same expression appears almost verbatim as **Matthew 19:30**

So that our parable is bracket front and rear by this expression

B. What prompted the parable

And this tells us why Jesus told this parable and thereby helps us understand the spiritual lesson Jesus was seeking to make clear

Let’s look back quickly at our Scripture reading and the progression of events that led up to this parable

Jesus had a conversation with the rich young ruler where the man asked how to be sure of eternal life

And Jesus challenged him to give up all he had and follow him which caused the young man to go away sorrowful

So Jesus took the opportunity to express to his disciples how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven

And this teaching came as a shock to the disciples because Jewish thought was that the rich were particularly blessed by God – that’s why they were rich in the first place - so they were left to question who *could* be saved if not the rich

And we see Jesus’ answer that with God all things are possible

Peter’s question

Then considering all of this, Peter had an “Aha! Moment” when he realized that although they weren’t exactly rich to begin with he and the other disciples had accepted the challenge to give up everything to follow Jesus

And he asked what seems to be a very mercenary question, “*What then shall we have?*”

Jesus’ answer

Notice that Jesus didn’t correct or rebuke Peter but rather gave him an assurance of reward

First he said that the twelve specifically would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel in the kingdom

Then he said that disciples in general will receive ample reward for all that they have given up

But then he issues the warning, “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*”

And since he closes out the parable that follows with the same warning that preceded it, it seems natural to determine that he told the parable to explain what he meant by the warning

But before we get to what the parable means I want to look for a few minutes at **what the parable does not teach**

II. What the Parable Does Not Teach

First of all the parable is not meant to inform us about **economics**

Jesus didn't give this parable to teach how to run a farm, a business, or a country

There are other passages in Scripture that deal with workers and wages such as **Luke 10:7** which tells us "the laborer deserves his wages"

Or **James 5:4** which warns against defrauding a laborer – "*Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.*"

And **Ephesians 6:5-9** which instructs both workers and bosses – "*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.*"

And there are many others we could look at but we err if we make this parable about earthly economics

The parable is also not about **equality**

Even though we all do have an equal standing before God Jesus was not teaching here that everything would or should come out equally in the end with everyone receiving the same reward

Anyone who sees a "living wage" or a "basic income for all" in this passage is reading it into it from their own mind because that's not what the parable is about

It also isn't about **efficiency**

Jesus wasn't saying that those who were hired last somehow earned their pay by working harder than the others

And he isn't saying they were rewarded for being smarter than the others in only working for an hour while the others worked all day for the same wages

Notice that the men who are hired at the eleventh hour aren't commended for being idle all day

In fact the landowner seems a bit surprised to find laborers are still available and he asks them how it came to be that they are still available

And their answer was that they were only still there because no one had offered to hire them

And when the offer to work was made they accepted and began working straight away and for the rest of the day

In other words, the parable isn't about **earthly employment**

While it does touch on some topics that overlap with earthly property rights and agreements those lessons aren't its purpose

And we can't point to this parable to say that a person should never ask for a raise

Again, we can point to other passages in the Bible to guide us in how to go about our dealings in the workplace **but we need to be very careful applying a passage in ways it wasn't originally meant to address directly**

At its core the parable is also not about **salvation** even though the calling at different times refers to salvation coming at different times

The parable is about service in the kingdom once a person is saved and in the kingdom and the rewards that result from faithfully serving with whatever time one has available to serve

So, what **truths** do we find in the parable?

III. The Truths of the Parable

The first truth we want to recognize is that **God's kingdom is not seniority-based**

Reward is not based on length of service or the amount of work done

God is sovereign and he can deal with people however he chooses regardless of how long or how hard they toil in the kingdom

Look at what God says in **Exodus 33:19** – “I will be **gracious** to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

Rewards are given on the basis of grace and everyone who labors in the kingdom will be fairly compensated but God will not be held to a human concept of fairness because his ways are different than our ways as we see in **Isaiah 55:8-9**

In fact, none of us truly wants what would be “fair” because the wages of sin is death and hell is what we deserve

The second truth is that **no one has the right to be envious of another's reward**

One of the greatest joy killers in the workplace is finding out what someone else earns

Even in union workplaces where everyone earns the same amount there are always accusations of laziness and claims of other forms of inequity

I admit, that refraining from comparing ourselves to others is difficult – even Peter had a problem with it

Look with me at **John 21:18-19** where we see the Lord tell Peter how he was going to die

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

And what did Peter do?

He immediately turned around and when he saw John behind them he asked Jesus, “**Lord, what about this man?**”

And in **verse 22** Jesus told him basically that what happened with John was not his concern

Peter's only concern was to make certain that he was following Jesus

We need to concentrate on serving well and then be pleased with what we ultimately receive and not concerned with what the Lord gives to someone else

And we dare not think more highly of ourselves than is warranted or think less of another's service

Paul states the proper principle for a believer in **Philippians 2:3-4** –

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

After all, if we have worked longer or done more than someone else it is only because God graciously provided us with the opportunity and the strength to do the work in the first place

The key to reward is faithful service whether that is for a day or an hour and we can trust that God will justly reward those who are faithful

God alone knows the value of a person's service for his kingdom and we can trust that each one's reward will be fair

With those truths in mind, what should our response be to this parable?

How should we apply it to our lives?

Conclusion

First, **we must recognize that there is more than enough kingdom work for all to find a place to serve**

Just like the landowner in our parable seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of work and had to keep recruiting additional workers throughout the day, we will never run out of things to do for God

With all there is to be done, it seems highly unlikely that any will be able to say that they couldn't find anything to do as those who were hired at the eleventh hour did

Therefore, **everyone who has responded to the gospel call must be diligent to get to work in the kingdom as soon as they are called**

As we see in the parable people are called early in life and late in life and at all times in between

But when a person hears the call they need to heed it

Acts 13:46 tells us that it's possible in rejecting the gospel to judge yourself unworthy of everlasting life

And we see in **Romans 2:5** that having a hard and impenitent heart means storing up wrath for oneself come judgment day

Jesus taught many things during his ministry that were considered scandalous at the time and that still run contrary to our human way of looking at things

And one of the scandals of the kingdom of God is that a person can live a long, righteous life, can be considered to be a paragon of morality and be widely respected but still wind up in hell

Or they can be a wicked and vile person who lives a life of pure evil yet accept Christ on their deathbed and spend eternity in heaven

Look at the thief who was crucified alongside Jesus

But only the person who responds to God's invitation receives a reward whether that invitation comes early or late

Then, the parable teaches us that the proper response as a laborer in the kingdom is **to work diligently during whatever time we have available**

Some of us may have been blessed to have been brought into the kingdom early and had a whole life available for service while others of us may have been saved later in life and only have a limited time to labor for the Lord

But we need to give ourselves completely to the work with whatever time we have available to us

And that includes any who may have been a Christian for a long period of time but haven't served fully

While we can't do anything about the past except repent and seek forgiveness we can make certain to serve with passion in whatever time we have left

Also, while we want to honor and respect those who have served in the church for many years we also want to be careful to **recognize all those who serve faithfully even if they only just got started**

We need to rejoice when others serve and encourage service at all levels because all service is precious to God and will be rewarded as long as the servant is serving to the best of their ability with what time and talents they have been given

Then we need **to serve because it's our duty and privilege to serve and not serve with a mercenary spirit**

Sadly, it's all too common in churches today to find people who have labored long and hard only to come to expect to be given something extra because of their labors

And there are also those who can't abide seeing someone else treated well without comparing scorecards

But if this parable teaches us anything it's that envy and a sense of entitlement have no place in the kingdom of heaven

And that our heavenly reward, whether that reward is immediate or eventual, is not based on how long or hard a person has served

Kingdom reward is based on God's grace and a person's faithfulness to serve when called

And we can trust that God will never give us less than what he has promised and that he may well give us more but that whatever he gives us will be fair

Let's pray