

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard
 Matthew 19:16-20:16
 ABC 6/21/20

That's not fair! Ever said that? Thought it? What about of God? The prophet Ezekiel spoke for God during the Babylonian Captivity. Like the other prophets, he repeatedly reminded & warned his fellow Jews about their sins. One of those sins was that of accusing God of being unfair & unjust. Twice in chapter 18 God declares, **You say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.'** **Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right?** (25; 29). When we doubt the justice & fairness of God, it's always because of our own perverted views of justice & of Him. God is the standard for righteousness & it's just as impossible for Him to be unjust as to lie. The truth is, none of us deserves God's favor. We're all guilty sinners who merit nothing more than damnation. No one who's sinned (& that's every one of us) has any rightful claim on the kindness of God. But God has every right to show mercy & compassion to whomever He chooses (Ex 33:19). Furthermore, when He shows mercy it's always in abundance. As He told Moses, He is **The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate & gracious, slow to anger, & abounding in lovingkindness & truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression & sin** (34:6-7). People who protest that God is unfair or unjust when He shows grace to the least deserving of people simply don't understand grace. Undiluted justice would mean immediate death for every sinner, because **the wages of sin is death** (Rom 6:23). The truth is, we don't really want what is fair. We desperately need grace & mercy. & grace isn't unjust, because Jesus made full atonement for our sins & turned justice in our favor. **If we confess our sins, He is faithful & righteous to forgive us our sins & to cleanse us from all unrighteousness** (1 Jn 1:9). Because Jesus took the penalty of sin on Himself, God can justify believing sinners without compromising His own righteousness (Rom 3:26). & as Paul says, **There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! He has mercy on whom He desires** (Rom 9:14, 18). & God's mercy must never be thought of as a reward for good works. Heaven isn't a prize for people who deserve it. God **justifies the ungodly** (Rom 4:5). Grace is by definition undeserved. But it's not unjust or unfair. Don't subject God's grace to human ideas about fair play & equity. No one has any rightful claim on His mercy. He's perfectly free to give His grace

however He sees fit. As He told Moses, **I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, & I will have compassion on whom I have compassion** (Rom 9:15). With that being said, let's read **Mt 19:16-20:16** PRAY

Like all parables, this one teaches spiritual truth. Jesus isn't making a point about labor laws, minimum wage, fairness in business, or any other earthly principle. He's describing how God's grace works.

1. The Parable This parable introduces us to a **landowner** (1), **the owner of the vineyard** (8). He's a man of great influence & wealth. But growing grapes has always been labor intensive. So he went to the marketplace to hire day laborers, temporary unskilled men looking to earn a living. Wages for day laborers were probably lower than the standard pay for a full-time employee or household servants, which was about a denarius a day & was what a Roman soldier would earn each day. It was a respectable living wage. A common, unskilled laborer could probably be hired for less than that. He was generous to offer them that. Naturally, they agreed & went to work. At the 3rd hour (9 am), the landowner went back to the marketplace. There were men still standing idle, not because they didn't want to work, but because no one had hired them. This time he gave no amount before hiring workers & sending them to his vineyard. All he said was, **I will pay you whatever is right** (4). **So they went.** They must have known him to be an honorable man & took him at his word, even though the terms were vague. 3 hours into the workday with no job prospects, they weren't in a position to negotiate.

He went out again about the 6th hour & the 9th hour & did the same thing (5). He continued to go back to the marketplace at noon & 3, gathering others to work in his vineyard. The workday was almost gone when vs 6 says he went yet again **about the 11th hour** (5 pm). Only an hour left in the workday, but he found more workers waiting. These were men who'd been waiting all day but were so desperate for work they hadn't yet given up. No doubt after a day of waiting they were discouraged, thinking they wouldn't be able to provide for their families that day. Again, we can't mistake their idleness for laziness. When the owner said, **Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?** they replied, **Because no one has hired us.** The owner hired them with the same

vague terms he had used with the 9, noon, & 3 pm groups: **You also go into my vineyard**, with no mention of payment (7). This landowner was an honorable man, faithful to the precepts of God's law (Lev 19:13; Dt 24:14-15; Lk 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18), **When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers & pay them their wages, starting with the last ones hired & moving on to the first.'** (8). It's significant he tells his foreman to pay the workers in reverse order. The context suggests that's the key to the meaning of this parable, we'll see why shortly. But for now, notice the men at the front of the line had worked only an hour. Those at the end of the line had worked 12. Yet as the steward began to pay them, those who'd worked the shortest amount of time **each received a denarius**. They received a full day's wage in return for just an hour of unskilled labor! They must have been overflowing with gratitude for the generosity of the landowner. No doubt the men at the end of the line were getting excited too. In their thinking, the owner was paying a denarius an hour, meaning they'd make 12x as much. The parable skips how the 3rd hour, 6th hour, & 9th hour were paid, but the implication is they also received one denarius.

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What were they saying? *That isn't fair!* What had the landowner promised to give them? A denarius which wasn't only a fair wage, it's what they happily agreed to. Yet they now resent the landowner & **grumble**. They were murmuring & griping about the pay they received. When the landowner heard them, he answered: 13-15

The parable deals only with the 1st & last groups, for obvious reasons. It's those who're hired 1st who protest when they're paid their wage, even though it's what they'd agreed to. It isn't so much they'd been cheated, by being paid less than what was agreed on; it's that the last group was paid more than they deserved. They didn't think that was fair. They were jealous of the others good fortune. Almost anyone at the end of that line would probably have felt some resentment. After all, they'd worked a full 12-hour day while the workers hired at 5 couldn't have done nearly as much. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that when the 6 in the morning crew were hired, they were happy with a denarius a day. They worked excitedly, thrilled the landowner was being generous with them. He was offering more than they could reasonably expect. What changed their

mood so drastically? Just that someone less deserving (or so they thought) was treated with even more generosity. Instantly they felt mistreated & envious of the other's good fortune. They couldn't stand the thought that other workers would get the same pay without working as hard as they did. Suddenly their gratitude for the landowner's generosity gave way to resentment. What's at the heart of their complaint? It's found in that little phrase **you have made them equal to us**. If you just count hours worked, they aren't equal. It's not that they minded the latecomers getting paid & it's not really that they minded the latecomers getting a denarius. Even that would be OK. But vs 10 says they thought they would receive more. That's why they grumbled. They saw the latecomers being paid. They assumed they would be paid more. They didn't like that they weren't & were unhappy that everyone was being paid the same. We'd probably be the same. Their complaint sounds fair but it's based on a standard of human comparison. Ultimately, they weren't complaining against the other workers. Their problem was with the landowner. But without him, they'd not have worked at all. The 11th-hour workers were thrilled. They understood better than anyone how graciously they had been treated (cf Lk 7:40–48). That's the parable, easily understood.

2. The Proverb But remember the context of this parable? It's bracketed with, at the beginning, **Many who are first will be last, & the last, first** (19:30). & at the end, **the last shall be first, & the first last** (20:16). An echo of the proverb is also found in the parable itself where the landowner instructs the steward how to pay the workers their wages: **pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first** (8). What does it mean? It's not saying the same thing as Mk 9:35: **If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all & servant of all**. Or Mk 10:43–44: **whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; & whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all**. Those elevate humility & self-sacrifice. They're commands for us to be humble servants rather than seeking prominence & power. Here is a simple statement of fact: **the last shall be first, & the first last**. What does that mean & how would it work? Good question. MacArthur says, *In a foot race, for example, the only way for the last to be first & the first to be last is for everyone to finish simultaneously. If everyone crosses the finish line at exactly the same instant, the first are last &*

*the last are first. Everyone ends in a dead heat.*¹ Is that what this is saying? In a way, I believe it is. Those hired 1st & those hired last all got exactly the same pay. All of them, from the 1st to the last, got the full benefit of the landowner's generosity, in equal shares. So what's the point?

2. The Point This parable teaches a magnificent truth about **the kingdom of heaven**. He's giving an illustration of the spiritual realm where God sovereignly reigns in righteousness & grace. Jesus used a common earthly story to illustrate a heavenly truth. It's a picture of God's sovereign & saving grace. Since sinners are all unworthy & the riches of God's grace are inexhaustible, all believers receive an infinite & eternal share of His mercy & kindness, though none of us deserves it. **In Him we** (all of us as Christians) **have** (complete) **redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace** (Eph 1:7). **He raised us up with Him, & seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus** (2:6–7). That speaks of all who are redeemed. It's the Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom (Lk 12:32), all of them & in equal measure. The dying thief who repented in his final moments entered paradise, where he's enjoying eternal life & everlasting fellowship with Jesus just the same as Peter, James, Paul, & many others who gave their lives in service to the Savior. The penitent thief who turned to Jesus on the cross with his last breath received the same salvation & heavenly glory as the apostles. He died justly as a criminal, whereas most of them died unjustly because of their faithfulness to Christ. He didn't have time to serve Christ, whereas some of them served Him far into old age. He knew just enough about Jesus to be saved & his service was limited to a brief time of praise & thankfulness, whereas the disciples were privileged to live intimately with Him for 3 years & were given unique revelation from & about Him. Yet all of them were received equally by their Savior & King & stand equally before Him in heaven.

Again, this pay isn't something the workers earned. It's not given to them like a minimum wage in a fair exchange for labor done. It's far too much for that. Rather, it represents a gracious gift, a lavish legacy that exceeds the best reward any worker could ever merit. This is the point: If you're

¹ *Parables*, p 67

a genuine believer, you receive the full benefits of God's immeasurable grace, just like everyone else in God's kingdom.

Your place in heaven isn't a timeshare where your access is determined by the length of time you spent doing the Lord's work. The blessings of redemption aren't handed out in quotas based on personal achievements. Forgiveness isn't measured by weighing our good deeds against our sins. Everyone who enters the kingdom receives the full abundance of God's grace, mercy, & forgiveness. That's true no matter how long you've worked in God's kingdom. It's true no matter how hard or how easy your circumstances are. It's true whether your service was minimal or maximal; whether you die as a martyr or live a fairly easy life & die of old age. It's as true of those who come to Christ in adolescence as it is of those who repent of their sins at the end of a sin-filled life. When this earthly life is over, if you're a believer, you'll go to be with Christ, just like that thief on the cross (Lk 23:43); just like the apostle Paul (2 Cor 5:8); & just like every other saint who has ever lived. Heaven isn't a reward for long service or hard work. Some people serve Christ their entire lives, & some for a very short time. But we all enter into the same eternal life. We all receive the same spiritual blessings in heaven. Face it, before receiving Jesus as Savior all of us are equally lost & after we've placed our faith in Him we're equally saved. Merit is irrelevant because all that even the best human righteousness can earn is damnation. If that seems unfair, remember it's far more than any of us deserve. The benefits of the kingdom are the same for everyone, because we're redeemed by God's grace & nothing else. That's good news for all of us. We don't have to earn our way into the kingdom. We cannot earn our way into heaven. It's never based on our merit but only on God's grace & His gift of His Son to die in our place taking the punishment of our sins upon Himself.

4. The Purpose Why did Jesus tell this parable? The events Matthew relates before & after the parable answer that question. Context is always key. He told this parable for the benefit of His 12 disciples right after His conversation with the rich young ruler. This young man had come to Jesus asking, **Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?** (Mt 19:16). He clearly thought he'd fulfilled every spiritual duty & that his life was exemplary. Rather than simply giving

him the good news of the gospel, Jesus challenged him on his obedience to the law. When the fellow insisted, **All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?** (20). Jesus told him to sell all his possessions, give the profits to the poor, & follow Him. That was a sacrifice he wasn't willing to make. He loved his possessions more than he loved either God or his neighbor. Although he claimed to have kept the entire law of God, he was breaking both the 1st & 2nd great commandments (22:37–40). But the man didn't see that. Unwilling to face his sin & repent, he **went away grieving** (22). The disciples were stunned when Jesus seemed to put obstacles in his way rather than encouraging him. They were confused & asked, **then who can be saved?** (25). Jesus' answer stresses the fact that salvation is God's work not something any sinner can accomplish for himself: **26**

The disciples were thinking about the impossibility of meriting God's favor. Unlike the rich ruler, they had left all to follow Christ (27). & they were looking for some assurance from Jesus that their sacrifice wasn't for nothing. That's what seems to have prompted this parable. As the rich young man walked away, Peter spoke up & said, **we have left everything & followed You; what then will there be for us?** (27). The 12 were like the 1st hires in the parable. They were the 1st ones Jesus called at the start of His ministry. They'd been working for almost 3 years. They'd given up homes, jobs, & relationships to serve & follow Him. With the exception of Judas, they loved Him. All of them would go on to give their lives for the gospel's sake. They wanted to know what they'd receive for their sacrifice. No doubt they thought they'd get special benefits. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah. They expected an earthly, political kingdom with all the glory & riches that came with it. They were the 1st disciples, so it made sense to them that one of them would sit at Jesus' right hand, in the highest place of honor. This was an immature & selfish view of Jesus' kingdom, but one they still had even after the resurrection. While the risen Christ met with them, they asked, **Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?** (Acts 1:6). Now that Christ had shown Himself triumphant even over death, they were hoping finally to get their crowns, thrones, & places of honor. When Peter asked in Mt 19, *What will we get* (27) Jesus answered & reassured them

they'd have places of honor in the kingdom. But He went on to say that *everyone* in the kingdom would be honored: **28–29**

It's intriguing how little effect this parable had on the disciples. They were so obsessed with the idea of special honor that even after they heard this parable, they continued scheming & jockeying for 1st place. In fact, the very next episode in Matthew's account records this: **20:20–21**

Matthew (1 of the 12) goes on to say, **24**.

They were annoyed because they all wanted to be recognized! This was a constant source of bickering among them. Even in the Upper Room on the night of Jesus' betrayal, it was Jesus who washed the others' feet, because they desired to be considered *great*, & foot washing was a job of the lowest servant (Jn 13:4–17). Later that same evening, right after Jesus broke the bread & consecrated the wine, **there arose also a dispute among them *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest** (Lk 22:24). So although this parable was given to confront the selfish, envious, confused ideas of the disciples, it took a while to sink in.

5. The Principles This parable is full of principles, including some that are basic gospel truths, & most of these are obvious.

A) It teaches that *salvation is not earned*. God sovereignly initiates & accomplishes salvation. The measure of God's gift of salvation isn't man's merit or accomplishments but His own grace, which doesn't vary. Eternal life is a gift that God gives purely by grace according to His sovereign will. Our salvation is entirely His work, & that's the main reason we have no right to make demands or set limits on what He gives to someone else. It's God's prerogative & His alone to show mercy to whomever He chooses. Can you imagine one of the disciples standing at the foot of the cross, hearing the final conversation between the repentant thief & the Lord Jesus, & hearing Him say, **Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise** (Lk 23:43), & the disciple saying, *That's not fair. I've been with You through thick & thin for 3 years, & this guy, You've only known him for a few hours, & you're telling him he's going to be with You in paradise? That's not fair!* They would be right, it's not fair, it's grace. But God in His goodness & love decides to give it!

B) But the parable's most obvious lesson is that *God gives the same abundant grace to everyone who follows Christ*. Robbers, prostitutes, murderers, & all sinners (like you & like me) who place their faith in Jesus by the grace of God will share in the same eternal life as those who've served all their lives, preached the gospel to thousands, & those who are martyred for Christ. Thankfully, He doesn't give any believer what we truly deserve. When we get to heaven we'll all live in the Father's house (Jn 14:2). We are all **heirs of God & fellow heirs with Christ**, & we will all be glorified together (Rom 8:17). We don't each receive a part of heaven; we all get the whole! *The contrast between workers is thus a relative one, much like the contrast between the prodigal & his older brother. Just as their father loved & wooed both of them with equal tenderness, so the landowner pays his laborers the same amount. No one gets less than he was promised; many get much more than they deserve.*² From beginning to end, the parable pictures God's divine, boundless grace. The men's work had absolutely no relationship to what they were paid. Even less do our works of supposed righteousness have any relationship to what we receive through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as sin is the great equalizer that causes every man to **fall short of the glory of God** (Rom 3:23), God's grace is the great equalizer that removes sin & makes every believer equally acceptable to Him in Christ. God gives on the principle of grace & we should therefore expect surprises. He'll never be less than fair, but reserves the right to be more than fair as pleases Him. God's grace always operates righteously.

Elsewhere Scripture indicates that in addition to full redemption from sin & everlasting life, there will be differing rewards God is pleased to give His children for their faithfulness. At the judgment seat of Christ, **If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss** (1 Cor 3:14–15). So some will suffer loss & some will be rewarded, depending on the enduring quality of their work. But Rev 4:10–11 pictures what becomes of those rewards:

The 24 elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, & will worship Him who lives forever & ever, & will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are You, our Lord & our God, to

² Blomberg, C. L., [Interpreting the Parables](#), p 284

receive glory & honor & power; for you created all things, & because of Your will they existed, & were created.”

Rewards, however, don't seem to be the issue in this parable. Jesus is teaching a lesson about the abundant, eternal life that belongs to all who embrace Him as Lord & Savior. Heaven itself isn't a reward to be earned by hard labor; it's a gracious gift, given in full abundance to all believers equally. God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34), & He makes no distinction between male & female, rich & poor, Jew & Gentile (Gal 3:28). In the parable, the landowner went out to find the laborers in the marketplace of the world & brought them into his vineyard. God does the seeking & the saving.

C) *Meanwhile, He continues to call workers into His kingdom.* All through human history, God is calling people into His kingdom. It's an ongoing work. Jesus said in Jn 9:4, **We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work.** Our parable illustrates what He meant. Redemption continues until the judgment comes. The night of judgment is coming when no man can work, but while it's day, the Father will continue to draw men to Himself. **My Father is working until now, & I Myself am working,** Jesus said (Jn 5:17), because the Lord does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Pt 3:9).

D) *God calls sinners, not the self-sufficient.* He brings into His vineyard those who know their own need, not people who think they've achieved & arrived (Rev 3:17). The men gathered in the marketplace looking for work were desperate, fully aware of their need. They were poor & meek, devoid of resources, begging for work. There was nothing complacent or self-satisfied about them, especially those who'd come to the end of the day & still had nothing. That's exactly the kind of person Christ came to seek & to save. Jesus said, **It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners** (Mk 2:17; cf 1 Cor 1:26–31).

E) *God is sovereign in the outworking of salvation.* Why does He wait till the last hour to call some? Why didn't the landowner hire everyone in the marketplace on his 1st trip there? The parable doesn't say. Neither do we know why He saves people at different stages of life. He sovereignly determines both when & whom He will call. But all those who're called know they're needy & are

willing to follow & obey Him. Their willingness is a result, not the cause, of God's grace to them. **For it is God who is at work in you, both to will & to work for *His* good pleasure (Phil 2:13).**

F) *God keeps His promise.* The landowner told the 1st group he'd give each of them a denarius, & he did. He kept his promise to those he hired later too. He said he would give them what was right—and what he gave them was more than generous. Likewise, God never gives less than He promises, & often He gives **more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think** (Eph 3:20).

G) *God always gives more than we deserve* (Js 1:17). & everything we receive other than eternal damnation is more than we deserve. So there's no place for Christians to resent God's grace toward others or to think He's somehow defrauded us. That idea is full of selfishness & blasphemy. In fact, that was the spirit of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. He deeply resented his father's grace toward his brother.

H) *God is gracious & we should always celebrate His grace.* This parable wonderfully exalts the principle of grace. Our response to it should be gratitude, because there are many who've been more faithful, worked harder, labored longer, & suffered more than we have. Maybe there are others who've worked less, fewer years, with less diligence. But grace abounds even to the chief of sinners & God saves all of us to the uttermost (Heb 7:25). That gives Him glory, & that certainly is a reason to praise Him & rejoice along with all who've received such grace. It's only by grace that anyone can be saved & this grace is available only in the sacrifice which Jesus made on the cross, where He took the sin, the guilt, & the punishment for lost sinners.

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law & the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:21-23).

Eternal life is not fair; it's a gift of God's grace. If eternal life were fair (that is, a payment to us, based on the quality & quantity of our good works), no one would ever see heaven. Eternal life cannot be earned, but it can be received as a gift. It isn't the righteous, those that are moral & humanly good, who get to heaven; it's sinners who know they deserve nothing but God's wrath but who gladly receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Think of it: If salvation were the result of works, there'd be a lot of very angry people in heaven, wondering why they worked so

hard for so long to get there, when those like the thief on the cross arrived in his last hours. God didn't save that thief so God would benefit from years of service. God saved him by grace, through the work that Jesus Christ accomplished at Calvary, for His own glory. We can rejoice that eternal life isn't fair but far beyond fair & only by grace. What an encouraging truth, that God has made salvation & eternal life available to us, apart from works, & by grace alone, through faith alone.

But I must give a word of warning: It's an offer that's available only before death. There's no 2nd chance. If you're one of those who's wrongly assumed that salvation is something you earn, something God gives you in return for your good deeds, let me urge you to recognize that the good news of Jesus doesn't work this way. No one will get to heaven because they tried to live a good life or that they lived a better life than others. The only people who will see heaven are those who realize their works can only condemn them, & that it's the work of Christ alone that saves. I urge you to trust in Him, so that you can rejoice forever in the grace of God. As John Newton, the infamous slave-trader become Christian, once said: *When I get to heaven, I shall see 3 wonders. The 1st will be to see many persons there whom I did not expect to see; the 2nd will be to miss many whom I did expect to see; the greatest wonder of all will be to find myself there.*³ PRAY

Benediction: Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church & in Christ Jesus to all generations forever & ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21).

³ Quoted by Neil R Lightfoot, *Lessons from the Parables*, p 151