

Parables | The Workers in the Vineyard

July 18, 2021 | Matthew McNutt

[open with title slide on screen] We are spending the summer working our way through the Parables. We're looking at Jesus the Storyteller. Which is an interesting title, isn't it? There is something inherently powerful with stories. Certain books, movies, plays; they move us, they grab our attention. Some of them have powerful messages. The first time I saw the movie "October Sky" I was in my early 20's and found myself sobbing in dorm room at the end of it because of this underlying message through the film about the relationship of the son and his father. Around the same time my college sent me to an arts in worship conference out by Chicago; I was one of the leaders of one of our campus chapel ministries, and they did a six minute drama, a skit, as an example of something they would use during a message. It dealt with death, and it completely caught me off guard because it brought to life many of the emotions I had bottled down from the death of someone that was important to me from a few years before – suddenly I was just weeping in this room with thousands of people, next to several other friends from college.

Because apparently I'm just a big cry baby.

Here's why I'm saying this; we have all seen or heard a story, in whatever format, that has moved us, that we have resonated with, that has caught us off guard with how it hits us. **Stories have power**. They can catch us off guard and hit us with a message that we may have been oblivious to or even opposed to otherwise. And Jesus used them regularly. These parables, these stories that Jesus created, these fictions with a divine purpose, contain powerful lessons both for the listeners 2000 years ago, and for us today.

So let's dive in!

Matthew 20:1 (NLT) ¹ "For

Let's pause here for a moment because this word "for" is a big deal. We know that Jesus tells parables to make a point, He wasn't just being a storyteller to be a storyteller. He had a divine purpose, and this word "for" tells us that what He is about to say is in response to something. What triggered this story? That's always a critical question when looking at the parables. Whatever caused the need for the story will help us inform the purpose of the story.

In this case, all we have to do is look a few sentences before. When the Gospel of Matthew was written, it wasn't divided into chapters and verses – someone did that much later to make it easier to navigate the Bible. For the original readers, this was all just one narrative, without section headings or chapters that can sometimes make it feel like disconnected thoughts. So, the previous paragraph would have naturally

flowed into this parable. Let me set the stage: A rich man came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to be saved and Jesus basically told him, sell everything and give away all your wealth to the poor, and the guy walked away sad because it just wasn't worth it. Now, is that a requirement to be saved? No. Jesus was revealing the man's first love, and as long as he valued wealth more than God, salvation just wasn't going to happen. Well, the disciples were absolutely shook, because in the culture, every good Jewish person 2000 years ago believed that being wealthy meant you were in with God and poverty meant you were being judged – neither of which is actually true. But the disciples had grown being taught that so they were all saying, if a rich guy can't get in, what chance do we have? And out of this conversation, Peter asks the realest question of all:

Matthew 19:27,30 (NLT) ²⁷ Then Peter said to him, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?" Jesus replied, ³⁰ "But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then."

"What will we get?" I love it. He says what they're all thinking; we've already done what you told the rich guy to do and then some, so what's in it for us? Throughout the gospels we see the disciples jockeying with each other for position and status – the maturity we see later in the New Testament just wasn't there yet. There was competition, desire for status and reward. And in response to this question, Jesus tells this parable:

Matthew 20:1-16 (NLT) ¹ "For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work."

When Jesus says "the Kingdom of Heaven is like," a frequent phrase for Him, it's a heads up that He is about to describe the activity of God's kingdom happening here, in the world.¹ It means that what follows is probably going to run counter to what our human cultures or instincts tend to gravitate to.

What Jesus describes was a normal practice at the time. Workers would gather at the marketplace hoping to be hired for the day, and a typical daily wage was one denarius, a Roman coin – here's a few on the screen. It was a small coin. A typical workday during harvest season ran from 6am to 6pm, a twelve-hour work day.²

³ "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴ So he hired them, telling them he would

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 664.

² Ibid.

pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵ So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

Many in the ancient world lived day to day; if they didn't earn anything, they didn't eat. There were no social services to lean on. So even though it was hours past the typical hiring time, 6am, they were still waiting in case an opportunity arose. The assumption would have been when the landowner promised to pay them whatever was right that they would get a proportionately smaller wage. Those beginning at 9am would have worked three-fourths of the day, so they would have assumed three-fourth the pay. Those at noon were working half the day, so half the pay. Those at 3pm were working a quarter of the day, so a quarter of the pay.

But the vagueness of this promise does introduce some dramatic tension: what will the landowner consider right or fair?³

We care a lot about things being fair, don't we? We see it even in Peter's question, "What will we get?" We are outraged when we feel like we've been treated unfairly. Which is strange since we live in a world that is inherently unfair. If equal work produced equal reward, there are men and women in parts of the world that do grueling physical labor from sunup to sundown that should be millionaires by that rationale, but live in dirt floor huts because they earn a dollar a day.

It reminds me of a lament from one of my favorite characters, Calvin (Calvin and Hobbes). https://twitter.com/Calvinn_Hobbes/status/1242647529642221569/photo/1

Calvin: Why can't I stay up late? You guys can! IT'S NOT FAIR!

Calvin's dad: The world isn't fair, Calvin.

Calvin: I know, but why isn't it ever unfair in my favor?

We tend to read this as an issue of fairness. But the original Greek said that the landowner promised **"to give whatever is righteous."**⁴ That hits different, doesn't it? Being fair and being righteous can be very different. A hint at what's coming.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get back to the passage:

⁶ "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?' ⁷ "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.' "The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), Kindle location 6199.

⁴ Ibid.

The landowner went back again and hired people who had been waiting for work for eleven hours. Can you imagine how discouraging, how dehumanizing it would be to be desperate to work and rejected hour after hour throughout the day? How desperate is someone to be willing to work for what they assume would be a twelfth of a day's wages that they would wait that long? They are the hopeless. But he hires them.

⁸ "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹ When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. ¹⁰ When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage.

Those that had been there all day were watching the later arrivals get paid. When the five o'clock crew were paid, the ones who had worked one hour, the rest must have been stunned to see them receive a full denarius. In fact, those who had worked all day must have immediately begun doing the math and thinking, "we're getting twelve denarius each!"

Have you ever had to share equal reward with someone who didn't do all the work? My mind immediately goes to group projects in school, am I right? My younger brother was part of a group once where one kid said, "I'm not doing anything for this, and unless you want an F, you all had better do it." They told the teacher and the teacher said they needed to work it out and washed his hands of it. In the end, they did the assignment and the one kid got the grade without doing anything. Outrageous, right?

Which is why some of us get really uncomfortable with this passage. Is Jesus actually suggesting everyone should be paid the same? It's literally the opposite of our capitalist American dream. Some have tried to explain it away, claiming that Jesus was not suggesting equal pay for less work, rather that these later hires somehow did as much work as the ones who were there all day and in reality they were all paid the same because they produced the same in different amounts of time.⁵ That somehow the most desirable workers that were hired first did far less while these people no one else wanted to hire all day were the actual super-workers.

There is nothing in the text to hint that that idea is even remotely accurate. But here's what I find even more fascinating; there is a similar ancient Jewish rabbinic parable in the Talmud. In that version, a king hired workers, one of whom was incredibly skilled. While the other workers worked all day, the skilled worker only worked two hours, yet the king paid them all the same. When they were angry, the king answered: "This man has wrought more in two hours than you in a whole day."⁶ Rewards based on merit makes sense; this is the parable most would find themselves getting behind.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 69.

⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), Kindle location 6278.

Jesus was directly countering the values of the 2000 years ago, and the values of today. Over and over God claims that His wisdom is not like our wisdom. Here's his response to their frustration:

11 When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, **12** 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

13 "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage?' **14** Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. **15** Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'

The use of the word "friend" communicates gentleness.⁷ The landowner corrected the angry workers, but he was trying to dial down the anger through a relational connection. It reminds me of the parable of the father and the two brothers; when the prodigal son returned the elder brother was jealously angry at what was being given him. The father tried to lovingly reach out to the elder brother and confront his misplaced frustration.

In this parable the landowner points out – they were treated fairly. He gave them the pay they agreed on at 6am. He is free to do what he wants with his money, even if it means paying someone a full day's wages for only an hour's worth of work.

Jesus then concludes the parable with the same thought he began the story with in Matthew 19:30;

16 "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Peter and the disciples wanted to know that they would be rewarded proportionately to their work. They were the first to follow Christ when no one else did, surely they deserve the most? Jesus' response was to tell them they had completely missed the point.

So what about us? What is the point for us today? I believe there are a few things we can take away from this parable:

1. THERE IS NO COMPARISON

Their mistake was to think comparatively at all. We get so busy looking at one another, don't we? Deciding how good of a person we are or not based on those around us. "At least I'm not like so-and-so." We see such wide gulfs between each other; I'm so much better than him, of course I deserve my position, my wealth, my possessions, my place in the group.

⁷ Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, 664.

When my dad was around ten years old, he had to be put in a special reading group at school because he was behind. But over time he started doing really well, culminating in him announcing to his family one night, “I’m the smartest one in the dumb group!” Sixty years later, that still comes up any time he is around his siblings. It’s laughable because it’s ridiculous. But it’s the same with us; we get so busy comparing with one another that we lose sight that we’re all the same when compared with God! We are all in the same boat, sinners who need a Savior!

Galatians 3:28 (NLT) There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

When Paul wrote this he was listing the major ways that people grouped themselves 2000 years ago, and he’s saying none of it matters. We’re all one. There is no comparison, so stop evaluating what you feel you are entitled to from that lens!

2. THE NEED IS URGENT

There is a moment in Matthew 9 where Jesus is looking at the crowds with compassion and he says to His disciples:

Matthew 9:37 (NLT) The harvest is great, but the workers are few.

Our God wants to see His children restored to Him. There is an eternal perspective that God wants us to have, to stop seeing the world through a human lens, but through a divine lens. We are surrounded by eternal beings, created in the image of God that need to be restored to Him, but often times our greatest reactions come to the temporary – we are deeply motivated when it comes to politics, to taxes, to gas prices going up. But God is calling us to something far bigger.

The landowner in this parable keeps going back for more workers. Over and over. The imagery of the vineyard was intentional; when the grapes are ready, they are ready, and if you don’t harvest them then, then you lose them. It’s a metaphor for God’s kingdom, and God is urgently trying to harvest as many as He can.

Our calling is to be focused on that task, not comparing ourselves to how much others are doing or not doing for God. If we truly grasp God’s heart for reaching this world, then questions like “what will we get” no longer become relevant. We won’t feel entitled to have things the way we want them at church or in our community because we’ve been a part of it longer or have “done more” for God. We won’t be jealous when the focus is on the harvest instead of our own desires because we will have the urgency of this landowner who keeps looking for more workers.

3. GOD IS EXTRAVAGANT

Do you remember when I said that the landowner, symbolizing God, said he would pay whatever is right actually mean he would pay whatever was righteous? God’s

righteousness, His generosity, it's extravagant. Unlike the common belief of the day then and now, which would evaluate pay on what the landowner received, God's focus was on the need of the workers. Each worker needed the full days' wage to feed their family; in God's economy, none of them would go hungry.

2 Corinthians 8:9 (NLT) You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

This is a parable about the kingdom of God, and in God's eyes, all who respond to His call are saved. All are blessed. All are rewarded. We all become rich in salvation.

The landowner asked the question, **“Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?”**

How we live our lives in this world reflects the God we belong to. Over and over, the Bible reveals God's heart for the poor, the homeless, the hungry, those in need. When we debate those in need in our country, our state, our city, do we sound more like the world's mindset based in comparison and flawed reward thinking, or do we reflect God's extravagant generosity? Are we jealous of others or do we remember the salvation we have been given?

Jesus was responding to Peter's question, **“what will we get?”** Anytime we find ourselves feeling we are owed something, feeling entitled, in our faith, in church, in what we want, this parable calls us to a wake up call. God's economy is far different than ours. This story should impact how we view church, how we view employment, how we view those who work for us, how we view school, sports. It affects how we view those we influence. When we get distracted by these other things, what we are revealing is that we have lost sight of how incredibly extravagant the gift of salvation already is, far beyond anything we deserve. It is a call to refocus, to stop comparing, to remember the actual need, and to be extravagant in thinking of others just as God is.