



# God & Reward

Parable of the Vineyard Workers

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# Rewards

- There are a number of passages in the Bible that deal with the matter of how God will reward those who serve him. For example:
  - Jesus' parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30)
  - Jesus' parable of the pounds (Lk 19:11-27)
- Here, however, we want to look at Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers, found in Matthew 20:1-16.

# Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matt 20:1 (NIV) 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."

# Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matt 20:9 (NIV) 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.

# The Story



# The Vineyard Workers

- An everyday situation in first century Palestine:
  - Large landowners
  - Many landless day-laborers
- The hiring procedure:
  - Landowner hiring throughout the day
  - Not surprising given that it is sufficiently important to harvest the grapes quickly

# The Payment Plan

- This is unusual!
- Paying the same amount to the one-hour workers could be seen as unusual charity for the unemployed.
- Paying them before (& in the presence of) others is certainly asking for trouble!
- But the owner gives his reasoning to the complaining workers.

# Interpreting the Story



# Imagery

- As with other NT and rabbinic parables, it is common to construct narratives using OT metaphors. Compare:
  - Job 7:1-2: “Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? 2 Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages...”
  - John 9:4: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”

# Imagery

- Compare the very similar rabbinic parable:

A king had a vineyard for which he engaged many laborers, one of whom was especially apt and skillful. What did the king do? He took this laborer from his work, and walked through the garden conversing with him. When the laborers came for their hire in the evening, the skillful laborer also appeared among them and received a full day's wages from the king. The other laborers were angry at this and said, "We have toiled the whole day, while this man has worked but two hours; why does the king give him the full hire, even as to us?" the king said to them, "Why are you angry? Through his skill he has done more in the two hours than you have all day." JT, Ber 2.5c

# Imagery

- In both our parable and this rabbinic parable, the same images are used:
  - Owner = God
  - Workers = humans
  - Day = lifespan
  - Payment = reward

# Unusual Features

- From the NT, we see that unusual or striking features in a parable are often the crux or main point of the parable:
  - Prodigal Son: father running to meet him
  - Two Debtors: king cancelling forgiveness
  - Tenants: owner sending his son

# Big Points of Dispute

- Do the workers represent:
  - Only saved people?
  - Both saved & unsaved?
- Does the wage represent:
  - Reward for service?
  - Salvation?

# Big Points of Dispute

- The context slightly favors the former in each case, since the parable follows & is connected to Peter's question (Mt 19:27) "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"
- In any case, we are not told the answer to these questions.
- The parable has important lessons which don't depend on answering these disputes.



# Lessons from the Parable

# Look at the Payment

- No one got less than was just, i.e.:
  - Less than what they had agreed to work for.
- Lesson 1:
  - God will never be unjust.

# Details of Bargaining

- 1<sup>st</sup> group bargains to get satisfactory wage.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> accepts promise to be paid justly.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> just accepts opportunity to work.
- All receive the same amount, but last gets best hourly wage, 2<sup>nd</sup> next, 1<sup>st</sup> worst.
- Lesson 2: You will get your best deal with God by trusting, not by bargaining.

# Workers' Complaint

- Unhappy that others got a better deal than they did.
- Lesson 3: We all tend to complain when someone else gets something we didn't.

# Owner's Answer

- Lesson 4: God never cheats us. We always get at least as much as we deserve.
- Lesson 5: God may wish to give another something he doesn't give us. Isn't this the essence of grace?
- Lesson 6: There is always a certain freedom in disposing of one's property.
- Lesson 7: Beware of covetousness & jealousy. The last will be first & the first last.



# The End

Work hard!  
Trust God!