

“Less Work Equal Pay”
The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20:1-16
Dave Dorst, June 5, 2005 (Youth Sunday), Potomac Hills Community Church

Introduction: It was the early 90’s and baseball salaries were starting to get out of control. Players were getting multiple year fat contracts, only to come back to their teams a year or two later (well before their contracts ran out) to demand new contracts because other players had received bigger contracts. I remember reading an article in which Andy Van Slyke, the centerfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, commented on this trend. He referred to a parable that Jesus told, about the owner of a vineyard who hired men to work for him. When he paid some other workers higher wages, these men wanted higher pay as well. But, Van Slyke noted, they had a contract that they were bound to, just as the baseball players were bound to honor their contracts.

Well, it’s a noble thing to honor your contract, and that’s one thing that we might pull out of Jesus’ parable. But hopefully **we will pull out much richer ideas about God’s grace** as we look at it.

Matthew 20:1-16: **1**"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of an estate 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. **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 pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. **5**At noon and again around three o'clock he did the same thing. **6**At five o'clock that evening 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 owner of the estate told them, 'Then go on out and join the others in my vineyard.' **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 earlier came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. **11**When they received their pay, they protested, **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 it 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 angry because I am kind?' **16**"And so it is, that many who are first now will be last then; and those who are last now will be first then."

I. Our attitude about others

How would you feel if you were one of the early workers and got paid the same as the people who had only worked 1 or 3 hours? I have to admit I’d have the same indignation as they did, and I’m sure many of you would as well. Seeing others get privileges makes us mad.

A. Biblical examples of bad attitudes

1. Jonah- remember the song the kids sang, “Jonah was a prophet but he really never got it?” After Jonah had been saved from drowning, repented inside the whale, spit out on the shore and preached to the people of Ninevah to repent, Jonah still wanted God to wipe out these pagans. He never understood that God had grace for these people, just like He had for him.
2. The older brother of the prodigal son- talk about a guy who fits the profile of those all-day workers who begrudged the owner for being generous to the later hires. “Hey Dad- my little brother insults you, blows all the money you gave him, can even get a job, comes back here begging to be your servant, and you throw a party

for him? Ah, where's my party? I've been working all this time for you and I expect you to be generous with me." And who does Jesus mean to be the older brother? The Pharisees, the ones who looked down on all the people that weren't as holy as them.

- B. Heart check- answer these questions to yourself to see how you feel about others prospering spiritually:
- How do you feel when younger Christians are given high positions?
 - How do you feel when you see people gifted by God who aren't as mature spiritually as you are?
 - How do like the thought of someone who becomes a Christian at the end of his life getting a better reward than you in heaven?
 - Here's the ultimate check: How did you feel when you heard Ted Bundy may have committed his life to Christ on death row?

1 Corinthians 4:5 reminds us, "Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God."

Remember the words of the song that Erin danced to: "Oh, the days when I drew lines around my faith to keep you out, to keep me in, to keep it safe/ The sense of my own self-entitlement to say who's wrong, or won't belong or cannot stay/ The times when I have failed to recognize how many chairs are gathered there around the feast/ He says, "Come, there is room enough for all of us/ This is the heart of the One who stands before an open door and bids us come."

If Jesus gave His life for someone, who are we to begrudge them receiving His salvation. Are we thrilled when we see God doing His work in the lives of others, or does it naturally make us selfish and wonder why we aren't getting more? Spiritual comparisons and envy will kill us.

II. Our attitude about ourselves

A. Peter's question (the larger context of Matthew 20:1-16)

At the end of Matthew 19, after hearing Jesus tell the rich young ruler to sell everything and give to the poor, Peter asks, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it?" Jesus' reply is reassuring- they'll sit on 12 thrones & judge. Peter's probably getting pretty excited. But then Jesus tempers that with verse 29- everyone who leaves anyone or anything will be rewarded. And to reinforce Jesus' approach to questions of grace (and perhaps because he detects a works mentality in Peter), he tells the parable. Then soon after the parable, Jesus has to set James and John's mother straight when she asks him if her sons would be getting places of honor in the kingdom.

Are we like Peter, trying to figure out what we'll get out of the deal? Do we serve with expectations of reward? Jesus is rebuking this attitude. "God promises rewards to those who obey Him without thought for reward, for in the kingdom of God all reward is the result of God's grace and not of human merit." (Tasker)

Heavenly rewards are kind of a funny thing to me. What will they be? Gold watch? A bigger mansion? All the instruments I could play with the ability to play them? I doubt that our earthly desires will play much of a factor into heavenly rewards. We shouldn't even think that way about heavenly rewards, because heaven and being in the presence of Jesus Christ, enjoying the fullness of God for eternity will quench every need, satisfy every desire that we have. That is reward enough. And isn't there something in Revelation about us throwing down our crowns before God?

B. What do you deserve?

What's the worst way to start a sentence with God? "I deserve..." What do you deserve? The wages of sin is death... You deserve nothing but eternal separation from God, the just penalty for your sins. If you give me the choice of receiving from God justice/fairness or grace, I'll take grace every time. I don't want God's justice, I don't want what I deserve- hell. I want grace.

III. Our attitude towards God

A. "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money/grace?"

If nothing else, this parable should teach us never to question God's sovereignty. This takes us back to *Romans*, where Paul says that God is the potter, and He has every right to make clay pots for noble use or common use. Just the same, God has every right to choose whom He wishes for salvation, and leave whomever He wishes in their sin. Just as the owner of the vineyard had every right to do what he wished with his money, God has every right to do what He wishes with His grace.

B. God does not play by our rules of fairness.

My grandmother is a saint of a woman. Always serving others, never expecting anything. Her sense of justice and fairness is very acute. For Christmas and birthdays, she tries as hard as she can to make sure that every present to every grandchild (and now grandchild) is as even as possible. I remember one time when she was pushing my brothers and I on a swing, but they went off to play ball. I asked for some more pushes, and she gave me a few more, but was very worried that my brothers would find out about those extra pushes. This has become known in my family as the "Vera Principle." If my parents buy my twin brother a guitar, then I know I can ask for something big.

We expect God to play by the "Vera Principle." If my grandmother had been in charge of wages that day in the vineyard, you can be sure the first group would have received their wage, the second would have gotten $\frac{3}{4}$ their wage, then the next group would have received half, etc. And that would be good business, but Jesus isn't teaching us business principles. He's telling us that God doesn't play by our rules of fairness.

That brings us to the statement that bookends the parable- the first shall be last and the last shall be first. This is one of those statements that we think is a formula, but Jesus just says to flip our logic on its head. Think of Jesus' response to Peter's question about how many times we should forgive- did he really mean 490 times? Of course not, He's just exaggerating Peter's seven number so that it blows his theory out of the water. What Jesus really means is there is no limit on forgiveness.

And here, Jesus is probably not saying that there will be some line-up at the gates of heaven, and God will just reverse the line- no, Jesus is saying, "My grace is totally different from what you think; your assumptions about who deserves what might be totally and completely dead wrong.

Conclusion:

Warren Wiersbe said, "What we need to learn is that God's abundance is His. In the world, the person who works longest and hardest should receive the most pay. That is just. But in God's kingdom, principles of merit and ability earn us only reprobation. They are all set aside so that sovereign grace may prevail. That grace generates the great reversal: some who are now first will be last, and vice-versa."

We need to be profoundly grateful for what God has done in our lives- for abundant life and the rewards and glories of heaven. We need to be excited and filled with joy and awe at what God has done in other's lives, free from envy and comparison. We need to be in awe that God is God and I am not (Steven Curtis Chapman), that He controls the universe for His own purposes and pleasures.