

Matthew 20:1-16

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.
4 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same.
5 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’
6 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’
7 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’
8 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.
9 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.
10 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,
11 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.’
12 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’
13 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
14 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’
15 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

- The landowner, or head of the household, is used throughout Matthew to refer to the Lord, Matthew 10:25; Matthew 13:27; Matthew 13:52.
 - The “vineyard” is a symbol of Israel, most notably from Isaiah 5:1. Jesus also seems to use it as a metaphor for the church.
 - Note that these first laborers might well represent the disciples, who readily agreed to follow in the early days of Christ’s earthly ministry.
 - Consider this parable a response to Peter’s question in Matthew 19:27... “*What will be our reward?!*”
 - Jesus has good news and bad news for the disciples, in that, yes, they will receive rewards beyond measure, but no, these rewards will not be prioritized by time served!
 - The payment for the day was fair and just.
- 3 *When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;*
4 *and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.*
5 *When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same.*
- The vineyard was vast and the work virtually limitless. So it is with the ripe fields waiting for harvest!
 - How wonderful that we all have a place in the Lord’s work—even if we’re late to the party!
 - The workers trust in the virtue of the landowner and do not ask for a particular wage. Perhaps Jesus is lightly pricking the disciples, who asked what was in it for them!
 - Certainly we are to understand here that the attitude of a grateful laborer in the Lord’s fields is preferable to the countenance of a hireling.
- 6 *And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’*
7 *They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’*
- Life can be cruel, and some lose hope—not just of finding a vocation, but of finding meaning and purpose.

- Only the Lord scours the highways and byways of life in search of those who are least (or last!) in the kingdom!
- Is there a hint of reproach in the landowner's question? "Where were you earlier in the day?!"
- They offer a poor excuse, as they would have been hired earlier had they been ready! However, their present willingness outweighs their self-serving rationalizations!
- Even if the Lord's return is imminent, there is much work to be done in the harvest fields!
- It is never too late in the day to find meaning and purpose for our lives in the name of the Lord!

8 *When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'*

9 *When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.*

- Finally! The reward due those who labored!
- Mosaic law stipulated that laborers be paid at the end of each day and not be forced to wait for what was due to them.
- As in the previous words of our Lord, the last shall be first.
- What a beautiful representation of what it means to know salvation in the name of the Lord. Whomever trusts in the Lord receives a full measure of blessings! How could our God promise anything less?!

10 *Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.*

11 *And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,*

12 *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.'*

- The disciples had to feel a bit of a sting here! Certainly they would expect to receive more!
- No matter our blessings, we find justifications for comparisons and envy.
- Do you see parallels to the parable of the Prodigal Son?
- The intermediate workers didn't complain even though they worked longer than the last.

- Note that the envy and mercenary spirit of those hired first did NOT deprive them of their just due. Our God is always faithful to the covenant.

13 *But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?'*

14 *Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.*

15 *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'*

- Of course they murmured! We would also!
- The landowner's logic is impeccable, but even as readers it is difficult for us to assent and agree.
- There is mild reproof toward the murmurers in the word, hetaire, which does mean friend, but not in an intimate sense. It would be as if we replied with the term, "good friend..." or "comrade."
- It seems as though this "ringleader" might have initially refused his reward.
- Will his "reward" ultimately be squandered?
- Note that the explanation given by the landowner is not likely to satisfy those who are hard of heart!
- This dynamic is seen often in churches, where long-term members are known to murmur that new members are receiving too much attention or granted too much say!
- We also have here an insight into the dark human heart, which is more interested in privilege than justice.
- "Envious" is actually, literally, an "evil eye."
- Verse 15 was a huge influence on John Calvin.

16 *So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

- Certainly, this teaching is a favorite of the Lord's, as it is recorded throughout the synoptic gospels: Matthew 19:30, Matthew 20:16, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30
- The first shall be last, but, in the end, the reward is equal.
- Remember that, as Gentiles grafted into the tree of life, WE are the last hired!
- The important point is not that the reward is equal, but that the love and mercy of our God is not measured or proportioned based on our earned rewards.