

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the workers on one denarius,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard for the day. ³ When he went out about nine in the morning,^[b] he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. ⁵ About noon and about three,^[c] he went out again and did the same thing. ⁶ Then about five^[d] he went and found others standing around^[e] and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’

⁷ “‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him.

“‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.^[f] ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.’

⁹ “When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. ¹⁰ So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: ¹² ‘These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.’

¹³ “He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous^[g] because I’m generous?’^[h]

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first last.”^[i]

What do you make?

When I used to work in retail and even more so in the wood shop there were certain topics that we couldn’t speak about in. We could discuss, religion, politics, morals, ethics, sports, etc... There were many questionable topics over which we could argue about, while name calling arguing loudly as we assembled, packed, delivered, and installed cabinets. The one topic that was and always has been a huge no-no was wages. How much do you make? Rumors went around and if asked I would have no problem telling others but if the boss were within earshot or maybe even if he were in the building, you’d have to wait. The company didn’t want anyone to know who made what and why. Maybe they were concerned because we all negotiated our wages differently. Maybe they wanted to avoid causing problems because some workers thought they were worth more than others and they really weren’t. Maybe the company just wanted to scam employees from what they were worth. That wasn’t the case but each of us were different. We were hired at different times under different circumstances and wages just weren’t to be discussed openly.

Our lesson is a little different and almost seems to indicate that we should discuss our pay. We need to talk about what we earn before God and what he has given us. After all why would the owner pay the last first in front of them all? It’s about the wages. Jesus is not teaching us how to run our businesses here but rather what is the kingdom of heaven like? Do we really earn anything in the kingdom of God? Are some worth more than others?

What we learn is that this parable is not about the workers. It’s more about the owner. It’s about his kingdom, his vineyard, and the people he calls to work it. But we get stuck with this idea that it’s my work, my effort, or my time that earns our position in heaven. That thought is what Jesus is warning against. Don’t compare effort spent but rejoice in the work given. Compare what God has given you. The wages he has won for you.

Jesus’ disciples have discussed greatness in the kingdom of God. He then discusses divorce and receives the little children blessing them. But then a rich young ruler comes before him and asks, “*What must I do to have eternal life?*” Jesus responds by telling him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him. After this ruler went away sad, his disciples turn to him and say, “*We’ve left everything to follow you.*” Jesus tells them that they will indeed *sit*

on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel... and you will receive 100 fold in the kingdom to come and inherit eternal life. Before their heads swell with pride over their vast accomplishment of following Jesus, Jesus cuts them down. “*Many who are first will be last, and the last first.* Don’t think too highly of yourself since you were called. A parable illustrating this point follows. A vineyard owner has a harvest to bring in. So he heads out first thing in the morning, 6 am.

After agreeing with the workers on one denarius,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard for the day. This is the first group and they agree to the wages. This is the only group who negotiate wages with the owner. The rest of the workers, those at 9am, 12pm, 3pm, and 5pm all agree to work for what is right, and some simply agree to work. There is no contract negotiated. They are satisfied. They trust the owner. That he is good and gracious.

At the end of the day the master has his foreman pay them last to first. He wants them to see their wages. He wants them to look closely at what they are given. But instead of rejoicing with those who labored for only an hour that they are able to go home head held high, able to bring home food for the family. They complain. They grumble. This word is the same used by the Pharisees when they complained, “*Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” This is the same word used by Israel in the wilderness when they grumble against God (1 Corinthians 10:10). It’s not a good thing. They complain because the owner is generous and they are jealous of others. ¹² *These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.* He wanted them to see wages. He wanted them to see what kind of owner they worked for.

You wouldn’t think it, since we often win the most humble person award and rarely boast about it, but we too need to be reminded that we are just workers in the vineyard. We’ve been working for years, ever since the day God called us to work. For me it happened before I could walk when a little water was splashed on my head and God called me into his family. There he called me to come. No contract was negotiated. I didn’t agree to serve as a pastor at that time. I didn’t even think I would be a pastor until I was called and ordained and then it was finally happening.

We’ve been at it for a long time and if we were to discuss our wages we should find that it’s still the same. Those who are new to the faith have the same gifts as those who have labored all their life. We know that but we often struggle because the natural view of the law says, “I must do something in order to earn this gift. I’ve done something and others haven’t.” Some might even focus on the work in the parable and say, “See, it’s about work. You have to work in the vineyard. So what are you going to do for Jesus? What are you going to do in the vineyard of our Lord?” Christians will come up with all sorts of crazy ideas. You have to pray a prayer. You have to dedicate your life. You have to spend so much of your time or give so much of your money. We’ll even idolize work and certain positions over others. No, the pastor doesn’t have the holiest of jobs. I don’t earn any more in the kingdom of heaven than the children who wash my car or crack walnuts. Each job is important but the work doesn’t matter thought people often use it to justify themselves before others, it doesn’t work before God.

What matters in the kingdom of heaven isn’t the work but the wages. And we might even get angry about God’s grace to others. The divorced husband who has lost his children, only finds out his wife has gone to another church only to find out they forgave her. Or maybe it’s the Christian man who in a moment of weakness had too much to drink and murdered a mother and her children because he ran a stop sign. This one too? We might complain, “*We did all the work. We bore the heat of the day. We worked in the scorching heat.*” We kept our nose clean. We didn’t drink, dance, (not sinful) or have sex before or outside of the bonds of marriage (clearly a sin) and for what! The same wages as those who’ve done everything wrong?

In doing so they turn a gift into something earned. We forget what the real gift is. It’s being in the vineyard. It’s hearing his call. It’s being with Jesus. We begin to sound like the older son in the parable of the prodigal and Jesus reminds us, “*My Son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.*” Maybe it was because they thought too highly of themselves, maybe like the disciples they were starting to get a big head about being the first called and the first to follow when many more would follow later. To compare work and boast about progress puts one in danger of

being dismissed from the vineyard. ¹³ *“He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.*

The point of the parable is that the wages are the same. No matter the skills or abilities of the workers. Often there was very good reason why workers would still be standing around at the end of the day. Our parable doesn’t mention anything about them being too lazy or unwilling to work. Why are they still standing there? They could be too embarrassed to return home without a day’s wage. They could have been hoping and praying for a miracle that someone might stop by and give them an opportunity to work. Otherwise they will return in shame to their wives and children, “Sorry no food today...maybe tomorrow.”

What we find in this parable about the vineyard owner is that he is generous, compassionate, and he comes in search of people to work in his vineyard throughout the heat of the day. The master takes the initiative. He himself goes out during multiple times of the day though he has a foreman which means he is a significant landowner and yet five times he comes in search to see if there is anyone to employ. He comes to the least, the last, and he makes them first. That’s what God does for us.

He began his work at the crack of dawn when the chief priests and elders plotted against Jesus to put him to death. They tied him up, and led him away and handed him over to Pilate. We don’t know what happened at the third hour, but from the sixth hour to the ninth hour we know he bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat. From the sixth hour to the ninth hour, from nine until three, darkness covered the land. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* He did all of this work and his whole life lived perfectly so that you could be made equal to him: righteous. He hasn’t stopped working for you and me either. Now he rules the world for the good of his church, calling us to look at his work and our wages.

This is not about merit, earning way into God’s favor. But receiving what God wants to give us through his Son.

Jesus takes those who have earned nothing and gives them more than they ever deserved and that makes people angry. He gives us more than we could ever desire or deserve and he gives us more. Jesus doesn’t redeem us because he’s going to get something in return. He does so because he is a gracious and merciful God. Why would it make people mad? Grace eliminates all our works and worship. Not even my little work or the little I do changes my master’s mind because the wages are still the same. It’s undeserved. In baptism all the fullness of Christ is given to you. Then as a member of his kingdom you are pushed out into the world to serve your neighbor. And yes, faith, a living faith is bound to produce good works. We don’t work our way towards earning God’s favor when it’s something we already have. And at the end, in our last dying breath, what do we get? Jesus. The gift is always there.

So where were you when God called you, made you his own, told you to work in his vineyard? Maybe you were a small child, at this font. Maybe it was something relatively recent or maybe a death bed conversion (but you’re not dead yet). Either way we can’t relate to those who were hired on at the first hour because technically speaking Paul says in Acts that we are living in the last days. We’ve all come to Christianity in the 11th hour.

God’s grace has been given to us. So seek the LORD while he may be found. Don’t wait and say, “There will be time later.” Sometimes that time will never come. We’ve been with him working in his kingdom this whole time and where would I rather be. Don’t be comparing yourself to someone else, if you do that, the danger is that you’ll lose the reward and become last. Which means – out of the kingdom. But God’s still at work. He is calling people into his kingdom. He bears the heat of the day to go out and find more workers.

If we begin to think, “We’ve got to do something!” Remember our Mission statement, “Look what Christ is doing! He gathers his church. Look what he is doing through his people.” We are known not by what we are doing but by who we are connected to. He has done us no wrong. He gives, forgives, and calls us to work. The first group is working because they expect to be paid. The rest are working because they want to work.

Matthew 20:1-16

18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2020

And it is by God' grace that we will be paid what he has earned for us. These aren't wages do but a gift given. So speak of it openly and freely to all. Don't worry about the boss wandering in on the conversations. In his kingdom this is what he wants as we discuss what he's earned on our behalf. Amen.