

It's Kinda Like This...

Ordinary Stories About an Extraordinary Kingdom

Workers in the Vineyard

Sherwood Oaks

Matthew 20:1-16

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In my youth, I never tired of visiting my grandparent's aging 70-acre farm in southern Indiana. From the dusty hayloft to the rusty hay rake, it was a place filled with adventures just waiting to happen. Jesus had a lot to say about agriculture, farms and vineyards. He shared the parable of the four soils, the parable of the rich farmer who tore down his barns to build bigger ones, the parable of the wheat and tares. Jesus assured us that a good tree doesn't bear bad fruit, he cursed the fig tree for its pretense of fruit when it had none, and he reminds us that he is the vine, and we are the branches. Apart from him we can do nothing.

But of all the parables generated by agriculture, none has a more unexpected conclusion than the one in Matthew 20. Honestly, it seldom makes the list of the top ten most beloved parables and for good reason. It's uncomfortable for most of us.

Matthew 20:1–16 (NIV84) ¹ “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.’ ⁹ “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.”

With clusters of ripe grapes tugging at the weary vines, the owner of this vineyard headed into town early one morning to hire temporary help. The Judean workday usually

began at 6:00 a.m. and concluded at 6:00 p.m. The parable's landowner made his choices from among the available workers who were likely gathered in a traditional spot for daily hires. He offered each a **denarius**, the customary daily wage for an unskilled laborer. Minted by the Roman government, the denarius usually bore the emperor's image and contained one tenth Troy ounce worth of silver.

Around 9:00 a.m. the owner returned to town to hire more workers. Evidently, the job was bigger than anticipated and the first crew needed reinforcements. With this second hire there is no wage negotiation; the farmer simply promised to pay "whatever is right." The workers were grateful for a job offer; they didn't argue. Back to town at noon and again at three o'clock the owner hired even more pickers. Finally, with daylight waning and only sixty minutes of work time remaining, the aggressive owner hired the last of the workers. Evidently, they had waited all day hoping against hope that someone would give them a job. Can you imagine the wave of relief that washed over these eleventh-hour hires? They would not go home empty handed after all. I suspect they had little expectation for very much pay, but then again if you can't have the whole loaf of bread, a slice is better than nothing.

Up to this point, we like the story. As the laborers filtered in from the vineyard, however, the story takes an unexpected turn. As one might expect, the workers lined up to receive their wages in the order of their hiring times – seniority ruled the day. The owner however instructed his foreman to pay the men beginning with the *last* ones hired. That certainly wouldn't be customary; some might even find it insulting. The foreman then gave a denarius to each of the eleventh-hour hires. Whoa! I suspect the early morning crew could hardly suppress their grins. *If those guys got what was promised to us, then how much more are we getting?* But as the foreman moved down the line to the next hires, their smiles quickly faded. Every worker got the same silver denarius. Finally, those who had worked a full twelve-hour shift received their denarius. What they had so eagerly agreed to at 6:00 a.m. had become an insult at 6:00 p.m. Man, they were hot under the tunic!

At best Jesus' listeners are puzzled by this surprising development; more than likely they are frustrated or even angry. Who is this businessman, this vineyard owner, and how could he be so callously unfair? The early morning crew grumbled at the owner's ethics and offered their best defense with a taste of whine. ***These men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day. (vs 12)*** But the logic of the owner's response was irrefutable:

- Did you get what I promised to pay you? *Well...yes.*
- Are you angry at my generosity? *Well...I shouldn't be angry at generosity, but, yes, I suppose I am.*
- It's my money and I can spend or give it as I want, right? *Well...yes, you can.*

The crowd is still mulling over the seeming injustice of the whole ordeal when Jesus hits them with the punch line – *the last shall be first and the first shall be last.*

Every time I read this passage I struggle with its implication. My American perspective of justice is greatly offended by this story. If fair pay for a job done is the heart of this parable, then this story does reek of injustice. I empathize with those early morning hires, don't you? How is it right to treat everyone equally? If you're a hard worker and you get the same pay as the slothful worker, doesn't that destroy one's motivation to put forth our best efforts? Wasn't that the downfall of the communist system, everyone is treated equally no matter how much or how little they worked? Before you plan protest, take a closer look at the theme. Jesus isn't talking about fair pay, or several other things that often distract us as we read.

For instance, his focus isn't the vineyard. It makes no difference if this farm was the premier vineyard of the region with a bumper crop or just an ordinary family run business with an average yield. The vineyard merely represents the world.

Jesus' focus isn't about the quality of labor, either. After all we don't really know much about these migrant workers. Jesus mentions nothing about skill levels or previous experience. We don't know if some insisted on breaks throughout the day while others labored on tirelessly. Nothing is said about their work ethic. The parable does not even address the quality of work accomplished. This we do know, in the arena of availability, they all appear equal. Each worker, regardless of the hour stamped on his timecard, seemed as willing to work as those hired earlier.

The virtue of availability is not the main point of the parable either but it is a meaningful *subplot* lesson. Throughout biblical history, the Lord has always considered availability more important than ability. Human talent is of little consequence when teamed with the omnipotent God. The story of Joseph in Genesis is one of my favorites. As a slightly-spoiled, doted-upon teenager – his father's obvious favorite among twelve sons – Joseph's people skills may have had a few rough edges, but he always made himself available to God. Through his ordeal with the steamy Mrs. Potiphar and his subsequent years in an Egyptian prison, God polished the leadership skills of Joseph to a brilliant shine. God still looks for those who will make themselves accessible for his use. Does that describe you; are you willing and available?

When the owner of the vineyard returned to the marketplace at 5:00 p.m. he seemed startled and a bit incredulous to find willing workers still waiting. ***“Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” he inquired. “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. (vs. 6,7)*** At a glance some might conclude that these eleventh hour laborers appeared lazy. Perhaps they slept-in and missed the first wave. Perhaps they dawdled away the best hours of the day sipping a double caramel mocha Frappuccino at the local Starbucks. Such idleness **would not** have been rewarded with a job. We recoil

at lazy. Musician Jimmy Lyons wrote, “Tomorrow is the only day in the year that appeals to a lazy man.” Billy Graham wrote, “Every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the past generation, and we cannot bear full responsibility for the next one; but we do have our generation. God will hold us responsible as to how well we fulfill our responsibilities to this age and take advantage of our opportunities.”

God also rebels at laziness. Solomon writes in **Eccl. 10:18 (NIV)** ¹⁸**If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks.** Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians that if a man does not work, then neither let him eat. My favorite OT passage is **(Proverbs 26:15 Message)** ¹⁵**A shiftless sluggard puts his fork in the pie, but is too lazy to lift it to his mouth.** Now, that’s what I call laziness! If you can’t get pie to your mouth – with or without a fork – you’ve got a problem! Each day is a gift from God; make the most of every minute. Be lively, not lazy and you’ll enjoy today as much as you look forward to tomorrow!

These laborers in the parable, however, were not lazy. They simply lacked an opportunity to work. I admire their tenacity. They could have given up early and gone back home in defeat, but they didn’t. And their persistence and patience paid off big time. As the old saying goes, good things come to those who wait.

I know people who feel they have no opportunity to make a difference. In certain cases, the opportunities *are* there, they just never see them. Others, however, wait a long while for that special opportunity to come along. As Moses celebrated his seventy-ninth birthday, do you think he assumed life’s opportunities had passed him by? Amazing, isn’t it, the change a year can make? By the time there were eighty candles on his Midian birthday cake, Moses was packing his clothes and brushing up on his Egyptian. And don’t you know that on the Judean Motherhood Survey form, Elizabeth had checked the box marked *failure*. Far beyond the childbearing age, she was resigned to the fact that she would never give her husband Zachariah a son. But nine months after her priestly (and surprisingly speechless) husband was visited by an angel, Elizabeth gave birth to a healthy baby they named John. The son of Elizabeth’s golden years grew up to be a mighty preacher of repentance. Those he baptized he pointed to the coming Savior. Of John, Jesus remarked, **“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...”** (Matthew 11:11)

Don’t give up if you think life has overlooked you in the distribution of opportunities. God isn’t finished with you yet. Your prospects to leave your mark on history may not come until...well, the eleventh hour. So don’t quit; be willing to serve. Make yourself available to God and keep your eyes wide open. God rewards such patient perseverance.

May I share another *subplot* lesson with you? For all that these vineyard workers had in common, there was at least one distinction among them. The early morning hires

who complained about the pay were the only ones who had no right to object. You see, the first group hired was the last group to have a negotiated wage. They knew what they would receive at day's end while the other groups employed throughout the day were merely told they would be paid *whatever is right*. Of all the vineyard workers, those who knew what the contract stipulated should have been satisfied. It wasn't until the late comers receive the same pay that they became indignant. Contentment is *so* fleeting.

Why are we so seldom satisfied? Legend has it that the industrial tycoon John D. Rockefeller was once asked, "How much money is enough?" To which he supposedly replied, "Just a little more." I don't know if the story is true, but the answer certainly is. We never quite have enough.

Greed, that *excessive* desire to acquire more than a person needs or deserves, always destroys. Everyone suffers when greed is the driving force. **Prov. 28:25 (NIV)**
²⁵A greedy man stirs up dissension, but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.

In contrast to such greed, Jesus wanted his listeners to grasp the one truly significant point of the parable: God (the owner of the vineyard) is a generous God. Generosity is such a winsome virtue. We like generous people. Those who engage in philanthropic ventures are always held in high esteem.

- Generosity encourages. We have all been cheered by another's unexpected gifts. Have you ever eaten at a restaurant when someone else picked up the tab? Free food always tastes better, doesn't it? And you leave encouraged.
- Generosity heals. Dr. Karl Menninger wrote, "Money-giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people." I would suggest that generosity is also a barometer of spiritual health. We are a clear reflection of our Father when we share generously. And the generous person sleeps better – combine a generous spirit with a sermon, and you'll get the best sleep you've had in months.
- Generosity surprises. It's the unanticipated word of generous praise; the unexpected offer from a neighbor to generously share his time to help with your backyard project; the unforeseen check that shows up in your mailbox out of the blue because a generous acquaintance wants to do something nice for you. Generosity always surprises.

Even more amazing for me, however, is the impact this parable has made on my own life and ministry. After more than four decades of preaching, this uncomfortable parable has surprised me in a way I never anticipated. A few years ago, I sat down with a man named Kenny Ooley to talk about his relationship with the Lord. Like so many Kenny had put off a spiritual decision that he knew deep down he truly wanted to make. He didn't struggle with his faith; he struggled with his past. How could a perfect God love and forgive him for a lifetime of lousy choices? Could God be *that* generous? Could forgiveness extend *that* far? After all, he had wasted a lifetime without the Savior.

With his sixty-second birthday just around the corner, he was convinced his best years were behind him. He expressed shame about being a Johnny-come-lately to the Kingdom. He said, “It isn’t fair to sneak in at the eleventh hour and give God the leftovers.”

Sound familiar? We always want to make it about us. *I have been too bad. I have nothing to offer God. I don’t deserve to be forgiven.* All true statements. But therein lies our problem – it’s not about us, it’s about God. It’s not about the farmhands; it’s about the Farmer. It’s not about the fruit-pickers; it’s about the Vineyard Owner. It’s his gift to give and he can give it to whomever.

Kenny did come to Christ, and I baptized him. You should have seen the look on his face as he came up out of the water. And then, unexpectedly, Kenny died just a week later, the result of a routine, non-life-threatening surgery. Suddenly, this parable of God’s generosity took on a whole new meaning. Never had this parable seemed more relevant or hopeful. I was no longer wrestling with the apparent wage inequity; at that moment I was celebrating God’s generosity. I think I’ve finally discovered my real issue with this parable through the years. You see, I’m one of those 6:00 a.m. workers. My name was on the cradle roll at my home church. At age twelve, on *Easter Sunday*, 1967, I accepted Christ as my Savior and was baptized. I started preaching before finishing college. I’ve celebrated dozens of weddings, preached scores of funerals and endured hundreds of leadership meetings! Maybe, just maybe...deep down...I didn’t think it fair that on one’s first time at bat, he could slide into the kingdom’s home plate at the last moment and be called safe. After all, I’ve been running the bases faithfully for years. It just didn’t feel right; that is, until Kenny. I thought I had been helping him spiritually, but all along he was helping me better understand the generosity of God. I shouldn’t be surprised at how God works but I always am. I will be forever grateful that God’s generosity is distributed on his terms, not mine. And I will be forever grateful that we will share heaven with Kenny Ooley and every other eleventh hour worker in God’s vineyard. The parable’s punch line – ***the last shall be first and the first shall be last*** – is now more relevant than ever; among those of us who had prayed for his salvation, Kenny was *last* to acknowledge the Savior but *first* to see his face!

I want to be generous like my Lord, but I’ve got a long way to go. How about you? It’s time we learned how to embrace our Lord’s example of generosity. I’m looking forward to seeing Kenny again. Most of all, I look forward to bowing at the feet of Jesus whose incredible generosity and indescribable grace have transformed us and given us eternal life. I wish I owned a couple of those ancient Roman silver coins. One denarius I would have placed in Kenny’s hand before the casket was closed – appropriate for an eleventh-hour hire. The other denarius I would keep in my pocket as a constant reminder to me – an early morning hire – to be ever grateful I serve a generous Lord!