

The Parables of Jesus, Teacher's Guide

Week 6: Grace in the Kingdom

Matthew 20:1–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This parable lands on one of the most important and most easily distorted doctrines in all of Scripture: the grace of God and how it is received. What is at stake is a true understanding of salvation that avoids two opposite errors. On one side is the merit error, the idea that we earn our standing with God by the quantity and quality of our work, so that He owes us. The grumbling dawn workers embody this, and Jesus rebukes it. On the other side is the error of cheap grace or faith only, the idea that God's grace asks nothing of us, that we may receive the gift while ignoring the call to come and labor. The parable quietly refutes this too, because every worker who received the denarius had first answered the call and gone into the vineyard. The church's settled understanding threads exactly between these: salvation is entirely a gift of grace, utterly unearned, and it is received through an obedient faith that responds to God's call.

Help your students feel both halves of this. The eternal life God gives is wildly out of proportion to anything we do; a denarius for one hour's work pictures a generosity that bursts the categories of wages and merit. No one labors their way into heaven, and the longest, most faithful Christian life still receives eternal life as a gift, not a paycheck. And yet grace is not a reward for staying idle. The workers worked. Faith, to be the faith that saves, answers the call, enters the vineyard, and labors. We are saved by grace through faith, and that faith obeys (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Then turn the lesson toward the heart, because this parable is finally a diagnosis of the spirit in which we serve. The dawn workers did their job and still went home angry, because a bookkeeping, comparing, entitled heart had robbed them of joy. Aim to expose that heart wherever it hides in the room, and to replace it with wonder at a Master who keeps seeking the unchosen and pays the latecomer a full day's grace. People who have truly grasped grace serve gladly and rejoice when others receive it too.

Question 1

Student Question:

Throughout the day the master keeps going back to the marketplace, again and again, to call idle workers into his vineyard (vv. 1–7). What does this repeated seeking teach us about God's gracious initiative in calling people into His kingdom, and about a God who keeps coming after those no one else has chosen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the rhythm of the parable: the master goes out at dawn, at nine, at noon, at three, and again at five. This repeated seeking is the first thing Jesus wants us to see. God is not a reluctant employer who fills His quota and locks the gate; He keeps returning to the marketplace, gathering in workers right up to the last hour of the day.

Draw attention especially to the eleven o'clock workers and their poignant answer: "Because no one has hired us." These are the overlooked, the passed-over, the ones nobody wanted. And the master seeks even them. This pictures the gracious initiative of God, who calls into His kingdom not the obviously deserving but anyone who will answer, including those the world has written off.

Tie this to the gospel's breadth. The call goes out to all, late and early, likely and unlikely. God takes the initiative; the workers did not come knocking on his door, he came looking for them. Salvation begins not with our search for God but with His search for us (Luke 19:10).

Apply it warmly. Some students feel they came to Christ too late, wasted too many years, or are too overlooked to matter. The repeated trips to the marketplace are good news for exactly such people: the Master is still going out, and He is still saying, "You also go into the vineyard."

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's gracious initiative in seeking and calling people (Luke 19:10)
- The universal gospel call, to the early and the late, the likely and the overlooked
- Grace that pursues those no one else has chosen
- Salvation beginning with God's search for us, not ours for Him

Discussion Prompts

- What does the master's repeated seeking teach us about God?
- Why does Jesus highlight the workers whom no one had hired?
- How is this good news for someone who feels they came to faith too late?

Question 2

Student Question:

The dawn workers began to serve with an agreement in hand and an eye on their wage. As you examine your own heart, do you serve God mainly out of gratitude for a grace you could never earn, or with a quiet expectation of what your service entitles you to? Where do you notice the bookkeeping creeping in?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question probes the spirit of our service. The dawn workers began with a contract and a calculation, and that bookkeeping mindset eventually curdled into resentment. The question asks whether a similar ledger runs quietly in the student's own heart.

Help students detect the symptoms of a wage mentality: feeling that God owes us an easier life because we have served Him, keeping mental track of our sacrifices, expecting blessing in proportion to our effort, growing bitter when obedience does not seem to pay off. None of this is gratitude; it is accounting.

Then hold up the alternative. Grateful service expects nothing and is therefore never cheated. It gives freely because it has received freely. Invite students to notice where the bookkeeping creeps in, not to shame them, but because naming it is the first step to trading the ledger for wonder.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Serving from gratitude versus serving for wages
- Symptoms of a bookkeeping heart: expectation, tally-keeping, bitterness
- Grateful service that expects nothing and is never cheated
- Trading the ledger of merit for wonder at grace

Discussion Prompts

- Do you serve God mostly from gratitude or with an eye on what you are owed?
- Where do you notice a quiet ledger of your sacrifices?
- What would change if every blessing felt like gift rather than payment?

Question 3

Student Question:

Every worker, whether he labored twelve hours or one, received the same denarius (vv. 9–10). What is Jesus teaching here about the nature of salvation as a gift of God's generosity rather than a wage calculated by our performance, and why is eternal life something no amount of labor could ever strictly earn?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens the central doctrine: salvation as gift, not wage. The decisive image is the equal denarius. The eleventh-hour worker receives a full day's pay for one hour, which by the rules of wages is absurd. That is precisely the point. What God gives is not calculated by our output; it is the lavish gift of His generosity.

Teach why eternal life can never be a strictly earned wage. The gift, fellowship with God forever, is infinitely beyond any possible labor, and the worker is finite, sinful, and indebted from the

start. Paul makes the contrast directly: to the one who works, wages are counted as his due, but salvation is not like that; it is a gift to faith (Romans 4:4–5). If it were earned, grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:6).

Show how this humbles everyone equally. The lifelong believer and the deathbed convert both receive eternal life as a gift, because neither could earn it. The longest, most sacrificial Christian life does not put God in our debt. We will all, in the end, receive far more than we deserve, which is the very definition of grace.

Be careful not to swing here into the idea that nothing is asked of us; that comes in a later question. For now, fix the truth that the prize is a gift. The workers did not earn the denarius by the hour; they received the master's generosity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as the gift of God's generosity, not a calculated wage (Romans 4:4–5)
- Eternal life infinitely exceeding any possible human labor
- If salvation were earned, grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:6)
- The lifelong believer and the latecomer both receiving a gift they could not earn

Discussion Prompts

- Why can eternal life never be a wage we strictly earn?
- What does the equal denarius teach about how God gives?
- How does this truth humble the lifelong believer as much as the latecomer?

Question 4

Student Question:

The eleven o'clock workers received a full day's grace for an hour's work. Be honest: does the thought of a deathbed convert, or someone who wasted decades before turning to Christ, receiving the same eternal life as a lifelong believer stir any resentment in you? What does your reaction reveal about your view of grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question targets the resentment grace can stir. It is one thing to affirm that salvation is a gift; it is another to rejoice when someone who seems far less deserving receives the very same gift. The dawn workers had no complaint until they saw the latecomers paid, and their reaction exposed their hearts. Ours can do the same.

Invite honest reflection on the deathbed convert, the prodigal who wasted decades, the notorious sinner who turns to Christ late. If the thought of them receiving the same eternal life

provokes any inner protest, that protest is worth examining. It usually reveals a lingering belief that we have earned something they have not.

Help students see that resentment of grace toward others is really a misunderstanding of grace toward ourselves. The moment we grasp that we too received infinitely more than we deserved, envy of another's grace becomes absurd. We are all latecomers compared to what God has given.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Resentment of grace shown to others as a symptom of misunderstood grace
- Examining our reaction to the latecomer and the late convert
- Recognizing that we ourselves received far more than we deserved
- Replacing envy of others' grace with shared rejoicing

Discussion Prompts

- Does the latecomer receiving the same grace stir any resentment in you?
- What does that reaction reveal about how you view your own standing?
- How does remembering your own undeserved grace dissolve envy of another's?

Question 5

Student Question:

Notice that no one was paid for standing idle; every worker who received the denarius had first answered the call and gone into the vineyard to labor (vv. 4, 7). How does this guard us against the error that God's grace asks for no real response, as though we could receive the gift while refusing the call to come and work?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question guards the other flank, against the error of cheap grace, and it is essential for keeping the lesson doctrinally balanced. Point out a detail that is easy to miss: no one in the parable was paid for standing idle. The denarius went only to those who answered the call and went into the vineyard to work. The five o'clock crew worked only an hour, but they did work.

Use this to refute the notion that grace asks nothing of us. Some hear 'salvation is a gift' and conclude that obedience is optional, that one may receive the gift while ignoring the call. The parable will not allow it. Grace is free, but it is not received in idleness; it is received by those who answer when the Master says, "You also go into the vineyard."

Connect this to the consistent teaching of Scripture that saving faith obeys. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works, and yet we are created in Christ Jesus for good works

(Ephesians 2:8–10). Faith that refuses the call and never enters the vineyard is not the faith that saves (James 2:17). The gift and the obedient response belong together.

Apply it plainly. The question is not whether our work earns the denarius; it does not. The question is whether we have answered the call and gone to work at all. Grace does not excuse us from the vineyard; it sends us into it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grace received through an obedient response, not in idleness
- Refuting cheap grace and faith only (James 2:17)
- Saved by grace through faith, yet created for good works (Ephesians 2:8–10)
- Answering the call to enter the vineyard as the shape of saving faith

Discussion Prompts

- What do we learn from the fact that no one was paid for standing idle?
- How does the parable answer the idea that grace asks nothing of us?
- How do the free gift and the obedient response belong together?

Question 6

Student Question:

Some of the workers spent much of the day “standing idle in the marketplace,” available but not laboring. Is there a sense in which you have been hearing God’s call yet standing idle, not yet truly at work in His vineyard? What would it look like to go in and start laboring this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes the image of the idle workers and turns it gently on the student. Some of the men spent most of the day “standing idle in the marketplace,” present and available but not laboring. The question asks whether the student has been hearing God’s call while remaining, in effect, idle.

Help students distinguish between mere attendance and actual labor in the vineyard. It is possible to be around the kingdom, to show up, to know the language, and yet never really to work, never to serve, give, witness, or invest oneself. Such a person has heard the call but has not gone in.

Then encourage a concrete first step into the work. The vineyard has endless rows: serving in the congregation, caring for the hurting, sharing the gospel, using one’s gifts. The point is not frantic busyness but genuine, glad participation in the Master’s work. Invite each student to name one way they will stop standing idle and start laboring this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between attending the kingdom and laboring in it
- Hearing the call yet remaining idle
- Glad participation in the Master's work, not frantic busyness
- Taking a concrete first step into genuine service

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a way you have heard God's call yet stayed idle?
- What is the difference between merely showing up and actually laboring?
- What is one way you could go into the vineyard and work this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

The all-day workers grumbled because they felt they had earned more than the others (vv. 11–12). Why is this sense of entitlement, the feeling that God owes us for our service, such a dangerous misunderstanding of our relationship with Him, and how does it poison both our joy and our love for others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question names the sin Jesus exposes most directly: entitlement. The dawn workers were not underpaid; they received exactly what was just. Their grievance was that the master's generosity to others made their own reward feel smaller. Beneath their grumbling lay the assumption that their labor put the master in their debt.

Teach why entitlement is so corrosive in our relationship with God. The moment we believe God owes us, every hardship becomes a grievance, every blessing to someone else becomes an insult, and gratitude dies. A servant who thinks he has earned his standing cannot receive anything as gift, and so cannot truly rejoice.

Point to the antidote in Jesus' own teaching: even when we have done everything commanded, we are to say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). This is not self-loathing; it is the freedom of knowing we are not owed, and therefore can be surprised by grace at every turn.

Apply it to the room. Entitlement hides easily behind faithfulness. The hardest workers can be the most prone to it, precisely because they have the most to point to. Help students see that long service is a gift to be grateful for, not a claim to hold over God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Entitlement as the belief that God owes us for our service
- How entitlement kills gratitude and joy

- The freedom of the “unworthy servant” who knows he is not owed (Luke 17:10)
- Faithfulness as a gift to be grateful for, not a claim to hold over God

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the feeling that God owes us so dangerous?
- How does entitlement poison both our joy and our love for others?
- What does it free us to say, “We are unworthy servants who have only done our duty”?

Question 8

Student Question:

Comparison was the dawn workers’ undoing; they were content until they measured their pay against someone else’s. Where does comparison creep into your walk with Christ, sizing up your service, your sacrifices, or your maturity against other believers? How has that comparison stolen your gratitude?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question isolates the trigger that undid the dawn workers: comparison. They were perfectly content with their denarius until they measured it against what others received. Comparison turned a fair wage into a felt injustice. The same dynamic quietly poisons many a Christian life.

Help students see the many forms kingdom comparison takes: measuring our service against others’, our sacrifices, our spiritual maturity, the blessings or trials in our lives against theirs. Comparison always ends badly, breeding either pride when we come out ahead or resentment when we come out behind. Either way it steals gratitude.

Offer the cure. The remedy for comparison is to fix our eyes on the Master’s generosity rather than on our neighbor’s wage. When we are lost in wonder at what God has given us, we lose interest in the bookkeeping of what He has given others. Invite students to name where comparison has stolen their joy and to bring that habit deliberately under the truth of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Comparison as the trigger that turns contentment into resentment
- The many forms of kingdom comparison: service, sacrifice, maturity, blessing
- How comparison breeds both pride and resentment
- Fixing our eyes on the Master’s generosity as the cure

Discussion Prompts

- Where does comparison creep into your walk with Christ?
- How has comparing yourself to others stolen your gratitude?

- What helps you fix your eyes on God's generosity instead of others' portion?

Question 9

Student Question:

The master insists, "I am doing you no wrong," and asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" (vv. 13–15), while the whole parable assumes the workers actually went and labored. How does this hold together the two truths we must never separate, that salvation is entirely a gift of God's grace that we could never earn, and yet that this grace is received through an obedient faith that answers the call and goes to work, so that we fall into neither the error of earning salvation nor the error of a faith that never obeys?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinally weightiest question, and it asks the class to hold together two truths that careless teaching constantly pulls apart. State them clearly at the outset: salvation is entirely a gift of God's grace that we could never earn, and this grace is received through an obedient faith that answers God's call and goes to work. Lose either truth and you fall into a serious error.

Take the first truth from the master's words. "I am doing you no wrong. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" The denarius is the master's to give, and he gives it out of generosity, not arithmetic. So with salvation: it is God's gift, sovereignly and freely bestowed, infinitely beyond what our labor could merit. This refutes the merit error, the proud bookkeeping of the dawn workers who thought their hours had earned them a claim. No one earns eternal life. If we could, grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9).

Take the second truth from the structure of the parable. Every worker who received the denarius had first answered the call and entered the vineyard. The gift was free, but it was not given to those who stayed in the marketplace refusing to work. This refutes the opposite error, the faith-only or cheap-grace notion that God's grace requires no real response, that one may claim the gift while ignoring the call to obey. Saving faith is never idle; it goes into the vineyard. As Paul says in the same breath that he denies salvation by works, we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (Ephesians 2:10).

Show students how to keep both truths without collapsing them. Our obedience is real and necessary, yet it is not the purchase price of salvation; it is the God-given response of a faith that trusts Him. We answer the call, we are baptized into Christ, we labor in His vineyard, and at the end we receive eternal life, not as wages we have negotiated, but as the lavish gift of a generous God. The worker still works; the gift is still a gift. The church has always insisted on both, against those who would make salvation a wage and against those who would make it require nothing.

Land the lesson on worship rather than calculation. The dawn workers did their math and went home angry. The right response to grace is not to compute what we are owed but to marvel that

the Master pays a full day's grace to those who could never earn it, and then to labor gladly in His vineyard out of love. Grace received rightly does not make us lazy or proud; it makes us grateful, obedient, and generous toward others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as the free, sovereign gift of God's grace, never earned as wages (Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Grace received through an obedient faith that answers the call and labors
- Rejecting the merit error: no one earns eternal life by the quantity of their work
- Rejecting the faith-only error: the gift is not given to those who refuse the call (James 2:17)
- Obedience as the God-given response of faith, not the purchase price of salvation (Ephesians 2:10)
- Grace producing gratitude, obedience, and generosity rather than laziness or pride

Discussion Prompts

- How does the parable show that salvation is a gift we cannot earn?
- How does it also show that grace is not received by those who refuse to work?
- How do we keep grace and obedient faith together without making salvation a wage?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the parable. Jesus gently exposed the bookkeeping heart and held up a Master who is generous beyond all fairness. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this story. What is the one change you most need to make this week, whether to lay down a sense of entitlement, to stop comparing, or to finally go into the vineyard and work?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers up the parable and presses it toward one concrete change of heart or action. The danger with a lesson on grace is that we nod along and walk out with the same bookkeeping heart we came in with. Keep the class on the specific.

Help students name the right step for them. For some it is laying down a sense of entitlement, releasing the belief that God owes them. For others it is repenting of comparison and the resentment it breeds. For still others it is simply going into the vineyard at last, trading idle attendance for real labor. Each of these is a definite, doable step.

Close by returning to the Master who keeps seeking and gives beyond all fairness. Remind students that the goal of this study is formation, not information. Invite each person to name their one step, and let the group pray for hearts freed from the ledger, content in grace, and glad to work in the vineyard and to see others welcomed in.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at a changed heart, not mere agreement about grace
- Choosing one concrete step: releasing entitlement, repenting of comparison, or entering the work
- Serving gladly out of gratitude for unearned grace
- Rejoicing when others are welcomed into the same grace

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one change this parable is calling you to this week?
- Is your step to lay down entitlement, stop comparing, or finally go to work?
- How can this group encourage you to live as one who serves from grace?