

The Parables of Jesus

Week 6: Grace in the Kingdom -- Matthew 20:1–16

It is still dark when the landowner walks down to the village marketplace. Harvest will not wait, and he needs hands in his vineyard, so he hires the first workers he finds and agrees with them on a denarius for the day, a fair and ordinary wage. They head off to the rows of vines, and the master goes back to the market. At nine in the morning he is back, and there are still men standing around with nothing to do. “You also go into the vineyard,” he says, “and whatever is right I will give you.” And off they go. He returns at noon, and again at three, doing the same thing each time, gathering up the idle and sending them into his fields.

Then comes the strangest hiring of all. At five o’clock, with only an hour of daylight left, the master goes down one more time and finds yet another group still standing in the marketplace. “Why have you been standing here idle all day?” he asks. Their answer is almost heartbreaking in its simplicity: “Because no one has hired us.” These are the leftovers, the men nobody chose, the ones who waited all day for work that never came. And the master says to them too, “You also go into the vineyard.” With an hour to go, he sends them in.

When evening comes, the master tells his foreman to call the workers and pay them, “beginning with the last, up to the first.” That order matters, because it means everyone watches what happens. The five o’clock crew steps up first, the ones who worked a single hour, and they each receive a denarius, a full day’s wage for sixty minutes of work. You can imagine the buzz running down the line. The men who started at dawn do the math and start dreaming of a bonus. But when their turn comes, they receive a denarius too, exactly what they had agreed to that morning. And they are furious.

“These last worked only one hour,” they grumble, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” The master’s reply is the heart of the whole parable. “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” And Jesus closes with the line that frames the story: “So the last will be first, and the first last.” Read this parable slowly, because it will gently expose something most of us carry without knowing it: a quiet bookkeeping heart that wants God to pay us what we think we have earned.

Group Discussion: The workers who started at dawn were not paid less than they agreed; they were paid exactly what was fair. Their complaint was that others received the same generosity for far less work. Why do you think God’s lavish grace toward latecomers can stir up resentment even in faithful, hardworking people, and what does that resentment reveal about how we secretly think our standing with God is earned?

Personal Reflection: Be honest about the spirit in which you serve God. When you give your time, your money, and your obedience, is it overflowing gratitude for grace you never earned, or is there a quiet ledger in the back of your mind, keeping track of what God now owes you? What would change if every blessing felt like pure gift rather than payment?

Read Matthew 20:1–16

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Ephesians 2:8–10, salvation by grace through faith, not a result of works, yet created in Christ for good works; Romans 11:5–6, the remnant chosen by grace, for if it were by works grace would no longer be grace; Titus 3:4–7, saved not because of works done in righteousness but according to His mercy; Luke 17:7–10, the servants who, having done all they were commanded, still confess they are unworthy servants who only did their duty; Matthew 19:27–30, the question of reward that sets up this parable, where the first may be last and the last first.