

Jesus' Parables in Chronological Order

Parable #34 — Matthew 20:1-16 — Workers in the Vineyard

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. ²He 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. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶About 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. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When 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? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don’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.”

Parable #34 — Matthew 20:1-16 — Workers in the Vineyard

1. What do you think of deathbed or death-row conversions to faith in Jesus?
2. Who is the best employer you have ever had? Why?
3. What wage was agreed upon by the landowner and workers early in the morning? (Vs 20:2) What wage was agreed upon by those hired later? (Vs 20:4)
4. What explanation did the last group of workers give when asked why they were standing around doing nothing? What else might they have been doing? How do you see this as applying to you or others today?
5. What did the landowner tell the foreman to do at the end of the day? (Vs 20:8)
6. Was anyone underpaid or cheated? Why then did the workers complain? Was anyone overpaid?
7. Does this parable make economic sense? Does it in any way fit with employers, unions, and government regulations in the world we live in? How do our cultural values resist the idea of grace?
8. With which group of workers do you personally identify—with those hired at 9:00 a.m., at noon, at 3:00 p.m., or those hired at 5:00 p.m.?
9. What's the danger of thinking of yourself as a responsible worker, hired early in the day? Why is it dangerous to compare your own situation with someone else's?
10. How does it make you feel to know that heaven will include murderers, child molesters, swindlers, and crooked politicians that put their trust in Christ only minutes before their death?
11. What would happen if God gave each of us what we deserve?
12. How can focusing on God's grace in our lives keep us from becoming jealous of others? In what way can you thank God every day for his grace in your life?

Parable #34 — Matthew 20:1-16 — Workers in the Vineyard
Leader's Notes

6. Observe that nobody was cheated! Not a single worker was underpaid. While it may be argued (based on human, subjective, economic comparisons) that some were overpaid, nobody was cheated. The complaint of the early workers offered no evidence of wrongdoing. It was a complaint born in hearts of jealousy, not objective reality. Some of them received less than they expected and many received more. We should rejoice in the good others receive.

The landowner had the right to “overpay” the late workers. He said “whatever is right you will receive.” He determined what was right, not based on ordinary human accounting, but grace. His overpayment of the late workers was his choice and nobody could argue he didn't have that right.

7. Jesus' story makes no economic sense, and that was his intent. He was giving us a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day's wages. No one was cheated; all the workers got what they were promised. But discontent arose from the scandalous mathematics of grace.

8, 9. Significantly, many Christians who study this parable identify with the employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as responsible workers, and the employer's strange behavior baffles us as it did the original hearers. We risk missing the point of the parable: that God dispenses gifts, not wages. None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell. (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*).