

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

1. Who is Jesus speaking to when He tells the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)? He begins the parable with the term “for”, what does this indicate?

Jesus is speaking only to the disciples. When He starts His parable with the conjugate “for,” Jesus is joining the message of the parable with the preceding thought.

In the preceding passages, the disciples witnessed the public teaching of blessing little children (Matt 19:13-15), and the public discussion with the rich young man (Matt 19:16-26). In the blessing of the little children, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like them, those who approach their faith with humility. In the rich young man, Jesus teaches that absolute allegiance to Him, not only entails the humility of a child, but also absolute self surrender. The rich young man’s compliance to the Law was worthless, because his priority on wealth trumped Jesus.

Most Jews believed that the rich would receive salvation, because their wealth testified to the blessings of God. Sharing this common view of the rich, the disciples are surprised. If a rich man, blessed by God, cannot be saved, then who can be? When Jesus responds with, “With people this is impossible”, Peter is troubled. While the disciples have made sacrifices, Peter is thinking in terms of deserving God’s favor.

Jesus assures His disciples with the promise of future blessings, but His response contains a gentle rebuke for their mercenary attitude. Others who make similar sacrifices will receive blessings that would greatly exceed any sacrifice that they may make, and “many who are first will be last; and the last, first” (Matt 18:28-30).

God’s grace must be approached with humility and self surrender. Yet the very idea of surrendering oneself may be contaminated with the ulterior motives of seeking reward, justifying worthiness, or inculcate an obligation. It is with this thought that the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is connected to.

2. What did the landowner offer?

Temporary workers were often hired during the harvest season, and work would usually begin at 6 a.m. The landowner offered 1 denarius (Roman coinage for one day of labor) to the following workers who started at: 6 a.m. (early in the morning), 9 a.m. (third hour), 12 p.m. (sixth hour), 3 p.m. (ninth hour) and 5 p.m. (eleventh hour).

Workers hired any hour after 6 a.m. would have expected less than a day’s wages.

3. How and why did the workers respond to their pay? What do you know of labor practices then and now?

Many people of the first century lived day to day, so Jewish law mandated that workers be paid the same day. In Jesus’ parable, the landowner paid the workers in an ascending order of hours worked; thus, the ones who worked the longest were the last to be paid.

By beginning the parable with a typical scene, Jesus’ introduction of atypical hiring and compensation practices focus the disciples’ attention on the workers who were hired first and worked the longest. These workers grumbled at the pay they received, because it was the same amount as those who worked less than a day. They pointed out in particular the unfairness of pay of those who worked for only an hour.

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4. How did the landowner respond to the workers' attitude? What does this tell you about the kingdom of heaven?

The landowner responds with three rhetorical questions:

The first addresses the fairness question, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?" There was no attempt to cheat or defraud the worker; the landowner paid the agreed wage.

The next rhetorical question addresses the legal right of the landowner to do whatever he wants with his money.

The third rhetorical question addresses the root cause of the grumbling. The workers were envious and jealous of the workers who worked 1/12 as long.

Because the landowner went out and hired unemployed men, the workers were beneficiaries of his grace; they received something (a job) that they wouldn't have otherwise.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a follow-up to the disciples' astonishment, "Then who can be saved?" (Matt 19:25) Peter himself was thinking that he was deserving of salvation (Matt 19:27). The reward of the kingdom of heaven, salvation, is not a reward based on one's good work and effort; it depends wholly on God's absolute sovereign grace.

References:

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