

Some Parables of Jesus Found in the Gospel of Matthew
A Study in Eight Lessons
Wednesday Evening Studies
Lesson Six

Matthew 20:1-16

Read the Parable of the Vineyard Laborers Together.

What's This About?

This is one of the most interesting of the parables of Jesus. What is going on here, we wonder? There have been many interpretations. Are the vineyard laborers the focus of the parable? Amy-Jill Levine wonders whether, in truth, something else might be the focus; something else might be going on in the story. Focus on the vineyard workers "allows the easy allegory that the landowner is God, and the parable becomes a lesson in how we are to understand the divine," Levine says. But, she asks, what if the story is "about real workers in a real marketplace and real landowners who hire those workers?"¹ Well, Jesus begins the story with the words, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (Matt. 20:1).

What Kind of Kingdom?

Here is another parable that promises revelation of God's kingdom ways. Those ways are radical. Stanley Saunders says that if readers are to observe the vineyard owner's way with the workers and be reminded of God's ways in the world, "we are brought face-to-face with a grace that undermines all human pursuits of personal merit and that subverts the world's most basic economic and social constructions." Indeed! The parable tells a story that ends with a day's pay for everyone, no matter how many hours each person was brought to the vineyard to work. It is a "peculiar justice," Saunders says. And surely God's justice does reach out "to the least, the last, the little ones, the children, the poor, the weak, and the suffering. God's justice consists of forgiving debts, restoring relationships, and making the creation whole."²

And yet...in this story of the vineyard owner and vineyard workers, there are unsettling relationships. Putting traditional interpretations aside, we might look at the vineyard owner in a different light. Is what he does and says positive? Or is it negative? Saunders says that "one point of the story may be that in the end the only person with any power is the land owner. The workers go in vulnerable and dependent and end up that way." What does that mean? "Power will always break down your community." That may be a message to the disciples, to us. The vineyard owner robs the day workers of their dignity by paying the ones who agreed to a full day's work the same wage as those who worked only an hour. "Even grace can be a weapon," Saunders says. The parable prompts us to consider: What is good? What is grace?³

¹ Levine, 214-215.

² Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*, 197, 199.

³ Saunders, B862 Gospel Parables class notes, July 2017.

Some Traditional Interpretations

Some traditional interpretations have connected this radical justice and love to God's ways of accepting the sinner who repents -- no matter when the repentance occurs: early in life, late in life, even just before death. There is nothing wrong with that interpretation; but there is no certainty that Jesus means that kind of interpretation.

But perhaps, some interpreters say, Jesus wants the story to illustrate the extravagant generosity that is typical in God's kingdom living. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous" (Matt. 20:15) [the vineyard owner says]. The vineyard owner made a contract with each worker. He "paid a full wage to those who might not have expected it. ... The only point that the workers could make about him was that he was generous to others," Levine says. And with that, the laborers learned that "the point is not that those who have 'get more,' but that those who have not 'get enough.' One does the work -- in the labor force, in the kingdom -- not for more reward but for the benefit of all."⁴

For those who lean toward this kind of interpretation, the parable might offer some interesting ideas for creating models for the neighborhood, the city, the country, the world. Might some modern-day disciples be inspired to imagine what is right and fair about a story that for so many readers has seemed odd and unfair!

⁴ Levine, 235-236.

Congregational Study of the Parables in the Gospel of Matthew
First Presbyterian Church of Natchez, Mississippi
Eight Parable Lessons for Adult and Teen Sunday Study
Lesson Six

Matthew 20:1-16

Parable of the Vineyard Laborers

Teachers: Read the parable together. Ask for any preliminary comments or questions. Then continue with the lesson.

Introductory Comments

Two extremes of the "advanced agrarian society" (William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, 73) appear in this parable: the rich landowner and the poor day laborers.

The rich landowners were powerful, of course. The peasant workers were not. Keeping that relationship in mind can help to draw out interesting questions as you read and discuss this parable.

The parable can be divided into two parts:

First, the hiring of the laborers takes place (20:1-7)

Second, the owner has the manager pay the workers, and the conflict takes place (20:8-15).

The Landowner Hires Workers

Once again, Jesus begins the parable with the words: "the kingdom of heaven is like..."; we know now that those words alert us to begin looking for ways the parable may be or may not be like what we imagine God's realm to represent.

The landowner goes out early to hire the first workers. They would have a full day's wage for a full day's work. The owner sent them to the vineyard to work. Two hours later the landowner returned to the marketplace to find more workers. He hired more and sent them to the vineyard, telling them that they would receive a fair wage.

The landowner made another trip to town, finding yet another group of workers; he hired them in the same way. Then he went at noon and at three o'clock; and finally he made his last trip to the marketplace at five in the afternoon! He asked those standing around there why they had not been hired. They told the landowner that no one had offered them work that day. So he offered to let them work the rest of the day for him even though only a couple of hours remained during the work day.

The Landowner Pays the Workers

So the landowner has numerous sets of workers in his vineyard! They have worked, variously, from an all-day schedule to a schedule of only a couple of hours.

The landowner tells his manager to pay all of the workers the same wage and to pay first, the ones who arrived last. When this happened, the ones who had worked all day were furious.

They pointed out that it was unfair that the ones who had worked only an hour or so should get the same pay that they did who worked all day.

But the landowner did not back down. In fact, he reminded the grumblers that he was paying them exactly as promised. "Are you angry because I am generous," he asked them. With that, he dismissed the grumblers.

Reflect on the Parable

1. What do you think of this parable? How does it make you feel?
2. What kind of contemporary story does it tell?
3. Whose side are you on and why?
4. Is it easy to decide who is right and who is wrong in the parable? Why?
5. What would you want to ask Jesus about this parable if you could ask one thing?

Lessons of Love and Hospitality in the Gospel Parables: How Jesus Leads the Church to Love, Welcome, and Serve Our Neighbors

Devotionals by Rev. Joan Gandy
Based on Parables of Jesus Found in the Gospel of Matthew

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am excited to offer devotional guides for your use during the eight weeks we will be studying Parables of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. These devotionals may be used by one person, two, a family of five or a room full of relatives and friends! The important thing is to use them faithfully, each week. Of course, have a Bible nearby, also!

The devotionals, it is hoped, may deepen your spiritual experience of reading and studying the beautiful parables of Jesus. If you are able, it is helpful to have a particular time of day when you devote yourself to reading and reflecting. Try to create a space where there are few distractions. Seek God's presence by devoting mind, body, and strength to listening for that divine voice to speak to you through Scripture and prayer. And be with one another, taking time to talk about what you are reading and feeling as you devote yourself to this informal worship time.

There are three devotional readings for each of the eight weeks we will study selected parables in Matthew. Choose the same three days each week to share these little devotionals in your family circle -- maybe Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Here is how the devotionals are arranged: In addition to a verse or two from the Gospel to guide your spiritual experience, there also is a verse from Psalms that helps perhaps to expand the meaning of the Gospel reading. The devotional concludes with a short prayer that you may read together. Then it is hoped that you will have your own family prayers together. If family prayers are not a habit you have cultivated, this is a great time to try that helpful practice. So: three times a week, devotionals are provided. Use them on whatever days you wish, but do try to enjoy the devotionals during the week designated if possible.

I leave you with these readings with a prayer that God will be with each one of us as we make this journey through parables together in the weeks ahead.

In Christ's love,

Joan

Week Six: June 3-9, Matthew 20:1-16
First Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (Matthew 20:1).

Psalms verse for the day:

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever" (Psalm 111:10).

The parable begins in the simple beginning! There is no note of controversy, no hint that the parable will be one that explodes into many meanings. Where is God's good word for you in this parable? What would Jesus have you take from it as you ponder the words while devoting your heart and mind to the comforting love of God upon your family? Whatever the message you find in the story today, you may be assured that God's love in Jesus Christ *can* be found here. Have the workers who worked the full day been abused? How can we pray for laborers in today's world whose days are very harsh but whose pay is hardly enough to keep them alive? In our world, we do see the deep divisions of wealth that are represented in this parable. Let your mind rove over the ways that these divisions cause injustice and unrest in the world today. Pray for God's guidance in how you might make a difference in such a world. Give thanks to God for his loving kindness and blessings. Ask God to keep you humble in heart and generous in spirit toward those who are not so blessed as you are.

Pray this prayer; then continue with your family's prayers.

Dear Lord our God, thank you for blessing us as a family. Give us a big heart to notice those around us who are working hard but struggling to make enough for their livelihood. Keep us ever mindful of how blessed we are. Send us out with grateful hearts to do the work in your kingdom that is waiting for us in this community. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Notes and Questions

Week Six, Matthew 20:1-16
Second Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us" (Matthew 20:6b-7a).

Psalm verse for the day:

"Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths" (Psalm 25:4).

How difficult it is for us to know what is going on in the life of strangers around us. We can be too quick to judge by appearances, can't we? Sometimes the person who is standing around without any work to do simply has not been able to find work -- or the work that is available is something that the person is not capable of doing. Having a heart open to the troubles of those around us is one of our calls from Christ himself. We cannot know all the answers. In fact, we don't know many answers at all when it comes to judging one person from another. Let us together seek to know better the homeless, sickly, weak, and forgotten people around us. And let us look with compassion upon those who are not able to find work. Let's pray together today that God will give us some role to play in helping unskilled, unemployed people in some way. There is someone who is looking for a smile only you can give, a pat on the back that can be only from your hand, or a helpful suggestion that might turn that life around. God bless you in your kingdom work.

Pray this prayer; then continue with your family's prayers:

Lord God, help me to be someone who makes a difference in the life of a stranger. Show me the way to someone who might need to hear something from me. Let me shine a light on the hard times someone is experiencing close by me today. Help me to help someone else. Amen.

Notes and Questions

Week Six, Matthew 20:1-16
Third Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15b).

Psalm verse for the day:

"From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (Psalm 113:3).

It is easy to be envious, especially of someone who has much, much more of something that we do -- money, material goods, friends, blessings. It is easy to be envious. In the parable, though, we are not sure how to figure out the landowner. Is he being generous? Or is he insulting the workers who came and did a full day's work for him? One thing we do know. The pay scale is odd. Still, we ask the question of ourselves: do we judge generosity based on how generous we can be? Do we criticize another person's generosity because their generosity is different from how we would offer a gracious gift? What we can do as disciples of Christ is to pay careful attention to what our Savior does, to see how his generosity is more of the spirit than of the material wealth. But, yes, certainly we are expected as Christ's people to be generous with our material goods, also. But today let's think of ways we might share grace, peace, faith, joy, and love, for example. Talk about this in your family. Make a plan to find a way to share one of those fruits of the Spirit with someone tomorrow.

Pray this prayer together; then continue your family prayers.

Generous God, teach us to be generous with our gifts, both material and spiritual gifts. Show us the way to go. Lead us in your truth and teach us. Take us to the place where we might help someone who needs to learn about your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes and Questions
