

Rev. Chris Christy

Sermon

Sept. 19-20, 2020

Year A / 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 20

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalms 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

### **The Landowner Parable**

**Have you ever given the Parables of Jesus a deeper thought? Lately I have tried to listen and read, at a deeper level, and think about what Jesus was trying to teach us. Many of us take what we hear and just move on never questioning the meaning behind what we are being told. The parables of Jesus make up a crucial part of the Bible. Jesus had the wisdom to simplify the profound spiritual truths he needed to share with humanity in the form of relatable stories that are easy to understand. A parable is a tale about a simple, common subject to illustrate a deeper, valuable moral lesson.**

**So, what is the meaning of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard?" This parable is found only in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) in response to Peter's question in Matthew 19:27: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Peter wanted to know what reward would be given to those who give up everything to follow Jesus. In response, Jesus explains this truth about the kingdom of heaven.**

**Jesus was particularly good at using tasks of the day for creating lessons having to do with the Kingdom of Heaven. As we reflect upon the lesson of the landowner and his hired workers, we learn that our Lord God Jesus Christ is the landowner. The land our Lord owns is the earth. The crop to be harvested is mankind. The payment promised each laborer, regardless how long they work, is eternal life. The wicked sinner who receives Christ, as their Savior, in their final breath of life will receive the same salvation as the lifelong Christian who has suffered much for their faith for years. For some, this may not seem fair.**

However, our life and salvation are our Lord's according to his will to give and not according to our will. Likewise, salvation is our Lord's to give according to his will and not according to our will.

Planting, maintaining, and harvesting vineyards in first-century Israel was strenuous work requiring hard physical labor in the heat of summer. Often, additional laborers were required to get all the work done. The owner of this vineyard went to the marketplace at the first hour of the morning (6:00 a.m.) to find workers for the day. His offered wage of one denarius, a Roman's soldier's pay for a day, was generous indeed. The workers in the first group were more than happy to work for the generous wage.

One thing I noticed right away was the landowner was not selective in who he hired. Anyone who wanted a job he hired. There was no application or interview process involved in the hiring or even questions of experience. Anyone the Landowner came across, was hired. All day long the landowner approached people without question of social standing or class, color of skin, race or cultural background, age, gender, or experience.

Finally, the last group of workers were hired at 5 p.m. to work only one hour. This man, who obviously represents God, was both fair and generous. To the first group of laborers he was fair, as he readily agreed to pay a denarius, the ordinary wage for a day's labor. The master could have paid workers what they earned according to hours worked, but he chose to pay them according to their need, not according to their work. He paid according to grace, not debt.

The parable focuses particularly on those workers who were hired at the eleventh hour. They were treated extremely generously, each receiving twelve times what he had earned on an hourly basis. Why did the landowner hire these laborers at the eleventh hour? Was it because an extra push was needed to complete the work? More likely, since Jesus was not teaching about Jewish agriculture, but about the kingdom of heaven, those eleventh-hour workers were hired because they needed to receive a day's wage. Laborers of that day lived a day-to-day existence. That is why the Law required land owners to pay hired men at the end of each day (Deut. 24:15).

To our materialistic minds, this is a very troublesome parable. It seems so grossly unfair. The last group of laborers were paid the same amount as the first even though they had worked only one hour, not the whole day long. From the point of view work and wages, that was a gross injustice. Need I say that those who started work at the beginning of the day were not enthusiastic about their pay. Their grumbling led the landowner to state the most important line of the parable, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Are you envious because I am generous?"

If we are troubled by the apparent unfairness of this parable, it is because we tend to identify with the twelve-hour workers. And the more committed we are to serious discipleship, the more apt we are to fall into the trap of envying those who enjoy the blessings of God more than we. By having each laborer receive the same wage Jesus revealed that the blessings of the kingdom are not determined by an individual's performance but by God's generosity. God's blessings are not earned; they are given.

So, what else could this Parable mean? Was Jesus recommending a crude form of communism? Or was he suggesting that we be ruthless exploiters taking every advantage of the workers? The parable has nothing at all to do with the money paid or the amount of work done. It is the kingdom of God - the absolute sovereignty of God's love which is at issue. The currency of the kingdom is GRACE, not coinage. Grace comes to us as the gift of God totally unmerited despite all our worthy efforts.

The operative principle in the kingdom of heaven is NOT merit but grace. We readily understand this principle in the context of our salvation. We know Paul's words: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. ...not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9), but many believers assume that we earn God's blessings by our works — apart from God's grace. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard, however, teaches us that not only our salvation, but also our entire Christian lives are to be lived based on God's grace. The parable also teaches us about two amazing qualities of grace: the abundant generosity of His grace, and His sovereignty in dispensing it.

In other words, we are all on equal footing with God when we have received God's forgiving grace. There can be no distinction made between anyone. Because of our salvation by grace alone, we are acceptable to God only because God loves us and Christ died for us, and for no other reason.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard teaches us many things but one great thing that it teaches us is that we as Christians cannot be envious about what others have or when they get saved. We should be overjoyed when someone gets saved.

The landowner, whose decision to pay all the workers the same, was an act of mercy—not injustice—represents God, whose grace and mercy are shed abundantly upon those of His choosing. "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Romans 9:15-16). In the matter of salvation, His grace and mercy are given to those whose self-righteous works could never obtain it. We are all sinful and "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), but His grace is sufficient to redeem all who believe. Whether God calls someone early or late in life to partake of His

grace, the glory and praise for our salvation is His and His alone and in no way amounts to unfairness. Just as the landowner has a right to do what he wishes with his own money, so does God have the right to have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

As I close today, I have a few challenging questions for all of us to think about.

- “What are you expecting your fair wage to be for your labors?”
- “Are we covetous or envious of those who seem to be blessed more for their labor than we are even though we know we have worked harder and longer than they have?”
- “Do we really believe that the wages that God has promised us are sufficient no matter what His Call upon our lives will require or has required?”

I believe that when we all get to heaven there will not be any room in our hearts for the petty things of this world anymore and what a blessing that will be for all of us!

**AMEN**