

The stories Jesus told.



Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Matthew 20.1-16 | August 20, 2017

Prepared by Rev. Curtis A. Bronzan
curtis@gspc.org | 562/493.2553 x115

I. Introduction to this Study

This week we continue our summer series The Stories Jesus Told, looking at a parable referred to as The Workers in the Vineyard. But is that what it should be called?

II. Connecting with One Another

When have you thought something was unfair? What did you do about it?

III. Study the Text

a. Read Matthew 20.1-2.

Like in Matthew 13.31, 33, 44, 45, and 47, this is a parable about the "Kingdom of Heaven." Recall that Matthew uses the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" instead of "Kingdom of God" out of respect for his primarily Jewish audience.

How do you understand that phrase "The Kingdom of God/Heaven"? Where is it? What is it? How can we be a part of it? How is it related to the church?

b. As will be implied later, the landowner starts out at 6am – the usual time for laborers to begin their day's work. Even today, travelers to the Middle East can "observe day laborers who wait beside streets or at street corners early in the morning to be hired by landowners or others who have work for them."

Have you witnessed a similar scene? Here in the United States or abroad? If so, try describing it to your group – or if you're working through this study guide individually, reflect on what it must feel like to be in the shoes of a day laborer.

c. A vineyard is a traditional symbol for Israel (see, for instance, Isaiah 5.1-7, Jeremiah 12.10, and Mark 12.1-12). Assuming that connection was Jesus' intention here, who is the landowner a metaphor for?

d. Read Matthew 20.3-5.

While the landowner specifically contracted to pay a denarius (a day's wages) to the first laborers hired at 6am, those hired at the third hour (9am), the sixth hour (Noon), and the ninth hour (3pm) were told that he would pay each "whatever is right."

What do you naturally assume "whatever is right" will be? Why?

e. Why don't you think the landowner hired enough workers at the beginning of the day? Surely he knew how much work needed to be done! Scholars have proposed a number of options:

- The work was urgent, requiring completion before the rainy season;
- It was a Friday and work needed to be finished prior to the Sabbath;
- The landowner was out to exploit the workers;

- The last workers didn't show up until later in the day;
- It makes a better story.

Carefully consider each possibility. Which do you think is most likely? Why?

- f. Read Matthew 20.6-7 aloud, in as many translations you have available.

The Greek term used at the end of verse 6 is literally "without work" or "unemployed." No negative judgment or implication of laziness exists within the text.

Why do you think they're still there? What must these "last hired workers" be feeling? Take some time to imagine the emotion they would have.

If those hired at 6am were promised a denarius for their day's work, what should those hired at 5pm – who work only an hour – get? Why?

- g. Read Matthew 20.8.

While modern readers of this parable could easily skip over this verse to get to the ending, recall chiasmic structure, where the meaning of a story is delivered right in the middle. This is that middle, which contains three surprises:

- The landowner has an estate manager! Which prompts the question, "Why was the landowner doing all the footwork through the heat of the day?" (In addition, notice that the landowner is now called "Lord")
- The landowner instructs his estate manager to first pay those hired last. It's been written, "Obviously, the master wants those who had worked all day to observe the grace that he extends to others." Again we should ask, "Why!?"
- The NIV reads, "pay them their wages..." But the literal Greek is "pay them *the wage*." In other words, they all get the same payment, a denarius.

- h. Read Matthew 20.9-12.

Imagine the tension building in the hearts of those hired first, as they watched the four later groups receive a full day's wages. How would you have felt?!

It's been said, "ambiguity leads to anxiety." In this case, ambiguity has led to anxiety and spilled over into anger! Is the landowner wrong? Why or why not?

- i. "'Equal pay for equal work' is a centuries-old understanding of justice. But that is not the issue here. This parable presents the overpaid, not the underpaid. The story focuses on an equation filled with amazing grace, which is resented by those who feel that they have earned their way to more." So is it amazing grace or infuriating grace!?

Does their reaction remind you of any other of Jesus' parables? Which one(s)?

- j. Read Matthew 20.13-16.

The word translated "friend" was "a general form of address to someone whose name one does not know." In other words, a polite title for a stranger. Interestingly, Arabic translations render this word as "You who are doing the shouting."

What do you think about the landowner's response? How would you feel?

- k. Similar to other stories Jesus told, this parable stops abruptly, like the Prodigal Son(s), the Good Samaritan, and others. Kenneth Bailey concludes that "the audience is placed on the stage and all listeners must finish the drama in the nitty-gritty of their own lives."

What do you think he means? How do you 'finish the drama in the nitty-gritty of your own life'?

- i. This parable is addressed to the disciples (see Matthew 19.23) and sandwiched between questions from Jesus' first disciples in 19.27 and 20.20-21.

How does this parable answer Peter, James, and John's questions to Jesus in the above verses?

- m. Arland Hultgren concludes, "The parable drives a wedge between two ways of thinking about the Christian life and one's relationship to God. The first way is centered on human effort, goodness, and working for the kingdom of God. That way of thinking affected even the great apostles – Peter, James, and John. And it has affected Christians ever since... The other way of thinking goes deeper into the gospel of God, a religious perspective that looks beyond the immediacy of human life to a larger picture revealed to us by Jesus. We cannot reason our way into it. It had to be revealed by Jesus in an outlandish parable. God's way with us is to make no distinctions. We are accepted and loved by God, and saved by God, not because of our efforts but purely by God's own grace."

Which way of life do you most commonly exhibit?

- n. Should this really be called the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard? Or something else? If something else, what?

IV. Pray

- a. Ask God to reveal the ways you try to justify yourself through human effort, goodness, and working for the Kingdom of God, instead of relying on His grace,
- b. Lift up those you know who have concluded that God is unfair, that they would see the beauty of God's grace for all people,
- c. Pray for the children and youth who are going back to school in the coming weeks, that God would use them on their campuses to point to His Kingdom.