

Workers in God's Shop

Matthew 20:1-16

In a former life I was a union steward and it was my responsible to make sure that what happened in this parable never happens in the shop where I worked. We demanded equal pay for equal work. But wait, let's look at this parable and see if it is really talking about the situation of millions of union workers.

To understand this parable we must look at its context and what was the reason for Jesus telling the story in the first place. A rich young man had come to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherited eternal life. Jesus ran through the basic Commandments and the young man stated that he had already been there and done that. Jesus then told him to sell what he had and give to the poor. Peter was quick to see the contrast between the wealthy young man and poor disciples. "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27)

Jesus gave the disciples a marvelous promise of rewards in this life and in the next. They would even share thrones when He established His kingdom. Whatever good things they had forsaken for His sake would be returned to them a hundredfold. In other words, they were not making sacrifices—they were making investments. But not all of the dividends would be received in this life.

However, Jesus detected in Peter's question the possibility of a wrong motive for service. This was why He added the warning that some who were first in their own eyes would be last in the judgment, and some who were last would end up first. This truth was amplified in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard or as the Word in Life Study Bible called the incident: Jesus and the Unjust Pay.

This parable may sound to us as if it described a imaginary situation, but this kind of thing frequently happened at certain times in Palestine. The grape harvests

ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came. If the harvest was not gathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour to the work.

The men who were standing in the market-place were not homeless, good-for-nothings, idling away their time. The market-place was the equivalent of the labor exchange. A man came there first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and waited until someone hired him. The men who stood in the market-place were waiting for work, and the fact that some of them stood on until five o'clock in the evening is the proof of how desperately they wanted to work. We can understand this story because there are so many people today who are unemployed and looking for any job.

These men were hired laborers; they were the lowest class of workers, and life for them was always desperately precarious. Slaves and servants were regarded as being at least to some extent attached to the family; they were within the group; their fortunes would vary with the fortunes of the family, but they would never be in any imminent danger of starvation in normal times. It was very different with the hired day-laborers. They were not attached to any group; they were entirely at the mercy of chance employment; they were always living on the semi-starvation line. Imagine they were working for minimum wage, so if they were unemployed for one day, the children would go hungry at home, and there was nothings left to save for a rainy day. For them, to be unemployed for a day was disaster.

This parable gives a vivid picture of the kind of thing which could happen in the market-place of any Jewish village or town any day, when the grape harvest was being rushed in to beat the rains.

The landowner went out early in the morning and hired men to work in his vineyard for the day, at an agreed price of one normal day's wages. Later, around 9

A.M. the landowner encouraged others in the marketplace to work in the vineyard, not for a stipulated wage but for whatever was right. The landowner employed more laborers about noon and at 3 P.M., and even some at 5 P.M. when only one hour was left for labor.

At 6 P.M. the landowner paid the workers, he began with those who had worked the shortest amount of time and paid each of them one a day's wages. When those who had worked the entire day came for their pay, they thought they would receive more than a day's wages. They had labored all day and borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day. They had agreed, however, to work for a stipulated amount and that is what they received (verse 13). The landowner argued that he had the right to do what he chose with his money. He reminded them they should not be envious of his generosity toward those who had labored only briefly.

First we must understand that this parable has nothing to do with working for our salvation. The day's wages can not represent salvation, because none of us works for our salvation. Nor is the parable talking about rewards, because we are not all going to receive the same reward. "And every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8).

The parable is emphasizing a right attitude in service. It is important to note that there were actually two kinds of workers hired that day: those who agreed to work for an agreed upon amount, and those who agreed to take whatever the owner thought was right.

Put yourself in the place of those workers who were hired first but paid last. They each expected to get a day's wages, because that was what they agreed to accept. But imagine their surprise when they saw the laborers who were hired last each receiving a full day's wages! This meant their own wages should have been twelve times as much!

But the 3 o'clock workers also received a full day's wages—for only three hours of work. The men last in line quickly recalculated their wages: four times a day's wages. When the men hired at noon also were paid a full day's wages, this cut the salary of the first hired workers considerably, for now they would earn only two day's wages.

But the owner gave them one day's wages each. Of course, they complained! But they had no argument, because they had agreed to work for this wage. They received what they asked for.

The lesson for Christ's disciples is obvious. We should not serve Him because we want to receive an expected reward, and we should not insist on knowing what we will get. God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve.

There is the danger of pride. "What shall we have?" asked Peter. This parable warned him, "How do you know you will have anything?" Beware of overconfidence when it comes to the rewards God will give, for those first in their own eyes (and in the eyes of others) may end up last! Likewise, do not get discouraged; for those who consider themselves "unprofitable servants" may end up first.

Beware of the danger of watching other workers and measuring yourself by them. "Judge nothing before the time," Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 4:5. We see the worker and the work, but God sees the heart.

We must also beware of criticizing God and feeling that we have been left out. The early morning workers did not rejoice that others received more; instead, they were jealous and complained. The goodness of the owner did not lead them to repentance (Rom. 2:4). It revealed the true character of their hearts: They were

selfish! Whenever we find a complaining servant, we know they have not fully yielded to the master's will.^{1 2}

There is more we can learn from this story about the Christian religion.

First Jesus is saying to them, "You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days others will come in. You must not claim a special honor and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All persons, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God."

There are people who think that, because they have been members of a Church for a long time, the Church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy. Such people resent what seems to them the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. In the Christian Church seniority does not necessarily mean honor. It may be that we who have been Christians for so long that we have nothing to learn from those who are late-comers to the fellowship of the faith.

Secondly this story teaches that no matter when a person enters the Kingdom, late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the midday, or when the shadows are lengthening, they are equally dear to God. The Rabbis had a saying, "Some enter the Kingdom in an hour; others hardly enter it in a lifetime." On this same note we can find comfort in the fact that sometimes a person dies full of years and full of honor, with their day's work ended and their task completed. But sometimes a young person dies almost before the door of life and achievement have opened at all. From God they will both receive the same welcome, for both Jesus Christ is waiting, and for neither, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 19:27

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:65

or too late. No matter when a person comes to Christ or how long they work in the Kingdom, they are equally dear to him.

Thirdly, we learn of the compassion of God. We know there is nothing more tragic in this world than a man who is unemployed, a man whose talents are rusting in idleness because there is nothing for him to do, no job to be had. In that marketplace these men stood waiting because no one had hired them; in his compassion the master gave them work to do. We know in our world and according to our sense of justice, the fewer hours a person worked, the less pay they should have received. But the master well knew that day's wage was no great wage; he well knew that, if a workman went home with less, there would be a worried wife and hungry children; and therefore he went beyond justice and gave them more than was their due. This parable reminds us if it is within our power everyone has a right to work and to receive a living wage for that work.

Fourth, we learn of the generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work; but they did receive the same pay. There are two great lessons here. The first is, as it has been said, "All service ranks the same with God." It is not the amount of service given, but the love in which it is given which matters. A person out of their plenty may give us a gift of a hundred dollars, and we are sincerely grateful; a child may give us a birthday or Christmas gift which cost only a few dollars but which was laboriously and lovingly saved up for—and that gift, with little value of its own, touches our heart far more. God does not look on the amount of our service. So long as it is all we have to give, all service ranks the same with God. However even more importantly is that fact that all God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.

Finally, we learn that God is looking at the spirit in which we do our Kingdom work. The servants are clearly divided into two classes. The first came to an agreement with the master; they said, "We work, if you give us so much pay." As their conduct showed, all they were concerned with was to get as much as possible out of their work. But in the case of those who were engaged later, all they wanted was the chance to work and they willingly left the reward to the master.

Peter asked: "What do we get out of it?" God wants us to work for the joy of serving God and our human beings. That is why the first will be last and the last will be first. Many a person in this world, who has earned great rewards, will have a very low place in the Kingdom because rewards were their only thought. Many a person, who, as the world counts it, is a poor person, will be great in the Kingdom, because they never thought in terms of reward but worked for the thrill of working and for the joy of serving.³

We have already been given the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus, let us rejoice in the privilege of serving our Lord with joy. Amen.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 221