

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace; **4** and to those he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. **5** Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. **6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’ **7** They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’

8 Now when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ **9** And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. **10** And when those hired first came, they supposed that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. **11** Now when they received it, they were grumbling at the landowner, **12** saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ **13** But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14** Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. **15** ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ **16** So the last shall be first, and the first last.” (Matthew 20:1–16, 2022 LSB)

BACKGROUND

UNDERSTANDING TIMEKEEPING.

The first mechanical clocks were invented in the 1300s, but minute hands were not added until 1680. About 5,000 years ago the Egyptians, Babylonians, Sumerians, and Chinese all settled on a 24-hour day, twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. Because the ancients did not have mechanical clocks, they used the position of the sun in the sky to

measure time. The 6th hour was when the sun was directly overhead, so the 3rd and 9th hours were when the sun was halfway up in the east or down in the west. This means that hours were not sixty minutes long but one-twelfth of the daylight. If you care about such details, there will be nine hours and twenty-eight minutes of daylight today, making each “hour” 47 minutes and 20 seconds long. On June 21st, the day with the most daylight, there will be 15 hours and 14 minutes of daylight, making each “hour” 76 minutes and 10 seconds long. So time really does seem to drag in the lazy summer days. At the Spring and Fall equinoxes, there are about 12 hours each of light and dark, and an hour is 60 minutes long.

UNDERSTANDING PARABLES.

As a reminder, Jesus’ parables are made-up stories that illustrate spiritual truth. Some are long and involved, and some are very brief, but they always have a single point to make. Jesus drew the parables from real-life situations; with a couple of exceptions (like the amount of debt the slave owes in Matthew 18) everything in Jesus’ parables was reasonable and possible. That is, He didn’t tell a parable about being able to fly and hold your breath indefinitely so you could go live on the moon. He spoke about a woman who mixes yeast in with dough or a man who sows seed in his field. Even when there is an exaggeration – like the man whose enemy sowed tares in his wheat field – the exaggeration is not outside the bounds of possibility. There are people who are so petty and mean-spirited that they would go out of their way to cause harm to someone else.

Matthew 20:1-16 is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s not a parable about how to pay workers or promoting socialism or the minimum wage. It is not about social justice. It’s about the Kingdom of God and the principle of grace on which the Kingdom of God functions. The Kingdom of Heaven is not just an opening line; it is like a high-strength steel chain that runs through every word from beginning to end.

UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLE

A man with a vineyard was in need of day laborers, most likely because of the harvest. So he very reasonably went to the marketplace at dawn to hire workers. (Matthew 20:1-2). They negotiated a good deal for themselves. A denarius was a day's wage for a *skilled* laborer. Harvesting in a vineyard would not be skilled labor. It required strength and endurance but not a great amount of skill. The landowner agreed to their terms, and off they went to work for the day.

At the third hour - midmorning – the landowner went to the marketplace and saw a group of men standing around idle (Matthew 20:3-4). He sent them into the vineyard. Instead of negotiating a wage, he promised to pay them what was right or just, and off they went to work. The same process is repeated again at noon and at midafternoon.

None of this would be particularly surprising.

The surprising thing happens at the 11th hour, just before sunset. The landowner returned to the marketplace and found others who had been waiting all day (Matthew 20:6-7). No one had hired them, so he sent them to work as well.

This is surprising because no one would hire workers at the end of the day. You might make a deal with men to work the next day. But by the time these men actually made their way out into the vineyard, very little of the work day would remain. How much could they actually contribute to the harvest? It would really only benefit them, and even then, they would only make a penny or two.

Why would someone not hire day laborers who made themselves available for work? Perhaps there wasn't enough work. Perhaps they were older or someone disabled, making them less capable of a long day of physical labor. And why had they remained in the marketplace all day? Clearly, their need for work was much greater than the landowner's need

for workers.

The landowner followed on their heels and, not long after arriving, announced that the workday was ended. He instructed his foreman to pay the workers. He specifically tells the foreman to pay the last workers first; this guaranteed that the first workers hired would see what happened. The 11th-hour men came to receive their pay and – to everyone’s surprise – receive a full denarius. Nothing is said about the pay received by the 3rd, 6th, and 9th-hour men. The first hires came up and also received a denarius, which created a conflict, which sets the stage for the meaning of the parable.

LAW OR GRACE?

We can all hear the first hires, can’t we? “That’s not fair! That’s not right! We’ve been out here all day doing the brunt of the work and enduring the scorching sun! We have earned more!” They became convinced that the landowner had badly mistreated them. Suddenly this great job they had for the day became a source of injustice.

Now, let’s not be proud; if we were in the position of the first-hour men, we would have reacted much the same.

What they wanted, and what we so often want, is what’s right, fair, and just. We want what we’ve earned. We think almost entirely in terms of wages, fairness, and justice. We do this in school: I did good work, and I deserve an A. We do this at work; I’ve put in the effort, and I deserve a raise or promotion. We do this in relationships; I’ve been faithful and reliable, and I deserve more consideration.

Now, God made us to be productive and to expect a result from our work. That’s part of the original creation. But our sinful nature has taken that expectation and twisted it and

made it ungodly. That's one reason that the 10th commandment is necessary:

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male slave or his female slave or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:17, 2022 LSB)

These first-hour men show their fallenness in their response. Without question, they coveted what the last-hour men received. They wanted *justice* which meant – think about this now – that others could not receive *grace*. If others received *grace*, they were not receiving *justice*. Putting it differently, God has to treat us all the same: we must all receive grace, but those of us who worked harder should receive MORE grace, which is an oxymoron.

THE JUSTICE AND GRACE OF GOD

The landowner is ready with a reply (Matthew 20:13-15). He singles out one of the men and speaks to him. He calls him “friend,” using a word that means a companion or partner. So the landowner is not angry with these men. He isn’t dismissive of them at all. On the contrary, they HAVE borne the bulk of the work, and it’s true that they have labored all day under the sun. He knows that, and he appreciates that. He’s more than happy to pay them, especially since they are getting what they have worked for all day long: “did you not agree with me for a denarius?” They did. They agreed to work twelve hours, trading their time and sweat for what amounted to a pretty good day’s wage. “Take what is yours and go.” Be happy. Be well. It’s yours. You’ve earned it.

18 For the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE IT IS THRESHING,” and “THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES.” (1 Timothy 5:18, 2022 LSB)

That’s the Law in a nutshell. You get what you earn. You get what you deserve. This was true for the blessings of the Law.

26 “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: **27** the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of Yahweh your God, which I am commanding you today; **28** and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of Yahweh your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by walking after other gods which you have not known. (**Deuteronomy 11:26–28, 2022 LSB**)

Both the blessing and the curse of the Law are wages that are earned by the people under the Law. Those who obey the Law of God earn His blessing; that’s the wage they receive. Those who disobey the Law of God earn His curse, His judgment; that’s the wage they receive.

Of course, by the time of the first century, it had been obvious that no one ever truly obeyed the Law. In part, that’s because the Law was really a pass-or-fail arrangement:

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (**James 2:10, 2022 LSB**)

And to be honest, no one ever stumbled on only one point of the Law.

Each person receives from God exactly what he or she earns:

23 For the wages of sin is death ... (**Romans 6:23, 2022 LSB**)

So if we demand that God give us what we have earned, we receive death and judgment. That’s what we earn by our sins. It would be wrong for Him to refuse to pay out our wages. That’s the Law.

It turns out that we don’t want what we have coming after all; we want what we don’t deserve. We want grace. The landowner went on to say to this man, “I wish to give this man

the same as you; is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?”

Here's the conflict.

On the one hand, we want God to treat us fairly and give us what we deserve. But in that case, God has the same right to receive what is rightfully His (our obedience and worship). What's more, God has the right to do what He likes with what belongs to Him. And since everything and every person ultimately belongs to Him, that means that He can do what He likes with us.

On the other hand, we want God to give us what we have not earned or deserve; that is, to show us grace and mercy. But in that case, it only follows that we would not talk about fairness or justice or what we have earned or what we deserve but be grateful for the blessings God gives us. And, we would not be jealous or covetous if He grants others greater blessings than He gives us.

When it comes to the good we've done, we want Law. When it comes to our sins, we want grace. But God doesn't mix things up that way; we receive one or the other. God measures out His judgment according to His Law. He measures out His blessings according to His grace.

Bringing it Home

Jesus finished the parable by repeating His words from Matthew 19:30, “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Remember, this is about the Kingdom of Heaven.

As far as biblical history goes, the people of Israel received the Old Covenant, the Law of

Moses. In Romans 3 Paul asks a question and provides the answer:

1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? **2** Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. (**Romans 3:1–2, 2022 LSB**)

Israel was “hired” first. God made a covenant with them; they had a negotiated deal with him. Life under the Law was strenuous, beyond question. In Acts 15:10, Peter calls the Law “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.”

The Gentiles came last. They had no advantage with God. They didn’t have the oracles of God, the Scriptures. What they did have was an unexpected promise:

7 What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but the chosen [the elect, both Jews and Gentiles] obtained it, and the rest [whether Jew or Gentile] were hardened; (**Romans 11:7, 2022 LSB**)

The blessing of the New Covenant is received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE” — **14** in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (**Galatians 3:13–14, 2022 LSB**)

The Kingdom of God does not belong to those who have worked for it because the history of Scripture shows that the only “wage” people deserve is death and judgment. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who believe in Jesus Christ, whether they are a Jew or a Gentile.