

The Eleventh Hour Workers

Matthew 20:1-16

A Sermon for Children

With Study Questions

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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 a 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 said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' ⁸ "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.' ⁹ And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' ¹³ But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take *what is yours* and go your way. 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 my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:1-16).

Another Question by Peter

What is a parable? A parable is a story about something we do understand to help figure out something we don't understand. The last parable we looked at was given by Jesus when Peter asked how often he should forgive. Here we see Jesus telling another parable that was a response to another question made by Peter. Peter is like the person in

class who asks all the questions you wish you had the guts to ask. Sometimes I wonder if the other apostles laughed or snickered or were embarrassed by Peter's questions.

This parable is right after the story of rich young ruler who thought he could earn his way into heaven by being good enough (Matthew 19:16). After Jesus taught how impossible it is to work our way to heaven by our good deeds, (but not impossible for God, Matthew 19:26), Peter asks what a lot of people might wonder – if there are any benefits to following Jesus and asks the question “**what shall we have**” (Matthew 19:27)? Peter and the other apostles had made a lot of sacrifices to follow Jesus and he wanted to know what he gets.

Jesus taught that those who follow Him would not only go to heaven, but even in this life would have good things.

So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s,³⁰ who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life.³¹ But many *who are* first will be last, and the last first (Mark 10:29-31).

Everybody in this room has been blessed in this life as a result of the faithful Christians who went before us. But what Peter didn't quite understand was that the blessings in this world should not be thought of as immediate or individual (since virtually all the apostles died for their faith). And the biggest point Jesus makes in this parable is that even though God may bless us in this life and with eternal life, it's not as if He owes us blessings.

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).

Hiring Workers

The landowner (God) is hiring workers (bringing people to faith in Jesus). The work Jesus speaks of are the things you and I do as Christians. (Ephesians 2:19).

There are times and places in history where faithfully working for Jesus cost people their homes and lives. Our works might include things like our time, finances, prayer, obedience and willingness to talk to neighbors about Jesus. It may also include things like:

Teaching Sunday school, helping organize and support the radio ministry or newspaper columns as outlets for the gospel message, organizing times for Christian brothers and sisters to sit, eat and fellowship with each other, working with our young people, making sure the lights in the church work, recording the message to give to others, organizing a time of prayer, leading worship, serving as elders, deacons and trustees to assure the proper functioning of the church, helping at the mission, organizing camps and dinners, caring for children whose parents are imprisoned, inviting people to your house for fellowship, keeping the church looking nice, delivering meals to those in need or it might be something nobody knows about—how you did something nice or said something encouraging to one of your friends.

Whatever they might be, our works for the advancement of Christ's kingdom should all be viewed as valuable and we should all, at some level, be working. That is what we, in accordance with the parable, have been hired for.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a 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 said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive' (Matthew 20:2-7).

A Fair Payment

In verse two we see the landowner agreeing to pay the workers a denarius a day, which would have been a standard day's wages. In verses three through seven we see the landowner hiring workers at other times in the day: the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour and the eleventh hour, promising to pay them a "right" or "just" or "fair" *dikaion* amount. This we would understand as people coming to faith at different times in life.

So we have in the kingdom of God, those who work their entire lives and those who only work for a little while at the end of their lives. Jesus might be talking about people raised in the church, in godly homes who seek to walk faithfully all their lives and those who started believing in Jesus as the retirement home when they were very old. Then we see payday.

Payday

So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first' And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day' (Matthew 20:8-12).

Some people worked all day and some people worked one hour and everybody was paid the same amount. So naturally the people who worked all day (even though they were given what was promised) complained.

Their complaint doesn't seem unreasonable does it? Say I promised my children five dollars to clean up the back yard and three of them worked all day. Then let's say the fourth one showed up and worked for fifteen minutes, and I paid them all the same amount. How do you think

the first three might respond? The Cedars of Lebanon could not withstand the gnashing of teeth by the first three, simply because I chose to be generous to the fourth.

Keep in mind that Jesus is answering Peter's question, which was (essentially) "what do we get for our work?" Jesus is addressing a mistake many people make. That mistake is that the person who has been a Christian longer and working for more years can somehow get God to a place where God actually owes us something. We can never make God owe us His blessings. God is not Chuck E. Cheese's, where we put in a certain number of tokens and He is required to give us ten skeeballs.

I may choose to pay my children for cleaning up the back yard, but they make a big mistake when they start thinking I owe it to them. When my kids start negotiating with me as if I owe them, the conversation usually goes like this:

Me: Can you please clean up the back yard?

Child: How much will you give me?

Me: I'll give you three dollars.

Child: That's not fair. You gave my sibling four dollars last week for cleaning up the back yard.

Me: But the yard was dirtier last week.

Child: (with an attitude) It's still not fair. You're not being fair!

Me: Pretty soon you're going to clean up the back yard and get nothing.

Child: Now you're being mean.

Me: I stand corrected, pretty soon you're going to clean up the back yard and get something...a spanking.

Jesus finishes the parable with this explanation.

But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take *what is yours* and go your way. 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 my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:13-16).

An Inconsistency?

The first workers received precisely what they were promised – there was no injustice. Secondly, the wages are determined by the owner since all things belong to him. Third, the envy they experienced at the blessings of another is addressed with a rebuke.

God is the owner of the field gets to do what he wants because the field belongs to him. Yet at the same time it does appear to be inconsistent with what Jesus taught elsewhere, that “**the laborer is worthy of his wages**” (Luke 10:7). The owner of the field may have the right to do as he wishes with his own things, but it still seems unfair.

This big problem here is that we don’t realize what we actually deserve.

A Sense of Entitlement

We think we’re entitled to God’s blessings because of our work – as if God owes us! We think this way because that’s the kind of relationship we have with people who aren’t God. When I pay for my groceries I have a reasonable expectation that the grocer will recognize my right to put them in my car, take them home and eat them. There is a person to person relationship which places a demand on us to be fair or just.

But the Christian should never think this way in our relationship with God. God can never, in any respect, at any time in heaven or earth be our owe us. There is nothing we can bring to God that in any way obligates God to shower His blessings.

If I work an eight hour day, my employer is required by the law of the land and the law of God to compensate me. But should God open the earth and swallow my place of employment along with my attending salary, He is in no way duty-bound to make up for what was lost. The man who cries for fairness with God is a man crying for judgment. For the only obligation God has toward man in order to maintain His own just character is to judge man. The text clearly explains,

He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished (Exodus 34:7)

When Peter asks, “what shall we have” and Jesus explains that those who follow Him receive untold blessings in heaven and earth, it should never be thought that we’ve somehow earned those blessings – doing so will cause us to question the blessings of others which appear might appear unduly generous when one considers how little they seem to work when compared to our own work. Such sinful and shortsighted thinking will make us frustrated and miserable. What we should know is that:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17).

Thankfulness to God

God does not give us what He owes us. And we should be thankful for that because the **“wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)**. No, God blesses us and supplies our needs, not according to what He owes us but according to **“His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19)**.

If God were to compensate us according to our works the wages would be death

For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4, 5).

We can never make God owe us anything, but in a certain sense, Jesus can. Later in this chapter Jesus will teach,

...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

When Jesus went to the cross of Calvary He paid a debt that we could not pay and the Father honored this ransom payment. And because of Christ and because of Christ alone those who follow Jesus find favor in the eyes of God and blessings from His hands.

Questions for Study

1. What is the context of this parable (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is a parable (pages 3)?
3. Is this parable talking about heaven? Explain (pages 3, 4).
4. In what respect are Christians to be laborers (pages 3, 4)?
5. Who do the different workers in this parable represent (page 5)?
6. Are the wages spoken of in verse 8 heaven? Explain (pages 5, 6).
7. What was the complaint of the workers (pages 6, 7)?
8. What is a common grievance about people coming to faith late in life? How would you answer that (page 7)?
9. Is Jesus being inconsistent when He says elsewhere that the labor is worthy of his wages (page 7)?
10. How does a sense of entitlement come into play (pages 7, 8)?
11. Does this parable teach that we don't have to be fair in our payment of others? Explain (page 8).
12. Can God ever owe man anything (pages 8, 9)?
13. If God were merely fair, how would that affect us (page 9)?

14. Discuss Matthew 20:28 and what that means to us (page 9).