

Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

FIRST THOUGHTS

Sometimes, we expect more for what we've done, and we begin to grumble and complain. We think we deserve better—maybe even from God. But God's values run counter to our natural way of thinking. He is a generous God who loves to give—even to those who don't "deserve" it. Truth is, none of us really deserve any grace from His hand. Thankfully, God does not pay based on merit. He gives based on His generosity.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Bible students also propose different explanations for why Jesus told this parable. However, since chapter 20 continues the episode of chapter 19, it is best to understand the main application of Jesus's warning as being to His own apostles to whom He had just promised great rewards in the future kingdom (Matt. 19:28).

Speaking for the other disciples, Peter pointed out their commitment to Jesus. They had left their old lives behind and wondered what it meant for their future (19:27). Jesus assured them that they would be rewarded in God's eternal kingdom. In that renewed era, they would sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28).

Jesus then shared that in God's kingdom, the values of this life are reversed. Those who think they are first will be last, while those who seem stuck at the end will be first (19:30). To impress this lesson on His disciples, Jesus told a parable called "The Workers in the Vineyard" in Matthew 20:1–16. This story describing the kingdom of heaven and its rewards ends with a similar note as 19:30, except in reverse order.

WORKERS HIRED (MATTHEW 20:1-7)

On a symbolic level, the owner represents God, while vineyards often represented Israel in Scripture (Isa. 5:1–7; 27:2–6; Jer. 2:21; 12:10). However, viticulture was common in ancient Israel, especially in the fertile soil of Galilee. That the landowner needed to return to the marketplace so many times to hire more workers suggests that his vineyard was large.

The story is set at harvest. The ripe grapes needed to be picked before they rotted or were damaged by a storm. Grape harvest was labor-intensive as each cluster had to be cut by hand. So the landowner **went out early in the morning to hire workers**. These were day laborers, who would gather in the local marketplace (v. 3) and wait to be hired. Going early suggests the landowner was looking for the best workers who were willing to give him a full day's work.

Being there early, the landowner had no trouble finding workers. He negotiated with them for the normal rate of **one denarius** for the day (Matt. 18:28; 22:19). A *denarius* was a Roman silver coin. With their compensation set, **he sent them into his vineyard for the day**. The landowner later returned to the **marketplace**. **About nine in the morning** means "about the third hour." The Jews began their day at sunrise, approximately 6 a.m.

On returning to the marketplace, the landowner **saw others standing . . . doing nothing** (literally "without work"). The narrative does not record any negotiation for their pay. The landowner simply promised to **give you whatever is right** (that is, something "just" or "fair"). Three more times the landowner returned to the marketplace looking for workers: **about noon** ("about the sixth hour"), **about three** ("about the ninth hour"), and **about five** (literally, "about the eleventh hour")

The case is different with those hired about five because the landowner saw them **standing around**. When he asked why they had been standing there all day, they told him that **no one hired us**. While these men clearly wanted work, their response may hint that they were the most undesirable of workers. Still, the landowner decided to give them a chance—**you also go into my vineyard**, the same words he used to those he hired in verse 4.

EQUALLY PAID (MATTHEW 20:8-12)

When evening came, the 12-hour workday ended. The owner of the vineyard can also mean “the lord” (kurios). Highlighting kurios at this turning point in the parable reminded Jesus’s disciples that the owner represented God.

A foreman supervised the property for the owner. At the end of the day, the owner told his foreman to gather the laborers and to give them their pay. The foreman was instructed to distribute the wages **starting with the last and ending with the first**. It is not clear if this practice was unusual or not, but it certainly aligns with the point of Jesus’s parable and with Jesus’s sayings in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16.

The workers **hired about five** had worked only one hour, with no guarantee regarding pay (v. 7). Given that, they must have been incredibly surprised when **each received one denarius**—a whole day’s pay! The groups hired at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. are not essential to the story, but we can assume that they all received a denarius as well. When the time came to pay the workers hired at 6 a.m., **they assumed they would get more** for a full day’s work. However, **they also received a denarius**. But because they were paid in reverse order, their expectations began to build to the point of entitlement. As a result, **they began to complain to the landowner**.

The men hired earliest in the day felt they had been treated unfairly—even though they had agreed to work for a denarius in verse 2. Once they saw that those who had **put in one hour** were **made . . . equal to us**, they felt the injustice of the situation. Their attitudes were heightened by **the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat**. These workers were resentful that those who had only done what they considered an insignificant amount of work received the same privilege as those who worked a full twelve-hour shift.

GRACE EXEMPLIFIED (MATTHEW 20:13-16)

One grumbler acted as the spokesperson for the group, so the owner addressed his response **to one of them**. The landowner called the man **friend**, perhaps because he didn’t know the man’s name. However, the term is not a positive one in Matthew’s Gospel, where it is used elsewhere to distance individuals from those who are in the wrong (22:12; 26:50). In this case, the landowner did not argue or seek to refute the man’s facts. There was no reason to dispute that the 6 a.m. group had worked longer hours under unpleasant conditions. Instead, the owner first addressed the issue from the legal side.

He pointed out, **I’m doing you no wrong**. That’s because he had paid these workers the amount they had agreed on in verse 2. The owner’s rhetorical question, **Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?** expected a “yes” answer. The workers had agreed to that amount, and the owner had paid that amount. There was no injustice.

Unfortunately, the workers associated equality (v. 12) with injustice. They felt like they were being treated unfairly, but they had no legal ground for complaint. The owner also pointed out that this was a matter of generosity, not a matter of legal obligation. As the owner of the vineyard and the one who hired the workers, he could do as he pleased with his money. Specifically, he chose **to give this last man the same as I gave you**. The owner spoke of giving, not of paying.

The landowner’s second rhetorical question confronted the workers’ real problem. They were **jealous** because the owner was **generous**. The term jealous (literally, “have an evil eye”) includes resentment and stinginess. The 6 a.m. workers were angry about the good fortune of others. The reversed order of the wording (compared to 19:30) fits the flow of the parable. The last workers hired were paid first, while those who were hired first received their compensation last. These verses remind us that genuine grace costs us nothing, while the grace giver pays dearly. Yet, the ultimate Giver (God) always operates out of a generous heart. Second, God’s application of grace often offends a world that cries out for its own idea of “justice.”

Next Week – Authority, Matthew 21:23-32