

## The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

“When God Isn’t Fair”

By Kent Crockett

[www.makinglifecount.net](http://www.makinglifecount.net)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And when he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, ‘You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’

They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into the vineyard.’ And when evening had come, 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.’

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.

Thus the last shall be first, and the first last.”

(Matthew 20:1-10,16)

We might assume that a Christian who served God for many years would earn more heavenly rewards than a believer who only served a few. Suppose someone served the Lord for five years until his death at age twenty-five. Wouldn’t he receive fewer rewards than a person who had been saved for forty-five years and died at age eighty? According to our way of thinking, the person who died at a young age would have been cheated out of those years when he or she could have earned eternal rewards.

The parable of the vineyard workers solves the problem of differing life spans. Remember that each of Jesus’ parables emphasized a different point. The parable of the unrighteous steward tells us we need to wisely use our money so that we can be received into eternal dwellings. The parables of the talents and minas pointed out the importance of accountability and faithfulness. Now the parable of the vineyard workers deals with the issue our length of service for the Lord during our lifetimes.

Parable	Theme
Unrighteous Steward	Wise use of money
Talents	Ability and accountability
Minas	Faithfulness of stewardship
Vineyard Workers	Length of service

In this story, the landowner hired several groups of people at different times during the day to work in his vineyard. Those who were hired earliest worked the entire day. Those

hired at noon worked for half a day, and the workers hired at 5:00 p.m. only worked one hour. The different times of the day when they were hired represent the different lengths of time that people serve the Lord during their lives on earth.

The laborers hired at 6:00 a.m. signify those who are saved at an early age and serve the Lord for many years. Those hired at 5:00 p.m. represent people who didn't serve the Lord very long during their lifetimes. This could be someone who was saved at a young age and only had a short time to serve God before he or she died, or it could be a person who was saved late in life.

This parable couldn't be talking about gaining eternal life because we cannot work to earn salvation. However, there is a correlation between our labor and our rewards. Our work starts counting toward eternal rewards from the moment of our salvation onward, but not before. Therefore, the service of the laborers deals with the length of time serving the Lord, not necessarily the length of time lived on earth.

For our purposes, let's suppose the time each group worked can be translated into years of service for the Lord. The chart below shows how the hours worked for one day could be stretched into years of service during a lifetime.

<b>Hour hired</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Approximate Years of Service</b>
Early	6:00 a.m.	45 years
3 <sup>rd</sup> hour	9:00 a.m.	35 years
6 <sup>th</sup> hour	12:00 noon	25 years
9 <sup>th</sup> hour	3:00 p.m.	15 years
11 <sup>th</sup> hour	5:00 p.m.	5 years

The person who serves the longest doesn't necessarily receive the greatest reward. Jesus told this story to show that God doesn't measure our work by the hands of a clock. We don't punch in and out on a time clock and turn in all our time cards on the judgment day.

The fact that each vineyard worker received the same amount of money does not mean that everyone will have the same rewards in eternity. That would contradict the teaching of the parable of the minas, where the slaves received different rewards according to their faithfulness of service. Certainly there are some people who perform more work in three years than others who work thirty. Those who are more faithful in their service will receive greater rewards than those who are unfaithful.

Frederick the Great was once asked to promote an officer simply because he had been in the army for so long. The Prussian king pointed to his pack mule and replied, "That mule has carried my pack for twelve years, but he is still a mule."

Just because a person serves for a long time doesn't mean he deserves a reward. Perhaps he hates his work and continually complains about his employer, or maybe his work is poor quality. These factors would cancel out any reward he might receive. Faithfulness of service and attitude of heart may be of greater importance to God than the actual length of time we served. Are we working for our own recognition, or for the glory of God?

Although some could serve God for many years, they don't make the most of their opportunity. Instead of pleasing God with their lives, they live to please themselves. Their

length of service becomes meaningless in such cases. God doesn't pass out rewards simply on the basis of how long you have been a Christian.

### Paying the Workers

The landowner paid each worker at the end of the day, the last group being the first to receive their wages. If the men who were hired first had been paid first, they would have taken their wages and gone home, not knowing what the others received. Since they were the last to receive their wages, they watched the laborers who only worked one hour get paid a denarius—the regular wage for an entire day's labor.

The laborers who worked early in the morning assumed they would receive more than the one-hour laborers because they worked eleven hours longer. But the landowner also paid them each a denarius. All the vineyard workers were paid the same amount, no matter how long they worked.

That doesn't seem fair for a couple of reasons. First, the ones who worked the shortest were paid first, while those who worked the longest were paid last. Certainly justice would demand that the group hired first deserved to be paid first because of their many hours of labor in the hot sun.

Second, the ones who worked one hour were paid the same amount as those who worked twelve hours. This looked like an injustice to those who worked all day. It wasn't fair that the one-hour laborers got paid so much for so little work.

Grace and generosity, however, are never fair. They are *better* than fair. When God isn't fair, He is generous. His generosity always reaches beyond fairness, and His grace beyond justice. The landowner demonstrated his grace and generosity by overpaying those who worked so few hours. While the parable of the minas highlights the faithfulness of the worker, the parable of the vineyard workers emphasizes the generosity of the employer.

<b>Parable of the Minas (Luke 19)</b>	<b>Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matthew 20)</b>
Each given the same at the beginning	Each rewarded the same at the end
Different degrees of faithfulness	Different lengths of service
Emphasizes the faithfulness of the worker	Emphasizes the generosity of the employer

When the last group received the same pay as the others, they complained against the landowner instead of thanking him. They thought they deserved more because they worked much longer than those hired at the end of the day. They forgot that just twelve hours earlier they had contracted to work for one denarius. Both employer and employee shook hands on that fixed amount, so they had no excuse for complaining about what they received.

Many people today agree to work for a certain wage, yet complain against their bosses if their fellow employees work less or are paid more. Like the laborers hired at 6:00 a.m., they are envious of others' wages rather than thankful for their own. It's hard to be grateful when you are envious. We must never forget that we are always working for a higher authority than our earthly employers. We are serving our Master in heaven.

The laborers who were hired later in the day didn't agree for a fixed amount before they went to work. Instead, they trusted in the landowner's generous heart and left the amount of their pay up to him.

That is a lesson for us as we serve our Master. We don't need to worry about the amount we will be rewarded for our labor, but simply need to trust in God's grace. No matter how or when we receive our rewards, God will be most gracious when he awards them to his children.

### **The Last Shall be First and the First Last**

When Jesus told his disciples the "first will be last and the last first" in Matthew 19:30, he spoke of *importance*. He meant many well-known people in this life will be at the bottom in the next, and many unknown people in this life will be in the highest positions in heaven. On the judgment day many will go from fame to shame, while others will go from shame to fame (1 Cor. 4:9-13).

But when Jesus said "the last shall be first and the first last" in the parable of the vineyard workers, he explained the order of being paid on the judgment day. Jesus turned the phrase in Matt. 19:30 around to make a different point. The first and the last in Matthew 20:16 pertains to *timing*, not notoriety. The workers who were hired last were paid first, and those who were hired first were paid last.

<b>Different Verses</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
"First will be last and the last first" (Matt. 19:30)	First and last in prominence
"Last shall be first and the first last" (Matt. 20:16)	First and last in receiving rewards

What is the significance of this? On the judgment day God will reward those who have served Him the shortest time first and those who served the longest last. God's kingdom works exactly opposite from this world, where we would reverse the order.

Might this have something to do with our job assignments in the kingdom of heaven? We don't know for certain, but God has His reasons for distributing the rewards in this way.

The parable of the vineyard workers teaches us that God desires to graciously reward those who faithfully serve Him. Don't compare your service for the Lord with anyone else's, for we are all working to please our Master. There is no room in heaven for envy. It will be exciting to see our brothers and sisters in Christ rewarded for serving the Lord and the jobs that will be assigned to each in God's eternal kingdom.

Now aren't you glad that God isn't fair?

Making Life Count Ministries  
 P.O. Box 680174  
 Prattville, Alabama 36068  
[www.makinglifecount.net](http://www.makinglifecount.net)