

## Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday – Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." We can picture this scene in the story our Lord tells: a vineyard owner needs more labor force in order to complete the work he needs done. Maybe it was harvest season and the grapes needed to be gathered, or the vines needed to be pruned, or the soil needed to be turned and watered. Whatever the case, the vineyard owner heads to a special corner of the village market where the unemployed assembled each day to find a job – any job, even if only for just one day. If they could make 1 denarius (the standard wage for a day's work), it would put their anxious wives' worries to rest, bring food to their hungry children, and turn disappointment into joy. In this public place many employers could find such eager workers. So it was incumbent upon these numerous working men to present themselves as the best possible candidates to be hired. They rushed to the employers to show themselves as young and strong, or to accentuate whatever attributes would put them ahead of the pack.

So this particular vineyard owner arrives to the scene to find his laborers. He hires some and enters into a verbal contract with them: a denarius for a day of work, the standard wage. Then he sends them off to his vineyard. About 3 hours later, the owner returns to the market corner to hire more workers. He also enters into a slightly different verbal contract with them saying, "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right (Grk "Dee-kai-os" – also the root of the word "righteousness"), I will give you. So these ones also went to the vineyard. Again, the vineyard owner returned to hire more men around noon and around 2 or 3 in the afternoon. He gave them the same verbal contract: "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right, I will give you."

Let's take a moment and reevaluate the scene at the marketplace: the best, the brightest, the strongest men have already been chosen, surely by the early morning. Other good workers have been taken sporadically throughout the morning. By noon, we can imagine, the eagerness and hope which burned inside these leftover workers had been quenched to despair. They begin to imagine going home again with bad news of another day of frustration and disappointment. Remember, this is a completely public setting: employers probably aren't looking for workers as the day rolls on. The passersby now look with pity upon these unemployed men. No one would hire them. Much like the last boy chosen for a kickball game, their humiliation was now tantamount.

But that's not us, so we think. We're working in the vineyard! We're in the kingdom! Pitiably? Not me! I can prove it! I'm saved by grace! But has that grace become cheap to us? Are we not still sinners? When is the last time that we've sat down and actually apologized to someone for what we've thought, said, or did? When is the last time we've confessed that actual sin to God? Are we not pitiably? Are we not last?

So now it's around 4 o'clock – almost quitting time. The owner makes one last trek to the market place to see if any workers still remain. Indeed, some remained there still hoping for work and wage. The vineyard owner didn't want to heap further humiliation upon their heads. He could have gave them a denarius there on the spot and said, "Go, buy some food for your families." But he didn't want them to be further humiliated by a handout. So he gave them nothing more than this command: "You go into the vineyard too." This last group was different than the rest. They had no promise of a denarius. They didn't even have they promise of receiving what was right or just for their labors! *They had nothing!* These last laborers had only the words of a vineyard owner with unspecified, or perhaps, *no* compensation. They didn't merely trust what the owner said (or didn't say), they trusted the man himself.

And that's when we start to realize that this is no ordinary vineyard owner. For him, it's not about the vineyard; it's not about the work; and it's not about the wages. It's about his mercy and his compassion for all men. After all, our Lord began this story by calling it a parable about the kingdom of heaven. And you should know this – cement this in your mind: "The kingdom heaven" is always Jesus' (not so) secret code words for "How God forgives sinners"! Whenever you hear this phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." the alarm needs to go off in your head that the Lord is telling you how He forgives sinners, even and especially sinners like us. With this in mind, let's find out how the story ends:

"And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the 11<sup>th</sup> hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, each of them received a denarius." So the last men hired, the ones who worked only 1 hour, received the same pay as the men who worked the whole day through. It's not fair. And all those full-day workers were determined to show this vineyard owner's injustice and wickedness. They hated him. But for the vineyard owner, this could have been easily avoided: he could have chosen to pay the first laborers first. They would have received their denarius and went on their way, filled with joy after a hard day's work. Then, each subsequent worker could be overjoyed by receiving a full day's wage for a part day's work. In this way, the owner would have avoided any confrontation that could ensue from his generosity or "unfairness." But he reversed the order of payment. Why? Why put himself through all this trouble? The reason? So that all would see that his righteousness was not based upon justice, but upon mercy and compassion.

"Not fair!" the early laborers shouted. "We should receive more!" But this isn't the cry of the underpaid. No one is underpaid in this parable. The vineyard owner fulfilled his verbal contract with the workers for a denarius a day. The complaint comes from the justly paid who cannot tolerate grace! They shout, "You have made them equal to us! These unemployed scum – who no one else would hire – you have made them the same as us. We worked all day and endured its scorching heat and wind!" To their market-oriented minds, their worth as human beings is directly related to how much they get paid. So the vineyard owner's grace is not only wonderful, it's also – for certain types – *infuriating!*

And are we not also numbered among those infuriated certain types? We've kept the law (so we think) and that puts us above others. So also we construct the "myself-o-meter" which others should live up to. If they don't live up to "myself" and what I would do, than they're certainly not as good as me. Sure, I haven't kept the law, but I've done a whole lot better than them!

So how does the vineyard owner respond to such ungrateful laborers? We can paraphrase: "You have no complaint! Justice is served! I have given you what I agreed to pay you. You are free to do what you like with what is yours! And am I not free to do what I like with what is mine? I chose to pay these men a living wage. You will be able to go home to your wives and your children and proudly announce that you found work and have a full day's pay. I want these other men to be able to walk in the doors of their houses with the same joy. I want their children and wives to be as proud of them as yours are of you ... So you worked through the whole day, did you? That's fine. And what do you think I was doing during the middle of the day? Taking a nap? No, I was on the road to and from the market, showing compassion to men like you in need of employment. I, the owner of this vineyard, I myself journeyed to alleviate the suffering of poor unemployed men. Why are you jealous of them? Why are you angry at me? You must understand that I am not only just and right—I am also merciful and compassionate, because mercy and compassion are the heart of true righteousness! ... You think you should receive more than a denarius. *You* want more for yourselves. *I* have chosen to give more of myself. *You* want to be richer at the end of the day. *I* have chosen to be poorer at the end of the day. Don't you try to control me! You take your earned wage and get out!"

We are all beggars before our Lord, this is true. We are all beggars before our Lord and we are entitled to nothing. The gift of forgiveness and eternal life is always given to us and never earned by us. We can never earn God's forgiveness! No works of ours can appease our Lord! And yet, the Lord continually gives us His denarius, by no merit of our own: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit ... I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... Take, eat; this is my Body, Take, drink; this is My Blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." From the smallest infants, to the most aged, to everyone in between: the Lord forgives you by grace. So rejoice in Christ your Savior whose righteousness is built upon mercy and compassion for you. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠

*Much of the content of this sermon was taken from the observations of Dr. K. E. Bailey in his book Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes Intervasity Press, 2008, pp. 355-64.*