

## Pentecost Study 17

### Matt 20:1-16 Parable of the Vineyard Workers NLT

**20** "For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay the normal daily wage<sup>[a]</sup> and sent them out to work. **3** "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. **4** So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. **5** So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. **6** "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?' **7** "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.' "The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

**8** "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. **9** When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. **10** When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. **11** When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, **12** 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.' **13** "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? **14** Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. **15** Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?' **16** "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Q.1. Jesus spoke a lot about the 'kingdom of heaven (God)' e.g. v.1. What did he mean by the phrase? For background see 1 Sam 13:13f; Isa 9:7 Dan 6:26f, 7:18ff. To what is it compared to in this story?

Q.2. The landowner hires labours to work in his field at 6am for a day's wage. What is their expectation for payment at 6pm? What changes their expectations v.10?

Q.3. Speculate, why did the landowner hire more workers at 9am, noon, 3pm and 5pm? He promised to pay each group 'what was right at the end of the day' v4. What would have been each group's understanding of that promise?

Q.4. Why are identical wages given to all the workers?

Q.5. The all-day workers are 'jealous' of the 'one hour' workers and complain vv.10-12; what are 3 possible problems they had?

Q.6. In Matt 19:30 & 20:16 Jesus gives a riddle. What does it mean and how might it help us understand the story?

Q.7. Thinking more broadly in Jesus' mind who might the 5pm workers represent?

Q.8. How is the landholder like God?

#### **Application: for reflection, prayer and action**

Q.9. Do you think the landowner's practice is unjust, generous or both? Why?

Q.10. If you had been hired first how would you have reacted to the outcome?

Q.11. If you had been hired last how would you have felt about the outcome?

Q.12. What is grace and how does this story illustrate it?

## **Matt 20:1-16 (my suggested answers)**

**NB.** Please answer the questions yourself. We all have different ways of answering; God may give you greater insights than mine. Put '*John thinks*' ... before each answer.

A.1. The small phrase 'kingdom of heaven (God) is best understood as 'the kingship of God' = the sovereign, gracious and saving rule of Israel's God, revealed in the teaching, miracles and ministry of Jesus. In this story Jesus compares it to the actions of the generous, gracious landowner who offers much to the undeserving.

A.2. The all-day workers were hired with the knowledge they would receive a day's wage. This only changed when they noticed that the last-hour workers received the same amount. Then they expected to be paid more.

A.3. The landowner may have had 2 reasons for hiring the later workers: i. there was plenty of work to be done – the more workers the better; ii. being kind he may have wanted to contribute to the later-hired worker's life, family and village.

A.4. This is the mystery and gracious generosity of the landowner.

A.5. The all-day workers are upset because they toiled all day and were paid the same amount as those who only toiled for an hour. They had 'misguided expectations' (money is their motive); they lacked 'gratitude' for the wage they did receive; and they divided life into 'us and them' - instead of rejoicing with all the other workers. They lacked empathy.

A.6. 'The first will be last and the last first' or similar, seems to be a constant saying of Jesus in lots of different contexts. Here he is probably warning the disciples not to expect the '1<sup>st</sup>' or best spots in the kingdom – rather be servants who gratefully and humbly work for a great cause.

A.7. The 5pm workers may represent late-comers to the kingdom (followers of Jesus), i.e. those who come to him well after the 12 disciples. This may hint at the gracious 'late' inclusion of Gentiles see Matt 28:19f. Paul says the Gospel is 'to the Jew first, but also to the Gentile' Rom 1:16f etc.

A.8. The landholder is like God in being generous and gracious to all who want to be a part of his kingdom/work-force. Late-comers are welcomed

A.9. Your answer. He is certainly generous to the late-workers – this could be considered unfair to the earlier workers only if they let jealousy rule in their hearts.

A.10. Your answer. I probably would have been a bit upset; not at what I got but at what the late-workers got (undeserved).

A.11. Your answer. I would have rejoiced and been extremely grateful

A.12. Grace is undeserved favour or kindness – given freely with no strings attached. It is illustrated by the landowner (God) who graciously gives his blessing to all who seek it, even late-comers (the least deserving). This is so often illustrated in Jesus' care for the marginalised (sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans etc)

Today this may be anyone we think of as 'them' over against 'us' (e.g. the homeless, refugees, indigenous people, immigrants, the mentally-ill ...)