

The Parables of Jesus #18
The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard
(Mt. 20:1-16)
Bill Denton

INTRODUCTION

A. Often, Jesus told a parable in response to an immediate situation

1. The story illustrated his teaching
2. The story illustrated a problem
3. The story illustrated mistaken ideas
4. The story illustrated that which people needed to understand

B. To appreciate a parable, it is sometimes important to look at context

1. The setting, people, questions, conflict or teaching is important
2. They help us relate the parable to the point being made

C. This is true with the parable we study tonight

1. Matt 19:30 -- But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (NKJ)
2. Matt 20:16 -- So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen. (NKJ)
3. In between is the parable that illustrates an important truth

D. The situation involves Jesus and the rich young ruler

1. Matt 19:16
Now behold, one came and said to Him, "'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?' (NKJ)
 - a. the questions seems to be an honest one
 - b. we know immediately the point of the discussion
 - c. Jesus tells him he must keep the Law
2. Matt 19:20
The young man said to Him, "'All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?' (NKJ)
 - a. this is the young man's claim to perfection
 - b. youthful boast? legalistic boast?
3. Matt 19:21
Jesus said to him, "'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'" (NKJ)
 - a. Jesus went beyond legal perfection to his heart
 - b. would he abandon everything for eternal life?

4. Matt 19:22
But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (NKJ)
 - a. the young man failed the test
 - b. he was unwilling to give up his material possessions
5. Matt 19:27
Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (NKJ)
 - a. we often neglect the disciples response
 - b. were they thinking they would receive greater blessings
6. Matt 19:29
And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. (NKJ)
 - a. Jesus wanted them to know that everyone who leaves his worldly possessions to become a follower receives a reward
 - b. everyone -- this is the key word
7. Matt 19:30
But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (NKJ)
 - a. this is the truth we must deal with
 - b. this is what God offers and what we must accept

E. What is the parable about?

1. It is about eternal life
2. It describes the goodness of God
3. It is a story to the disciples to help them understand the gift God offers to all

I. THE PARABLE

A. Note what the parable describes

1. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard
2. The parable describes something about the kingdom of heaven
3. The key is the action of the landowner hiring workers

B. Five groups of workers are hired

1. The 6:00am group -- early risers, eager, hard workers
2. The 9:00am group -- late, but surely acceptable workers
3. The 12:00pm group -- the "half-day" crowd
4. The 3:00pm group -- the "scrap" team brought in just to finish
5. The 5:00pm group -- what is this group really for?

C. The matter of wages

1. The only group who contracted for a specific amount was the first
 - a. the agreed wage was a denarius
 - b. the normal daily wage
2. To all the others, the landowner only promised "whatever is right"

D. Payment of the wages

1. Matt 20:8 -- 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." (NKJ)
2. The way payment was made is key to understanding the parable
 - a. landowner instructed the steward to pay the laborers
 - b. the last ones hired were to be the first ones paid
 - c. this is probably not the way we would think of doing it
3. The last ones hired received a denarius -- the same amount that the first group had agreed for a day's work
 - a. they probably didn't expect it
 - b. they probably considered the landowner to be generous
 - c. they probably understood they received what they didn't earn
4. Then the group first hired came to be paid
 - a. they knew what the others had received
 - b. they expected to receive more -- after all they worked more
 - c. but they received the same wage
 - d. suddenly, in their mind, they were getting shortchanged
5. Those who were last had become first, and those who had been first had become last

E. The answer of the landowner

1. He did no wrong because he paid the first group exactly what they had agreed to work for
2. He had the right to give the last group whatever he wished to give
3. It was certainly lawful for the landowner to do with his own money whatever he desired to do with it
4. Any problem was with the attitude of the first workers

F. The point of the parable

1. Matt 20:16 -- So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen. (NKJ)
2. Payment to the workers seems to be based on a different standard than the amount of work done
 - a. it seems to be based on the graciousness of the landowner
 - b. it was perhaps affected more by the need of the worker than the actual work he did
 - c. it seems to be based on what the landowner could do, not on what the workers did

II. LESSONS TO LEARN

A. The main lesson is not in the wages earned, but in the graciousness of the landowner

1. It is the kingdom of heaven being described
2. It is like a gracious landowner who is beyond fair; he is generous
3. We see God's grace in this story
 - a. Eph 2:8-9 -- For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (NKJ)
 - b. Rom 4:4-8 -- Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin. (NKJ)
 - c. 2 Tim 1:8-9 -- Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, (NKJ)

B. The rewards of God are his to freely give as he pleases

1. The plain statement of the story is that God pays what he owes
2. When God pays, it is fair and equitable
3. Reward, however, is within his right to give as he desires
4. If one feels shortchanged, perhaps it is because he does not recognize God's rulership over his creation

C. The story teaches that God gives out of man's need, not from what man earns or deserves

1. This goes along with the point about grace
2. Isn't this exactly what each of us hopes God will do for us?

D. The story teaches the very real possibility of misunderstanding the nature of the kingdom because we compare ourselves to others

1. 2 Cor 10:12 -- For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. (NKJ)
2. When we do that, we might easily feel cheated, and that those who are undeserving receive God's rewards

E. The story teaches that those who think they deserve the least may find they receive the most

1. Remember the young man who had asked about eternal life
 - a. he was one of the "first"
 - b. he had the attitude that he deserved more than he got
 - c. he did not understand his need -- he only understood in terms of his wants
2. Why is it so hard for some to understand?
 - a. why so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom?
 - b. could it be that they cannot see their needs and thus cannot appreciate what God can do for them?
3. Were the last minute workers expecting a day's wage?
 - a. hardly!
 - b. but they got what they needed anyway
 - c. they couldn't depend on what they produced

CONCLUSION

A. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who is generous to those who are in need and who depend on him

1. What they receive isn't based on that they're worth
2. What they receive is based on the generosity of the landowner
3. It's just like that with God and us

B. Have you been called to labor in God's vineyard?

1. Were you called early or late? Does it matter to you?
2. Or is it more important that you were called to serve?
3. Are you willing to let God reward you as he sees fit

C. At every point, it seems to come back to the issue of faith

1. Do you trust God, depend on Him?
2. Or are you more comfortable striking a deal with him?

D. Invitation