



## “Laborers in God’s Vineyard:

...gracious or grumbling?

Matthew 20:1-16

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**Matthew 20:1-16** *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning*

*to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 "Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 "and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. 5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 6 "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' 7 "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' 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.' 9 "And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. 10 "But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. 11 "And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 12 "saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 'Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."*

We live today in a time, like never before, where humanity has embraced a self-entitlement position. Our hand is out as we ask our government, or neighbor, our spouse and our church, “*where’s mine?*” Yes, and like so many other worldly aspects, this thinking has found its way into the greater church also. Not just snuck in, but boldly plunged in with elbows swinging. Sadly the church has not only accommodated this attitude, it has in so many cases perpetuated it through an overt desire to artificially fill their pews with bodies on a Sunday morning. In the movie Sgt. Bilko, Steve Martin offers up the great quote “*All I’ve ever wanted was an honest week’s pay for an honest day’s work.*” We laugh, but in fact that seems to be the overwhelming reality thought today.

This has brought new dynamics and problems to Christendom, because principles like socialist equality on every level is just simply contrary to biblical teaching. Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that “*In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well.*” (Romans 12:6 NLT) He says there also that “*Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body...*” (12:4-5) Elsewhere He also tells us much about predestination and the “calling” that we all individually have upon our lives. Peter says in his first letter that “*God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.*” (1 Peter 4:10) God’s word is very clear in telling us that all men are created equal and every single person can be a child of God, receiving the full inheritance of heaven. But it does not say we are the same, or that we all will live or live out the same. Our living will not be manufactured in a religious cookie cutter fashion.

Christ even speaks in depth concerning judgement and reward...both in this life and the next. Some folks will have positions and experiences that others will not. Some will find a greater earthly comfort than others, for He says that *"the poor will be with you always."* (Matthew 26:11) And *"... I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper."* (Luke 14:24) Like so much of life in the kingdom of God, the question doesn't lie in how much we have done, but the heart and passion behind what we DID do! Were we faithful with what we were given?

An old story goes like this: A man dies and goes to heaven. An angel meets him at the gate, and says, "Tell me...what was your life like? Why should we let you in? You need 100 points to gain entrance, so tell me the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points and when you reach 100 points, you get in." "Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," says the angel, "Three points!" "Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service." "Terrific!" says the angel, "that's certainly worth a point." "One point? Well I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic, two more points," he says. "TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I'll get in is by the grace of God!" To which the angel replies, "Now you're getting the idea- Come on in!"

Mark Twain once mused that, *"In the beginning God created man in his own image and ever since, we've been returning the compliment: we've been busy creating God in our image."* We of course tend to believe that God ought to run things as we would, and thus we imagine that entrance into the afterlife and even his present good graces is based upon earning enough points.

Let us look to the scriptural account before us: The landowner in our story is of course a picture of Christ, and the day laborers are all of us, living day-to-day, trusting in the supply and provision of the land owner. We have similar situations in the secular work world today. I myself have done this when I was younger. The workers show up in the morning, ready to work, tools in their hands, with hopes of acquiring some work for the day; some work for which they would be paid at the end of the day, thus living the proverbial "hand-to-mouth." In such situations, there is little to distract one from the task at hand. There isn't the office protocol nor the long term objective of corporate ladder climbing. There is simply the focus of the immediate work and the very real need of fulfilling that moment's call. All other issues take a back seat. Thankfully, for many who serve within the spiritual realm, there is no less earnestness and focus.

In the story, these individuals who were willing to work were brought on board. There was an agreement made for the pay of a denarius. In that day, such was the equivalent of approximately a penny, which certainly may seem inconsequential, but in that day it was a fair day's wage. The first of these workers started first thing in morning, probably around 6am.

*"about the third hour..."* was about 9am. At this point the vine keeper finds some more workers ready to work. So he hires these fellas also and sends them out to the vineyard. No promises of specific pay were made in this case, but the workers trusted their employer to deal with them fairly, and they wanted to work. They **needed to work!** And certainly that was what was happening here. This was not stuffing envelopes; it was **work**. It was **hard** work! There would be a great deal of effort, discomfort, and it all would no doubt deliver the inevitable aches and pains.

This all sounds already a lot like the spiritual calling to *physical* service that the Master is calling **us** to today! For there is no promise of the quantity of work, it's level of difficulty or ease, no detail as to impending duty or even any resulting reward: *we will just have to trust the vine keeper!*

Then this “sending out” continued again at noon, 3, and 5pm. Each time there is a repeating of the events that transpired in the instance before. Finally the work for these men came to an end, and now its payday. Just as sure as our work here on this earth will one day come to end and our eternal life as well as our rewards for our service to the Kingdom will be distributed. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says “*For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.*” Make no mistake as to this doctrine of scripture: such things do not affect our salvation, nor His love for each one of us which is quite unearned! These rewards are our treasures and positions in the second life and is based upon our fruitfulness in this one.

Now of course, the caveat in this account is that the boss inexplicably paid each worker the same wage no matter when they started. And His point of course is that **our** Boss too delivers each his pay, regardless of length of service. Repeatedly in scripture...*if we will only read it as written*, we are reminded that the Kingdom of God operates on a different principle than the world. What then are the qualifications for serving the Kingdom? Well, basically *showing up, committing to the task and being a faithful and true worker.*

I am compelled to mention at this point that no one showed up and said they’d “*work for a while and see how it would all play out*”...you know, to see if the work is too hard or the time requirements are too demanding or the conditions are not too unfavorable! No, there was a commitment made by both parties and a relationship built upon that mutual promise.

We can indeed gather the truth therefore, that God does not operate on a “point system.” Sadly for many, such a fact is received as a “free pass” to “park it” on the proverbial couch with a clicker in the hand. In the UK, Unemployment Benefits have been known by the slang term 'the dole' since WWI. People speak of “being on the dole” which means they are unemployed and being carried by the welfare state. God is gracious and gives us so much we fail to deserve...even the first breath we took this morning upon waking up! But there is no “kingdom dole” in the spiritual realm of faith. Or at least not for long. He doesn’t revoke our citizenship, but we can certainly fall out of the realms of blessing and fellowship when we fail in our part of the agreement. Service to our Lord must always be an overflow of our heart, a physical manifestation of our love. That’s why, if it is *real*, then it doesn’t really matter *what* we do to serve Him, but just that we *get to serve Him* and we *do!*

This methodology troubled those who had worked all day, and maybe it troubles you also. Such angst can be generated from either extreme of this spectrum. Many of those so disturbed are those that have served God diligently over many years and feel somehow God owes them or at least owes them more than the next guy who just arrived. Others are troubled by the whole concept of rewards and they fret of course with biblical principles of failing to produce...failing to maximize what we have been given to invest for the kingdom. But the “penalty” comes not in our failing to **produce** but our failing to **invest**. Matthew 25:30 describes such a verdict: “*Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” The flesh leads us to believe this is unfair, and can generate all sorts of earthly response: from resignation, to self-pity, to anger, to bitterness.

In our earthly and very **American** thinking, we are incredulous! After all, does it seem right for the one-month-old convert to possibly receive the same reward as the veteran saint who has served God for 50 years? It does to Jesus, and it’s **His vineyard!** We are judged rather according to the faithfulness to the call and to the direction of God: what we did or did not do with what we have been loaned.

Today we generally have far less desire to find and live out *God's* will, than we have to see *our* plans become reality. Again, much of the church is promoting this "me-first" mentality, and the "Jesus-the-lucky-rabbits-foot" doctrine, which all feeds the flesh and blasphemes the Word; *both the living Word as well as the written Word*. The mantra of the modern church-goer is "what's in it for me...how can I get God on my train?"

We as a church speak often about God's grace. This passage is nothing less than the very *picture* of God's grace! Grace is the delivery of blessings we do not deserve, and gifts we have not earned. It is God dealing with us according to who *He* is, not according to *who we are*; and He is the God of grace! It is not that the Master has been unfair. In fact, our grace is a two-edged sword. We *want* God's grace for the blessings, but we *need* God's grace also because anything else but His grace would mean a living hell and an eternal death. Far be it that we would ask the Father to give us what we deserve! But like the early birds in our story, many of us fail to desire God's grace toward others. Suddenly in that realm we want judgment rendered according to merit, yet we fail to acknowledge that this would then ultimately condemn us also. Do you *really* want what you deserve?

This pay-out troubled those who had worked all day. It often so disturbs those whom have served God diligently over many years. The flesh leads us to believe this is unfair. Yet the fact of the matter is, again, that we are judged according to faithfulness to the call, the gifts, the opportunities, the blessings and direction of God. It doesn't matter to God whether that was for a week, a month, or 50 years!

It is often easy for us to forget about the God who has extended generosity and forgiveness to us when we didn't deserve it. We easily forget about all the people who love us more than we deserve. We are shocked and amazed to learn that in God's economy things are radically different than what we imagine. As we learned in our last gathering, a meeting with the real Jesus always is always distressing. For we inevitably find that following Christ is far more demanding than we ever understood and far more of a blessing than we ever imagined. We just generally fail to grasp the magnitude of this thing called Christianity.

When applied to the Kingdom of God, our modern work ethic and score-keeping does not result in gratitude but rather grumbling. God's gracious generosity cuts through our little moral equations. Our midwest mentality is "You get what you deserve." *Really?* Thank the Lord it doesn't work that way in the Kingdom of God. The prophet Isaiah saw it clearly in his own day and he penned the words of God, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"

The landowner leaves us all with two probing questions: *One*, is God not allowed to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him?" And *two*, are we to be envious, competitive and comparing because He is generous? All of this does not free us from greatly serving God for the Kingdom's sake, but it all is designed, no doubt, to keep our eyes on *Him* and not upon the acts we complete for Him.

*"So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."*

No, we are not the same, nor will we all receive or live the same. God's kingdom is not based on the democratic free trade model of our day. He is the king around here. And we owe everything to Him. **What will we do with it?**