

Matthew 20:1-7

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Jesus tells the first half of the parable of the Vineyard laborers. He describes how the landowner continually goes out throughout the day to hire workers to help harvest. This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven that shows His disciples that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. This parable makes it clear that it is never too late to begin living faithfully. God will give great rewards to some people who come to understanding much later in life.

This parable is unparalleled in the other gospel accounts.

Jesus then shared a parable about *the kingdom of heaven*. It is often called “the parable of *the vineyard laborers*.” It is one of Jesus’s longer parables. Its story can be divided into two halves. The first half of the parable shows a *landowner* hiring *laborers* to work *his vineyard*. The second half of the parable depicts *the landowner* paying *the laborers* for the work they did.

Upon first glance, the parable’s meaning might not seem obvious. Neither Jesus, nor Matthew give a detailed explanation of its parts or meaning. Accordingly, the context in which Jesus shared the parable of *the vineyard laborers* serves an important role in interpreting its meaning.

Jesus shared this parable as part of the same conversation that began when the rich young ruler asked Him what He must do to obtain eternal life (Matthew 19:16). Jesus loved this man for his enthusiasm for *the kingdom* and piety (Mark 10:21), but he walked away from gaining the fullest rewards of *the kingdom* when Jesus told him to trade his earthly possessions in exchange for heavenly rewards (Matthew 19:21-22). Jesus commented that it was hard for a rich man to enter *the kingdom* of God, and gain its benefits; because they had to empty their hands of the world’s goods in order to fill them up with kingdom goods (Matthew 19:23-24).

The disciples then asked Jesus that if outstanding citizens like this pious, rich man could not enter *the kingdom*, who could? Would no one be able to enter *the kingdom*? (Matthew 19:25). Jesus essentially answered that humans really weren’t capable of entering the kingdom, but thankfully with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). This again pointed back to the importance of faith. Faith gets believers justified in the sight of God (John 3:14-16). But it also gets believers kingdom rewards, when believers act and walk by faith, following Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Then Peter asked, “What about us? Have we done enough? What will we have in *the kingdom* for leaving everything behind to follow you, Jesus?” (Matthew 19:27). Jesus assured him and His other disciples that they would have great kingdom rewards, and “sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). He also told them that “everyone” who sacrificially leaves behind relationships or livelihoods for His sake “will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age” and will inherit eternal life “in the age to come” (Mark 10:30).

Jesus then introduced the parable of the *vineyard laborers* with the proverb: “But many who are *first will be last; and the last, first*” (Matthew 19:30). This paradoxical introduction is the exact inverse of what He will say at the conclusion of this parable. *So the last shall be first, and the first last* (Matthew 20:16). The parable is bookended by mirror images of these parallel proverbs. Both mirror images are true. Many who are last in this age, and are persecuted by the world, will be first in the kingdom of heaven. And many who enter the kingdom last will be the most prominent in the kingdom. “Last” in this sense might mean later in life or later in the current age.

Jesus explicitly said this parable pertains to *the kingdom of heaven*. And He connects the parable back to the preceding context (Matthew 19:16-30) with the word “*for*”—*For the kingdom of heaven is like...* From this preceding context we can deduce three things about the parable of *the vineyard laborers*.

- First, the introductory and concluding proverb about who is first and who is last is clearly the main point of the parable.
 - What will matter is the faithfulness of the time you have serving God while living on earth. God will determine rewards, and He is very generous. Sometimes He will reward latecomers just as liberally as those who labored long for His kingdom, or perhaps saints at the end of the age as much as in the beginning.
- Second, the parable illustrates something important within Jesus’s answer to Peter’s question about what he and the disciples can expect to gain from leaving everything behind to follow Him.
 - They will gain great rewards, as Jesus had stated. But so will many others, many who follow behind. It might be that those of later generations get the same reward as those in early generations, and vice versa.
- And third, the parable depicts something about the disciples and the rich, young ruler.
 - Those who are preoccupied with being first in this life, as the rich young ruler was, forfeit their chance to be first in the kingdom. They will be last or lower in the kingdom. But those who seek God’s kingdom by serving and loving others as they love themselves (and consequently are likely considered last in this life) will be first in the kingdom.

Jesus stated the proverb, and begins by saying *the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard*.

The scenario Jesus depicted would have been familiar throughout the agricultural society in which He lived. It is harvest. The grapes are ripe. The *vineyard* owner needs workers who will pick them off the vine before they spoil. So, *he goes out* at the beginning of the day, *early in the morning*, so that *he* can find and *hire wage-laborers* who will harvest the grapes while they are still fresh. *He went to the market place*, to a *place* where it was known and accepted that laborers would gather, hoping to be hired.

The *landowner* encountered some workers for hire, and *the laborers agreed to a denarius* as fair wages *for* the day’s work. Then *he sent them* to work *into his vineyard*. A *denarius* amounted to a day’s wages.

Apparently, there was more work to be done than could be finished before the grapes over-ripened. So rather than let even a portion of his harvest go to waste, *the landowner* returned to *the market place* four more times throughout the workday to *hire* enough *laborers*.

The market place was a city gathering *place* for the people of that town and its surrounding villages and farms. It was a *place* where people went to buy and sell goods. It was a good *place* to seek potential *laborers*, or to find work depending upon the situation. *The landowner* went out *about the third hour* (9:00am), *sixth hour* (noon), *ninth hour* (3:00pm) and even the eleventh hour (5:00pm) to *hire* more workers. The *eleventh-hour* crew would only have been able to work for a single *hour* that *day* (as we will be told in verse 12).

Jesus said that *the vineyard* owner *saw* these potential workers *standing idle in the market place*. They were *idle* and not doing anything, not *because* they were lazy. *The landowner* asked the *eleventh-hour* crew, *Why have you been standing here idle all day long?* And they told the *landowner*, *“Because no one hired us.”* This showed willingness. They were still trying to get work, even at that late hour.

The vineyard owner said to these later crews, *‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’* And so they went. It is interesting to note that these crews of *laborers* did not agree with *the landowner* upon a predetermined amount of payment for the work they would do. They simply trusted *the landowner* to pay them *whatever is right*. This detail shows they were willing to receive a proportional compensation, and trusted the generosity of the *landowner*. The first group of *laborers* had made an agreement. They were receiving a *denarius*. The subsequent groups seemed to be grateful to get anything, after not being hired at the first hour of the day.

The first half of the parable of *the vineyard laborers* introduces several important parabolic symbols in Jesus’s allegory. The *landowner* represents God, and *His vineyard* is *His kingdom*. *The laborers* are those willing to work in *the kingdom* of heaven. The work is the things done for God and in *His kingdom*. And the *denarius* represents the fair reward for the work. The *day* or *hour* represents the amount of time or opportunities each believer has to work in God’s *kingdom* during their lifetime.

The entire scene up to this point is reminiscent of what Jesus told His disciples just before sending them to preach the kingdom to the lost sheep of Israel.

“Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.’”
(Matthew 9:37-38)

Jesus will finish the parable in the next section, covered in Matthew 20:8-16.

Biblical Text

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for

the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And *so* they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. ⁶ And about the eleventh *hour* he went out and found others standing *around*; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'