

Workers in the Vineyard

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Our reading is from Matthew chapter 20, and you can find that on page 987 of the Church Bible, if you like to read from there. I'll just give you a moment. Page 987, Matthew chapter 20, and I am reading from verse 1 to verse 19. Verse 1 to verse 19, Matthew chapter 20.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About nine in the morning, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, you also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.

So they went. He went out again about noon, about three in the afternoon, and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, why have you been standing here all day doing nothing? Because no one has hired us, they answered.

He said to them, you also go and work in my vineyard. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first. The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

[2 : 0 8] So when those who came were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These who were hired last worked only one hour, they said, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

But he answered one of them, I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last. Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem.

[3 : 1 8] On the way, he took the twelve aside and said to them, We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law.

They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day, he will be raised to life.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, St. Silas.

And a happy new year. If I have not spoken to you in person, my name is Martin Ayers. If you are here as a guest, I am the lead pastor here. It is great that you could join us today for Back to Church Sunday. And as is our custom, we are going to look at the Bible together now.

So it would help me if you could keep your Bibles open. It is page 987, Matthew chapter 20. And if you find it helpful, there is an outline inside the notice sheet that just shows the points that I will make as we look to see what the passage is saying to us.

[4 : 32] But let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we pray that you will graciously speak to us this morning.

That you will give us ears to hear your voice. Heads that can understand. And hearts that are open to change and to follow you. For we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, does Jesus offer you a good deal? We're always thinking about good deals, aren't we? Last week, Cristiano Ronaldo, the former World Footballer of the Year, signed for a club in Saudi Arabia, Al-Nasra.

Reports are that he will earn more than 160 million pounds a year. But he'll be accused of moral compromise, of failing to speak up about moral shortcomings in the country that he is now going to be playing football in.

But I take it that Cristiano Ronaldo has decided that Al-Nasra will be good employers. It is a good deal for him, particularly with the pay package.

[5 : 43] Prince Harry must have felt the same about Penguin Random House with the terms of the book deal that they have offered to him. With the significant advance that he was given and then his book coming out.

It was in the news yesterday that there was a point where maybe he had second thoughts about the book. But he's kept with Penguin Random House. And all around us at the moment, we're facing disruption because people are trying to get a better deal from the people they work for.

It's a winter of discontent, isn't it? And this week, our kids are off school one of the days because teachers are striking. But there's been rail workers striking, nurses striking, ambulance workers have been on strike.

And there are situations where people feel their employers should be offering them a better deal. That's how the world often works, isn't it? That if we're blessed to have a job, we might hear of another job opportunity.

And we think to ourselves, would that be a good place to work? Would they be good people to work for? If I think about what they would pay me and I think about what I would have to give to them.

[6 : 56] And if we hear of what other people get from their jobs, we might get our calculators out. And we ask ourselves, am I getting a fair deal? If they get that for what they do, do I get a good deal for what I do?

And sometimes we bring that mindset into our spiritual lives. As we think about something like the Christian faith. So I remember asking a friend, Matt, what he thought of the Christian faith.

And he'd raised lots of issues before that we talked about. But he said to me, I think the heart of my issue is, I think Jesus would take away my freedom. And I don't think Matt would be unusual today.

For him, when it comes to thinking about God, it wasn't that he needed more evidence to help him on is it true. It's just that he thinks, if I was to turn to God, I presume I'd have to keep all kinds of new rules in my life.

To kind of earn a reward from God. And I don't think that that's a good deal. I don't think that the change that I'd have to go through in my life to live for God is worth what God would reward me with.

[8 : 05] He thinks that he doesn't like that deal that's on the table from God. And he's found more rewarding things to live for. And sometimes any of us could think like that about the Christian life.

Jesus calls us to change our lives for him. And maybe we get our calculators out. And we decide, I'm not sure about this bargain anymore. Maybe if you're already a Christian.

And you think, look, just thinking about last year or the last few years. I've done this for God and that for God and this for God. Do I deserve more from God in return?

Well, if we ever think anything like that, this story that Jesus told can help us. Our account of it is here from Matthew's first century gospel account of Jesus' life.

And it starts with something very familiar to the first hearers. And then it gets more and more weird, the story. Now, what's just happened in Matthew chapter 19 is that a man came to see Jesus who seemed to have everything going for him.

[9 : 10] He was a good man. He was a religious man. He was a rich man. He was a young man. And he asked Jesus in chapter 19 verse 16, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

So he wants to know the terms of the deal. And Jesus makes a demand on him that is so big, go sell all you have and give it to the poor and then come and follow me, that the man goes away sad.

And Jesus makes this extraordinary statement in verse 24 of chapter 19. He says, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And the disciples are astonished, the followers of Jesus. And Peter, one of them, is getting nervous about this. And he gets his calculator out. And he says, hang on a minute, Jesus.

Look at verse 27. He says, In other words, we've done this and this and this.

[10 : 19] What are we going to get in return, Jesus? And Jesus assures Peter and all of his disciples that for anyone who follows Jesus, wonderful things will be given.

Wonderful things from God. So he gives this reassurance. But then we're left at the end of the chapter really confused. How can every disciple of Jesus be promised great and wonderful glory?

But this rich young man who seemed to have so much he could offer, how could he be unable to earn a place in God's kingdom? And Jesus tells this story.

So we're going to look at it in three parts. The first is the owner's call to serve in his vineyard. Let's pick things up in verse 1. Jesus says, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. Now the language Jesus uses here of the kingdom of heaven is describing what we might think of today of becoming a Christian.

[11 : 29] He's talking about coming to know God, becoming one of God's people, and being in the kingdom of heaven, that starts the day you turn to God and you know God and goes on, we're assured, into the future forever.

The kingdom of heaven will last forever where we'll be with God in a glorious eternal future. So Jesus is teaching us something of that relationship with God with this story and he says, Picture a vineyard where of course in the parable, the story, the landowner represents God for us.

And this is a familiar picture in the Bible of God having a vineyard. The vineyard is a place that God protects and looks after. It's a great place to be. And here in the story, the owner of the vineyard calls people to come and work for him in his vineyard.

He gets them from the marketplace. And in those days, if you were not a landowner or a slave already tied to a particular master, then what you would do is every morning you would go to the marketplace in the hope that someone would hire you to work for the day.

That's still very common in lots of parts of the world today. Until recently, it was common in this country. My great-grandfather was a laborer on the docks, loading the ships with coal, which needed to be done.

[12 : 50] And every morning, he would head out to the docks and he'd line up with all the other men who needed work. And the four men would come down and they would hire the people they wanted that day.

And getting chosen was a win. Hard work, but a huge relief because it meant food for the family for the day. If the four men didn't hire you, you went home with nothing.

No welfare state to support you. And after a few days, you would go hungry. It's the same today in lots of parts of the world. So Jesus paints a familiar picture here.

And we can see from the picture that entering the kingdom of heaven is about a change of allegiance. It's about living your life for a new master, coming to serve God, live for God.

What matters to God isn't ultimately how good we've been or even how many religious works we have accomplished in our lives.

[13 : 52] What matters is, who are we living for? Are we living for God? Is that the direction of our lives? Or are we living for something else? And right through the story, it's the owner of the vineyard who takes the initiative.

He calls people and they answer the call and they come and serve him. And if you've come to church today with a sense that God might be at work in your life calling you to follow him, then I take it Jesus' story here urges you not to be complacent about that.

It's his vineyard. He has the right. He takes the initiative in calling people. And what matters is that we respond to that call. And going to be with him, serving in his vineyard, is much better than being on the outside in the marketplace.

So that's the first thing we see in the parable as he paints the picture. The owner's call to serve in his vineyard. But people get left behind, unemployed, and they reveal something for us about the character of this vineyard owner.

So that's our second point. The owner's compassion on those left standing. His compassion. So he recruited people at 6 a.m. That was the standard time to get people to do a day's work in the ancient Near East.

[15 : 18] And he's offered to give them each a denarius. And they've agreed because that's just right. That is a fair wage for a day's work. But what he does next is much more puzzling.

Let's pick things up at verse 3. About 9 in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, you also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.

So they went. So these new men that he calls from the marketplace, they've lost three crucial hours of work, of useful work before the sun gets too hot.

and yet he calls them to come to his vineyard. And then it gets more strange. Verse 5, he went out again about noon and about 3 in the afternoon and did the same thing.

About 5 in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. Now the working day finishes at 6. But he asks them, why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?

[16 : 27] Because no one has hired us, they answered. He said to them, you also go and work in my vineyard. Now what's going on? Clearly this guy has no idea how to run a business.

Or crucially, Jesus' point is, the kingdom of heaven is not run like a business. It doesn't operate on a system of what can you offer to God and will that deserve a reward?

It's not about getting paid for what you put in. All this working out what you'd have to do for God and comparing it with what you'd get from him in return, it's looking at the Christian life the wrong way.

It's just not how it works. God doesn't ever really need to recruit any of us to serve him. Rather, he calls out to us in compassion for us.

And now the story takes another extraordinary turn because the day is finished and it's pay time. So have a look at verse 8. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.

[17 : 41] And then verse 9 takes everyone by surprise. The workers who were hired at 5 o'clock, they come and they each receive a denarius. They got there at 5.

Literally, they came at the 11th hour. It's a phrase that we still use today. You might have heard it before, when people arrive late or when footballers are being signed and people put in offers.

Sometimes a club comes in with an 11th hour bid. And it's because of this story. This is where it comes from. That Jesus says, the 11th hour workers get a full day's wages.

They get everything. And wonderfully, that's a picture for us of the lavish generosity of God. Business-wise, it's disastrous.

The vineyard owner's chief financial officer has his head in his hands as the vineyard owner is just dishing out a full day's pay to these late arrivals. But the point is that the living God is recklessly generous.

[18 : 43] He is reckless in his generosity. And his call goes out to everyone who finds themselves in the marketplace. And if you answer his call, it doesn't matter how late you are to join the party.

It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what little you feel you could offer God. You get everything you need given by him and more.

In the Bible book Ephesians chapter 1, the writer says that God gives Christians, he blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ through the work of Jesus.

The blessing that God has chosen you, he sets his love on you, he adopts you into his family, he redeems you through Jesus dying on the cross, he forgives you, and he gives you the gift of his Holy Spirit in your life.

God drawing alongside you to help you. And these spiritual blessings, they're not just for those who have served God for the longest, they're not for some religious elite, they're not for those who have served most wholeheartedly, those who have given more to God than other people.

[19 : 55] No, those blessings are for everyone who answers God's call to follow him. That equality is pictured here as the foreman goes around to people who worked at 9am, from 9am, from 12, from 3, even from 5, and he gives each of them the right money that they would need, exactly what they need.

And what do we think of a vineyard owner like that? Well, just imagine being there as the money is dished out. Wouldn't you be thinking, look, I'm not going to buy shares in this guy's vineyard, but I know I want to be with him.

He is so generous. This is a compassionate man. And that's the picture Jesus is giving us of what God is like. That when you turn to serve him, you will lack nothing.

He gives you the gift of himself, knowing him through Jesus, enjoying peace with him, purpose in life, serving him, and hope, confidence for a life beyond the grave.

And everyone gets it, no matter how late you are to join the party. But what about the guys who have worked all day? How do they feel about the generosity of their master to these new arrivals?

[21 : 17] Well, that's our third point, the owner's challenge to his grumbling workers. Understandably, I think, the workers who were there all day, their expectations have gone up.

They get their calculators out, and they say, hang on a minute, if one hour's work gives you one denarius and we've done a day, punch, punch, punch, that means we do quite a major bonus here.

We are quids in with this vineyard owner. And then they don't get what they expected. If you look at verse 10, so when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These who were hired last worked only one hour, they said, and you've made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

Now, I don't know what you think about that, but I think that if the kingdom of heaven really did operate like a business, they have a reasonable point, don't they?

[22 : 25] I'm not sure how we'd feel if it was working life and we all got paid the same and some of us had worked far longer and harder than other people.

And there are other times in life, aren't there? There are other situations in life where someone's generosity to others may make us feel, that's not fair on me. If you're a child and you see your sibling get an amazing gift, how does it make you feel?

Or, just thinking of an example, imagine you have a very long-standing friend who you've been really committed to and they invite you to some event that they've got tickets for, a really special thing, a concert or something, and you feel it's a really good celebration of your friendship they invited you along and you get there and they've brought along someone else, some other person that they haven't known very long.

And you think, but all these years I've been here for you, who are they? Why have you brought them as well? But Jesus is telling this story so that when we come to think about getting into the kingdom of heaven, we put our calculators away.

Have a look at verse 13 of what the vineyard owner says. He answered one of them, look at the gentleness, I am not being unfair to you, friend.

[23 : 48] And then he helps them by helping them think, did anybody get less than they were promised? And did anyone get less than they deserved? So he says, didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?

The vineyard owner is not being unfair if he's actually being good to everyone. And as long as everyone who serves him is getting everything they deserve and much more, they shouldn't be looking over their shoulders at what other people are getting.

So at the start, we thought about how we might ask ourselves, is God going to give me a good deal? What would I have to give to God in the Christian life?

And would I get in return something that's worth all that service? And Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven just doesn't work like that. That's how human religion works, man-made religion.

[24 : 57] It says to us, if you serve and obey God or the gods, then God will accept you. But when we hear Jesus, he says, put your calculator away.

In reality, none of us deserves God's favor. If he was a vineyard owner, none of us would deserve to be hired by him. And none of us can make things right with God by a fresh commitment to serve him, a New Year's resolution to make things up with him for how we've lived.

We just can't do it. And Jesus' message is one of scandalous grace. Scandalous grace. Incredibly, every one of us can receive all the blessings of being in the kingdom of heaven as an undeserved gift if we simply respond to God's call.

So the parable leaves us with a challenge and an invitation. First, the challenge. The challenge is don't resent God's generosity. And this is something that I think any of us who are already Christians could drift into.

You know, we become a Christian and in the early days we're full of joy at finding peace with God and purpose in life and hope for the future and we're gladly volunteering to live for Jesus in all kinds of ways.

[26 : 19] And then over time we start to feel a sense of obligation about it all. A growing sense that the Christian life has cost me a lot. And then we see God's generosity to someone else.

maybe someone who has lived what looks to us a very easy life and then they become a Christian and they seem to be getting all the breaks in life and we start to resent it.

We think I've done more for God than they did. I deserve better. And God says to us put your calculator away.

And what helps in the parable what helps those workers is to focus less on how God is treating others in his generosity and instead to reflect personally deeply on how God has treated you and me.

What he offers each of us is wonderfully generous and we mustn't let his generosity to others whom we feel don't deserve it we mustn't let that get in the way of us receiving rightly his generous offer to us and enjoying it.

[27 : 27] what might make you resentful or envious? Someone you think is horrible becomes a Christian or someone becomes a Christian and they get what you were praying you would get in life.

Well of course they don't deserve it. No one deserves this generosity from God but neither do we deserve what God gives us.

So how is it possible for God to operate this way with such scandalous grace to see people in the marketplace with nothing to offer him and call to us and give us the generous gift of himself?

Well only because Jesus is on his way to the cross to earn that generosity. He says in verse 17 over the page that he is going to Jerusalem he calls himself the son of man and says he'll be delivered over to the chief priest and teacher of the law he'll be condemned to death they'll hand him over and he will be mocked and flogged and crucified and then on the third day he'll be raised to life.

Any feeling that we might hold of envy for what God gives to others any feeling of resentment for what you feel you've given to God can be lifted from you when you remember that for each of us we're so deeply flawed Jesus had to come and die for us and yet we're so deeply loved he willingly chose to come and die for you so that you could be called out to by God called into his kingdom where you receive the generous gift of himself.

[29 : 15] So that's the challenge that we wouldn't resent God's generosity but then the invitation to respond to God's gracious call. So the parable is a challenge if we put ourselves in the shoes of the full day workers those who were left grumbling but there's an invitation if we put ourselves in the position of the 11th hour workers they were picked up at 5pm they'd wasted the day they'd lost the day what is Jesus saying to us this morning about his kingdom the kingdom of heaven that we must never think I can't come it's too late for me we could never think that it is too late for me we must never think I can't come I've been too bad a person I can't come it wouldn't be fair on the people who've done it their whole lives I don't know what you're living for this morning but whatever it is the picture here is that Jesus sees you in the marketplace and he calls out to you come to my vineyard and I'll give you whatever's right and when you respond to God's call it is never about what you could bring you admit that it's late in the day

I've got nothing I can give you God and I've got no time to make it up to you and he says I know that just come you can trust that he wants to be generous to you he earned the right to be trusted when Jesus came and died so that he could offer you life let's pray together just a moment of quiet to reflect on what God might be saying to us through this parable heavenly father we thank you that your kingdom is not about what we can give but about your generous gift to us forgive us for when we've thought of coming to you as like a transaction and wondered if it's a good deal for us thank you for the free gift of life forever knowing you won for us by Jesus as he died as a ransom for many father would you help any of us this morning who are conscious that we're outside of your kingdom standing in the marketplace to hear your call to trust your generosity to respond rightly to you and for those of us who are already with Jesus in his kingdom would you help us not to resent anything that we've freely given help us never to envy your generosity to others we pray that our hearts will be full of joy and wonder at your goodness to us we ask these things in Jesus name Amen