



Lesson 2: The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15)

Review of Lesson 1

- 35% of the synoptic gospels are in the form of parables.
- Parables teach, among other things, about the nature and dynamics of the Kingdom of God/Heaven.
- **Definition:** A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.
- **How to interpret:** Parables should be understood as containing one simple truth.
- **Purpose of Parables:**
 - Parables both reveal and conceal (Matt 13:13).
 - Parables bring the listener to a place of decision.

Introduction and Context

- The parable is Jesus' response to Peter's statements of personal sacrifice, *'See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'* (19:27).
- **Meaning:** entry into God's kingdom is not gained by our work or action, but by the generosity of God.
- **Main application:** our attitude of heart to God's service should be one of thankfulness for His grace and not expectation of reward for our labor.

Wrong Conclusions and Interpretations

1. Those who do just an hour's work do as much work as the all-day laborers because they worked hard.
2. The willingness of the late comers compared to the unwillingness of the all-day workers.
3. Gentiles are the latecomers while Jews are the all-day workers.
4. All men are equal before God or all kingdom work is equal.
5. The parable portrays working conditions in the first century. All men were entitled to a certain wage for the day.

The Parable

- **Scene 1 (20:1-2):**
 - A vineyard owner hires laborers for an agreed amount.
- **Scene 2 (20:3-7)**
 - The vineyard owner hires more laborers throughout the day: 9am, 12 noon, 3pm and 5pm
 - The vineyard owner promises to pay 'whatever is right' (20:4)
- **Scene 3 (20:8-12)**
 - The vineyard owner pays his laborers an equal amount each, beginning with the last to the first

- Though the first laborers receive what they worked for, they are unhappy, believing equal pay for all is unjust
- **Scene 4 (20:13-15)**
 - The vineyard owner questions the first laborers' view of justice and rebukes their begrudging his grace to those who, they thought, were less worthy

The Point

- The landowner is God and the workers are believers
- God distributes His gifts according to His will, not because they are earned, but because He is gracious. These gifts can relate to every aspect of life from salvation to gifts of service.
- Two opposing principles:
 - **The world's:** He who works the longest receives the most pay. That is just!
 - **The kingdom of God:** The principles of merit and ability may be set aside so that grace can prevail.
- Romans 9:10-16 confirms the principle of grace over justice in the work of salvation
- Our motivation for Christian service must come from grace, and not justice

The Practical

- There is a danger of a commercial spirit
 - If we work for wages, we will get exactly what we desire, no more and no less
- There is a danger of a competitive spirit
 - Joy in serving God vanishes when we begin to compare ourselves with others
- There is a danger of a complaining spirit
 - Grumbling and complaining is an attack against the goodness and generosity of God Himself

- **David Livingston**, in Dec 1857, tries to put into words the motives that shaped his life while returning to Africa:

'People talk a lot about the sacrifice involved in devoting my life to Africa. But can this be called a sacrifice at all if we give back to God 'a little of what we owe Him?' And we owe Him so much that we shall never be able to pay off our debt. Can that be called sacrifice which gives us the deepest satisfaction, which develops our best powers, and gives us the greatest hopes and expectations? Away with this word 'sacrifice'. It is anything but a sacrifice. Rather, call it a 'privilege'.