

Sermon Series – Matthew 20:1-16

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Septuagesima

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm: Psalm 95:1-9

New Testament Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5

Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

Receive your generous payment from Christ with joy and do not be envious of fellow Christians.

If I am not mistaken, we have studied this parable of the Bible in Sunday School. Indeed, I have heard some of you joke that you desire to show up at the vineyard on the eleventh hour so that you may receive full payment, but not accomplish half the work. I know you say that in jest, but if you look at this parable in that light then you are missing the point Jesus was making. There is a much deeper spiritual meaning to this parable. During Jesus' time, parables were a common method to teach people. In fact, Jesus used parables when describing something that was almost incomprehensible to the people around Him. Jesus used parables to teach about heavenly realities. When you read a parable that Jesus taught, there is always one main teaching behind that parable. Jesus used today's parable to focus people on His grace and on His mercy. The early church Fathers had a field day interpreting this parable. In the past, I have made reference to commentaries written by the early church Fathers as they are often times excellent examples and expositions of the Word. However, on this parable they went in a direction that I am not comfortable with. The early church Fathers would say that this parable focused on different periods of time in which certain groups of people were brought into the Kingdom by God's grace. For instance, Adam, Eve, and even

Noah were represented by those who woke up in the early morning to work in the vineyard. Other patriarchs, such as Abraham, were called into the vineyard later in the day. Finally, when the eleventh hour had come, the Gentiles were brought in. If you follow the interpretations of the early Church fathers, then you could say that we are arriving later in the day, receiving full payment, and only providing a small quantity of work. However, I believe they have missed the main thrust of the parable. The point of this parable is to receive your generous payment and do not envy others who receive the same payment.

When Jesus tells this parable to those around Him, He continually focuses His discussion around the wage. In this parable, the wage that He gives is not based upon what you do, but upon what He wants to distribute. For instance, the wage He discussed with the workers early in the morning was presented to the workers and agreed upon.¹ The Landowner states that the wage, or payment, for working in the vineyard is a denarius, which is a standard day's wage. In the morning, these men were quite happy with that agreement, but as the day went on the agreement began to sour. At nine o'clock in the morning, noon, and three o'clock in the afternoon, the Landowner again went out into the marketplace and offered a wage that the Landowner would decide.² One last time, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the Landowner goes into the marketplace and seeks workers for His vineyard. Again, He tells them that He will pay them a wage that is right. In other words, the Landowner tells the workers hired from 9:00am through 5:00pm that the wage will be right, but the wage is up to my discretion.

¹ Matthew 20:2

² The Jewish day started at sunrise, which is near 6:00am. Therefore, the third hour would be 9:00am, the sixth hour would be noon, etc.

At the end of the day, the Landowner told His steward to call the laborers, starting with the ones hired most recently, and pay them all one denarius. From an outsider looking in, we can plainly see that this landowner is very generous. However, when He paid all of the workers the same wage, even though some of them put forth more effort, He angered the ones that had been there longer. Even though Holy Scripture does not provide us with the response from all of the workers, it is not difficult to imagine that each group hired earlier than another (and therefore laboring more) were somewhat envious of that earlier group and dissatisfied with their payment. However, the Landowner paid to each group hired what He believed was just and right. This really hits home for all of us today. For example, think about the lives of the apostles. Jesus came to them and said, "Follow me".³ They dropped what they were doing to be with Jesus. Some of the apostles walked away from a prosperous, family fishing business. When Jesus called, they dropped the nets and followed Him. Still, other apostles had occupations and livelihoods, which they walked away from just to be with Jesus. They gave up everything they had and yet when it comes the kingdom of heaven, who is raised higher? Who is mightier? Who receives the better wage, the apostles or the thief on the cross?⁴ Did the thief being executed for living a horrible life, worthy of punishment by crucifixion, receive greater wages than the apostle that walked with Jesus after walking away from the family business? Let me ask you the same question in a different manner, do the apostles have a right to be upset? After all, they gave up everything they owned and worked longer in the mission field with Jesus. The answer is, No. The apostles received a just and right wage. You may say that the apostles

³ Matthew 4:19, Matthew 8:22, Matthew 9:9, etc.

⁴ Luke 23:43

worked harder than the thief on the cross. Yet, it is Jesus Who decides what the payment is, and in this case the payment is extremely generous. Some of you have been Christians all of your life. Some of you have been brought into the fold much later in your lives. However, the Holy Spirit found you all standing in the marketplace, idle, and invited you into the vineyard to receive a just and right wage. That wage is the gracious gift of eternal life, which is not based upon how long you worked or how hard you worked, because the gift is nothing other than grace and not based upon your works.

Another interesting point of this parable concerns the sovereignty of God. In the parable, the Landowner pays wages, not only in the amount, but also to whomever He pleases. Of course the Landowner has a concern for having His vineyard tended to, but the Landowner also persistently goes out again and again inviting workers into the vineyard. Even at the very last hour, the Landowner seeks workers for His vineyard. This is precisely how God works in our day and age. He never gives up on seeking workers for the Kingdom. As your pastor, I have gotten to know many of you very well over the last couple of years. As we evangelize to the community around us, we continually pray that the Holy Spirit will one day break their hearts and we will see these people at worship. We grow frustrated with the task. However, God does not! He continually sends His Holy Spirit into the marketplace and the community seeking workers for He has a wage of eternal importance to the people. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to break the hearts and minds of unbelievers and He is very persistent. As a matter of fact, we ought to thank the Holy Spirit on a daily basis that He did not give up

on any of us. Actually, once we are in the vineyard, the Spirit continues to work in our lives driving each worker to become, even more so, a child of God.

There is something here that tends to get lost when studying this parable. The workers who came early in the morning, as well as those who came later in the day, worked. They did not simply come to the vineyard and stand around. They worked and I am certain that they worked hard. Have you considered how difficult it is to work in a vineyard? The soil needs to be tended and the grapes need to be planted. Once the plants begin to grow, they must be trained to grow up the trellis and then pruned occasionally. The grapes need to be picked at a certain time, a perfect time before the cold rains or hot sun rays destroy the flavor. The grapes must be pressed and crushed and then mixed with the correct ingredients to cause fermentation. Once the fermentation process has completed, the wine is bottled and aged before a single bottle is ready. Each and every bottle has a great deal of work upon it and the labor is not easy. In fact, it is quite intense. The labor in the kingdom of God is also not easy. It is difficult. In fact, it also is quite intense. God's Kingdom needs people to plant seeds and He needs people to water and help the vines grow. All of this labor is difficult and each of you has been given certain gifts from our Creator that is perfect for a particular job in growing the Kingdom. Matthew writes in his gospel that Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few."⁵ Perhaps this understanding of the work involved in the Kingdom gives a new meaning for some of you? As a congregation, we are all workers called into the vineyard and the Landowner, Jesus, has an expectation that each of us will work at different jobs while we are in the vineyard.

⁵ Matthew 9:37

Lastly, Christ points out in His parable that envy will not be tolerated. Be happy with what you have received. I appreciate how the Landowner of the parable has a very friendly tone towards His ignorant workers. The workers who came first expected something more. Perhaps they were standing in line expecting a bonus for the hard and lengthy work they contributed. That is not what they received. They received exactly what they agreed upon with the Landowner. When they became angry and quarrelsome, we hear these beautiful words, "Friend". It is so lovely the way the Landowner begins the conversation with the angry workers. Friend, what is the problem? Am I being unfair? It is very easy for us to say here today, no. Of course, in our place of employment, I would expect to hear you all say, "Yeah! I worked my tail off! You have given the other workers the same thing you have given me, this worker arrives later than I do and he leaves earlier. In fact, he does not put the same amount of effort in that I do." We cannot allow ourselves to think in this manner, especially about the work in the Kingdom. In the Kingdom, our wages are not based upon what we do. In fact, praise God that we are not given what we deserve. Instead, we have a generous Landowner in Jesus Christ. In the parable, Jesus tells us that the wages He has He gives freely to Whom He desires. His payment comes from His grace and if the Landowner desires to give freely, who are we to question His generosity?

Our payments will be received, each and every one of us, paid in full upon our death. We will be welcomed into that beautiful vineyard, the gates of heaven, and we must receive generously the gifts that Jesus has given to us and not be envious of the same generosity towards others. Earlier today, I read a comment in the Tyndale Commentaries concerning this text. The author wrote that the parable of the workers is

quite simply this: that we always receive a fair wage, and oftentimes much more than we deserve. God does graciously bestow on us wages that are far more than we deserve and we should be happy to receive them from such a good and gracious God. Amen. May this word bless you dearly throughout the week.

SERMON OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION:

Homiletical Point: Receive your generous payment from Christ with joy and do not be envious of fellow Christians.

1. Through a parable, Jesus identifies that the wages He gives to you is not based upon your works

Explain: Early in morning (third, sixth, ninth, eleventh hour);
God alone establishes the terms

Illustrate: Thief on the cross vs. the disciples who left everything

Apply: Jesus sees you standing in the marketplace and calls you to His vineyard – Will you come?

2. In addition, Jesus illustrates God's sovereignty in distributing His gifts to whoever He pleases

Explain: Persistence of the call from God (early, third, sixth, eleventh);
God never gives up calling His workers to the vineyard

Illustrate:

Apply: Have you thanked the owner for inviting you into the vineyard?

3. Again, Jesus showed that all who came into the vineyard worked for a time

Explain: Twelve hours (nine, six, one) of working

Illustrate: The work in the vineyard (work in the kingdom)

Apply: As a worker in the vineyard, are you working with the other workers?

^{NIV} **Matthew 9:37** Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

4. Lastly, Jesus opposes envy from fellow workers in the vineyard

Explain: Envy is not tolerated:

Am I being unfair? Do you really want what you deserve?

Do I have the right to give freely? Isn't that what you received?

Are you envious? His generosity is what brought you into the vineyard.

Illustrate:

Apply: Do you focus on what YOU did and angry at what everyone else has NOT done?

CONCLUSION: Receive your generous payment from Christ with joy and do not be envious of fellow Christians.

Your payment is received upon your death: