

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS

Matthew 20:1-16

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The title of my message today is “The Parable of the Laborers” and I’ll be reading from Matthew, chapter 20, verses 1-16.

The two points of my message are as follows:

- You should respond when God calls
- It’s all in how you view the vineyard

INTRODUCTION: In recent weeks, I’ve preached from the parables of Jesus. We’ve covered The Parable of the Bags of Gold (or talents as some might refer to them), The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, The Parable of the Mustard Seed and Yeast, and Brother Bill preached to you about The Parable of the Lost Sheep. Some of Jesus’ parables are easy for us to understand today, and some of them are subject to debate and discussion. Today’s parable is one of those. Commentators have different opinions about this parable, and I’ll try to bring it home in an easy-to-understand way.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ 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 long doing nothing?’

⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

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.’

⁹ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘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.’

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

BACKGROUND: A few weeks ago, I preached about the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, and I shared with you how an unforgiving spirit has no place in the kingdom of heaven. Today’s parable is about another attitude that has no place in the kingdom.

EXPLANATION: What in the world is the meaning of this parable? The best way to understand any passage of scripture is to look at its placement in the chapter it’s in, the chapters before and after, and ultimately, its placement in the Bible. If you receive a letter from a friend you normally don’t read one section and ignore the rest. You keep in the mind the person writing and why they wrote it.

We see that this parable follows the conversation with the rich young ruler. The man asked about eternal life and Jesus challenged him to give up everything and follow him. You know the rest of the story. The man went away sad because he couldn't part with his material goods.

Jesus used this as a teaching opportunity about how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven... not impossible, just difficult. Then the disciples began to wonder who would be saved – and Jesus replied with the well-known verse: “With God, all things are possible.”

Of course, the disciples gave up all they had and followed Jesus. Most of them had nothing, really, so they didn't have much to give up. When Jesus said, “Follow me,” they all did. None of them lingered and debated, none of them walked away like the rich, young ruler.

Peter spoke up. If it was difficult for the rich to be saved but possible for them to be saved, then how much greater would the reward be for those who gave up everything and followed him without hesitation.

I believe Peter's question was sincere. I don't really see a motive here other than merely wondering. Some probably think they've got more waiting for them on the other side, but I don't think that's what Peter was thinking. It appears this parable was a “preemptive strike,” as one writer said, in order to preempt the disciples of thinking in terms of some type of profit motive in eternity.

Jesus' reply to Peter's question comes in chapter 19. He gave them assurance he had a special role for them, which I don't have time to talk about today, and then he closes with a warning in verse 20. Look at it: “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” Underline that verse and put a note in the margin of your Bible to go to chapter 20, verse 16.

Jesus said the same thing twice so it's clear that this parable came as an illustration for the discussion Jesus had with them.

The landowner had a vineyard that needed attention. He hired people in the early morning and offered them a denarius. Then he hired more at nine o'clock, noon,

three o'clock, and five o'clock. At the end of the day, he started with last hired and gave them a denarius... he paid everyone who worked the same amount of money.

ILLUSTRATION: Let me put this parable in an American perspective. Let's say a farmer said, "I'll give you \$10 an hour to help harvest my crop." The first workers agree to the wage and start around sunup and work twelve hours. That means they'd make \$120. Then another group starts at 9 AM for over \$13 an hour and works nine hours. Another group starts at noon for \$20 an hour for six hours. Another group starts at 3 PM and works for \$40 per hour for three hours. The last hired hands work for \$120 per hour for one hour.

In modern-day language, what those who worked longer would say is, "Unfair! The boss is not being fair." And certainly, we can understand their concerns. We can look at this from several angles including supply and demand. The owner of the vineyard might have realized throughout the day he needed to pay more to get more workers or he might lose his crop.

In the parable, the landowner makes sure he reminds the first worker they mutually agreed upon a wage.

WE SHOULD RESPOND WHEN GOD CALLS

EXPLANATION: While there are at least five different interpretations of this parable, I want to share one with you. Because of the background of this scripture, it's clear Jesus was speaking to the disciples about their labor. They answered the call when he called them. In the future, they would suffer. There would be those who came to faith in Jesus later in life. In the end, they would have eternal life just like the ones who believed first. There would be no "eternal life number one" for the super saints and "eternal life number two" for the others.

Jesus' truth here is clear and simple. The person who becomes his follower later in life has as much of Jesus as the person who becomes his follower in childhood. It's possible some might not like that truth, but let me point out - if this truth upsets you, then something is wrong with your understanding of salvation. None of us "deserve" salvation. It is not a right. It is a free gift of God, as the scriptures tell us. If you think many years of being a Christian destines you for some type of special

place in heaven then you are sadly mistaken, and you need to rethink your understanding of salvation.

We must keep in mind the landowner who said it was his right to do what he wanted with his money. He kept his commitment to the first who agreed to work for a denarius, which was basically a day's wages.

APPLICATION: Folks, when we commit ourselves to the Lord, we are at his disposal to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants, for as long as he wants. We do not and cannot know the mind of God.

- It is not up to us to challenge God and say, “Hey I’ve been working harder for you, Lord, than those people and you seem to be rewarding them more. That’s not fair.”
- It is not up to us to tell God to do anything. He defines fairness the way he wants.

ILLUSTRATION: Let me ask - if eighteen-year-olds get married, are they less married than a couple who's been together fifty years? No. Either you are married or you are not.

Let's say a man or woman was born in America, serves the country during wartime, pays taxes every year for many years, votes in every election, and so on. Then let's say someone from another country comes here and becomes an American, but never fought in a war, is too poor to pay taxes, and has never voted. Is the citizen since birth more of a citizen than the one who just became a citizen? No, both are citizens and both share the same benefits of citizenship.

ILLUSTRATION: I'll never forget the man who started a gospel singing group with his children. They had a sound system and sang in churches. Then one day he quit and someone asked him why. He said, “I was working hard for the Lord and he wasn't blessing me, so I quit.” What a case of missing the point! The blessing was that he was spending time with his teenage kids.

APPLICATION: If God calls you as a little child to follow him and become a missionary to the darkest place on earth, you should respond to his call. It won't be easy and you'll take the arrows – maybe even literally.

If you are older and God is calling you to follow him, you should respond to his call. If you are in the latter days of your life, God is probably not calling you to take the Gospel to the darkest place on earth, but he's calling you to be obedient to him, even if you are on your deathbed.

IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU VIEW THE VINEYARD

ILLUSTRATION: Let's think about the laborers in the field. Consider those who love the early morning, the beauty and colors of the sunrise, the still of the crisp air, and feeling the heat of the sun as it passes overhead. Those laborers enjoy the water and meal breaks and the fellowship and conversation with others. They view work as a privilege and are glad when people join in on the work throughout the day. While they have to earn money to live, they enjoy the experience more than the pay. I'll call this person the happy worker.

Now let's take a look at another group of laborers: those who hate it. They don't really want to be there. They keep tabs on who's doing what, on who's not working as fast, on who took the most water breaks. They take extra breaks when no one is looking. They'd rather be anywhere else. During the heat of the day, they think to themselves they'd rather be dead than work another day in the vineyard. Their main goal is to fulfill their duties, let everyone know, and get paid. I'll call this person the begrudging worker.

EXPLANATION: You know, in the work of the Lord, it seems to be the same. There are those who happily go about their calling. They are generous with all their resources and give freely. And they are happy even if they get no recognition.

Then there are the begrudging workers. These are the ones who do what they are supposed to do and really dislike doing it. They'll go out of their way to make sure people know what they've done.

APPLICATION: In the parable, the early workers were jealous of the workers who were hired later. Don't be like them! Wherever you are in your walk with the Lord, be glad for those who join in regardless of their background.

When a person repents of sin and trusts Jesus as Lord and Savior, that person has an immediate and irrevocable inheritance. While I do believe in deathbed conversions, I believe they are few and far between. It is terribly unwise to delay repenting of sin and trusting Jesus, because we have no guarantee for tomorrow, no guarantee for today. In fact, we have no guarantee for the next minute.

For the person who is putting this off -- Yeah you. The one with a false sense of security that you'll be able to be saved in your dying breath. Listen to me. What are you thinking? Do you not realize that most people don't die while having a conversation? Most people die either suddenly with no advance warning or after they've lost consciousness. I know of only a few occasions where people professed Christ in their dying breaths, and they weren't people who spent their lives planning to do that, they were people who heard the Gospel in their final minutes and responded.

Let's be laborers for our Lord and let's see it as a privilege that we wake up every day, that we get to take a breath, that we have thoughts in our mind. Let's make the best of every day as we labor for the Lord's kingdom.

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