

This morning is the fourth week in my summer sermon series Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a seed" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning we will be looking at the parable of the workers in the vineyard, which is found in Matthew 20. Let me give a quick context of this passage. In the previous chapter, people are bringing children to Jesus to bless, and the disciples rebuke them, thinking that the children are just a nuisance. But Jesus lets the children come to him and declares **"the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."** Jesus tells the disciples **those who come to him like children, trusting in Him with nothing to offer but their love and devotion, are the ones to whom the kingdom belongs.** Immediately after that, a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to get eternal life. And after Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and come follow him, the man goes away sad. And Jesus tells his disciples how difficult it is for a rich person to enter heaven, that it's harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle. There's a clear contrast here: **children, who have nothing to offer but childlike faith, are close to the kingdom, while rich people who have much to offer but are reluctant to part with their worldly goods or to trust Him, are far from the kingdom.** Then Peter answers,

Matthew 19:27-30 - Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Peter says: we have given up everything, just as you challenged this young man to do. What do we get in return? Jesus graciously replies that you will receive so

much more than you have given up, and inherit eternal life. Your sacrifice will result in eternal reward, and there is nothing that you have lost here on earth that will not be made up a hundredfold for all eternity. **This calls to mind the parable we looked at last week on how the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in the field.** But Jesus must have sensed a sense of entitlement in Peter's question, because immediately after this, he tells them this parable about the undeserved favor and grace of God, known as the parable of the workers in the vineyard:

Matthew 20:1-16 – *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

Jesus begins this parable by comparing the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, to a landowner hiring workers. He hires some early in the morning and agrees to pay them a denarius. **This is an important detail to the story.** A denarius (**slide**) was a silver coin that was a typical day's pay for a soldier, a living wage. In this parable, the land owner is hiring day laborers. Day laborers were unemployed men who would go to the marketplace hoping that someone would hire them for the day. Day laborers were typically hired for a fraction of a denarius, since they couldn't negotiate and competition was fierce. In other words, a denarius was a very generous offer for a day laborer. Continuing in Matthew 20:

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.”

So the foreman pays the day laborers, from the last one hired to the first. The ones who worked for 1 hour are paid a denarius, a full day’s wage. And so naturally those who worked for 12 hours expect to receive more. But they do not, and they grumble against the landowner. The landowner answers them that he has the right to be generous, and they should not be envious because he is generous to others. And Jesus ends with reiterating the same thing he said at the end of the previous chapter – the last will be first, and the first will be last.

The point seems to be this: God is like the owner of the vineyard, and those of us who have been saved into God’s kingdom, who have come to faith in Jesus, are like the workers in the vineyard. Some become believers early in life, some later in life, some even at the proverbial 11th hour, on their deathbed. But each one receives eternal life. And so, if you had to sum up the main point of his parable, you could say this: **it doesn’t matter when in life that you are saved, each one receives eternal life.**

Now, that seems a simple enough lesson. So why doesn’t Jesus just say that? Why does he speak in parables when they can be so easily misunderstood?

I think that one of the qualities of the parable is that because it sounds like an everyday story, it has a way of **sneaking past people’s defenses and revealing the attitudes of the heart** in the way they respond. Think of Nathan confronting David about his adultery with Bathsheba, telling a story about a rich man who steals the only lamb from a poor man that gets David upset and then telling David, “YOU are the man!” The parable functions like a mirror, and as you study it, it has a way of revealing who you are and the condition of your heart. As you listen to the story of the workers in the vineyard, I believe it reveals three things in particular:

1) It reveals our attitude toward salvation

When I use the word salvation, I am referring to the essential message of the Bible, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. The bad news is that we are all separated from a holy and perfect God by our sin and deserving of eternal separation from God and all that is good. But the good news is that God loves us so much that He did not let us die in our sins but sent His son Jesus to live the perfect life that we could not live and to die a sacrificial death on the cross in our place for our sins, so that all who repent – turn from their sins and self-centeredness – and believe in Him are

saved from the punishment they deserve, eternal separation from God, and instead receive eternal life.

John 3:16-18 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the workers were going to go hungry unless they were hired. But the landowner chose some of them to work for him. Some worked a full day, some for part, and some only for an hour, but each was given a denarius, more than enough to live on, a day's wage. In the end, the landowner chose each of the workers and generously gave each of them more than they deserved. But as the workers who were hired early saw how generous the landowner was to those who were hired last, they began to think they deserved more.

Now consider the parallel. No one is born a believer. Some come to faith in Jesus as 5 year-olds, some as teens, some as adults, and some, like the thief on the cross who died next to Jesus, hours before their death. But each one – from the 5 year-old to the deathbed convert – receives eternal life, a restored relationship with God, and entry into heaven. Or, put it another way – some have much to offer God, many talents and much influence to make a difference in God's kingdom, while others may have very little to offer, like those who had gone without being hired for 11 hours until the owner of the vineyard brought them in. But each one receives eternal life. How does this make you feel?

Some of you came to faith early in your life. If you came to faith early in your life, are you offended by God's grace towards those who come to faith later in life? **Do you feel you deserve more reward because you served longer, like the workers in the vineyard who worked all day?** Or, if you gave more and worked harder, do you feel like you deserve more? And if so, what does that reveal about your understanding of salvation and of the gospel? If we find ourselves bitter or resentful, like the workers in the parable, then **it shows that we believe that in some way we have earned our salvation and deserve a reward.** But if we know it is all an undeserved gift, much more than we deserve, then our response is gratitude, and we will not be envious of those who come to faith later. As Paul put it:

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

We are saved by what Jesus has done, not by what we have done. And so, if we truly understand the gospel, we know that bitterness and envy are not congruent with salvation by grace through faith. All who are saved have been chosen by God and received His undeserved grace. Salvation is a gift to all. Nothing is earned.

2) It reveals our attitude toward the life of faith

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.’*

The workers saw it as unfair that they had worked the whole day and not earned any more than the ones who worked one hour. And we may think the same way in terms of the life of faith, when we think about our commitment to God. Some of you may feel like you’ve been sacrificing and following Him and saying no to things and living on this narrow path for so long, while others have been living it up and doing whatever they please, and just because they repent at the end of their life, they receive heaven, just like us? That’s just not fair.

If that is how you feel, what does that reveal about your attitude towards the life of faith, towards knowing God and following Jesus and walking by the Spirit?

Think about it another way. What if you knew that you would die on July 28th, 2029? Five years from today, you are going to drop dead. If you knew the day of your death, how would that affect the way you live? If you knew you would die on this date in 5 years, how would that change the way you live? Would you live it up, do whatever you wanted, and then turn to God in repentance the day before you died and ask forgiveness and make sure you were right with God? Or would you commit your all to serving God today, knowing your days are numbered?

In other words, do you see the life of faith as a privilege? Or as a chore, laboring in the heat of the day? Do you see life to the fullest as connected to knowing and serving God or to living apart from Him?

Look at the attitude of the workers in the vineyard. They are filled with envy. After all, they see it as unfair that they had to work the whole day for a denarius and the others worked 1 hour. Does this resonate with you when you look at the life of

faith? **Are you envious of those who are not concerned with Christ?** Are you envious of those who have the freedom to do whatever they want without worrying about what God thinks, or what is right or wrong? Are you envious of those who lived life apart from God and turned to Him later in life?

Remember what Jesus said:

***John 10:10** - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Knowing Him and following Him is life to the fullest. **If you don't feel that way, then you don't know the landowner very well.** You do not know how good He is, **or you have forgotten how good He is.** You do not know that sin leads to death, that choosing to live apart from God is like cutting yourself off from oxygen. Or you have forgotten. You don't know that the things of this world will be burned up in the end, and only what is done in the name of Jesus will last forever.

Those who come to faith later in life and truly know God usually look back and regret the way they lived, wishing they had come to faith sooner, because they know that the consequences of sin remain far after the thrill of sin is gone.

Do you envy the 11th hour worker, the one who comes to faith later in life? Or do recognize that it is the one who came to God in the 1st hour and has spent the majority of their life in the kingdom that is the one who is truly blessed?

3) It reveals our attitude toward God

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 ones 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?'*

Those who worked the full day grumbled against the landowner, believing him to be unfair. They had forgotten that, without the landowner hiring them, they would have had nothing. Furthermore, they forgot that the landowner had given them

more than they deserved, and instead they chose to focus on those who received a lot more than they deserved. The landowner may have shown the workers hired at the 11th hour even more grace, but that does not change the fact that he also showed grace to those hired in the morning.

The workers hired first thought God was unfair for his unequal distribution of grace. How true this can be of us. Do you think God owes you? Do you live your life thinking that if you are good or if you obey, that God owes you blessing? Remember again Peter's question in Matthew 19:27: "*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*"

Do you get resentful if he doesn't answer prayer, because you've been good? Do you grumble against God when others who have not been half as faithful as you receive incredible blessing or healing while you are seemingly overlooked? You spend your mornings in prayer and yet you are still single. You serve in the church and yet someone else gets healed and you don't. This parable reveals that many of us believe that God owes us for our faithfulness or goodness, and that we can become just as resentful or angry as the day laborers when He does not give us what we think we deserve.

But the truth is that God owes us nothing. God is no man's debtor. We can't place him under our obligation because we have done something for him. Everything we do experience is pure grace. Listen to how Jesus put it:

Luke 17:7-10 – "*Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*"

Interesting, huh? Even Jesus comes out and says, you are unworthy servants. God owes you nothing. All is grace.

R.A. Torrey, 19th and early 20th century pastor and writer, shares in his book *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power* a relevant anecdote, a letter he received from someone:

Dear Mr. Torrey,

I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God's will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all that time. I have been superintendent in the Sunday School for 25 years, and an elder in the church for 20 years, and yet God does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?

"This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for 30 years, a faithful Sunday School superintendent for 25 years, and an elder in the church for 20 years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach him in that way. We must, if we would have God answer our prayers, give up any thought that we have any claims upon God. There is not one of us who deserves anything from God."

I love the way he explains praying in Jesus' name vs. praying in our own name. To pray in our name is to tell God that He owes us because of the good we have done. To pray in Jesus' name is to approach God in Jesus' power, through His sacrifice, because of what He has done, not thinking that we can approach a holy God in our own name and on our own merit.

This is the problem with overemphasizing the love and favor of God and deemphasizing the holiness of God and our sin. The more that preachers oversell God's love and favor and minimize God's holiness and our unworthiness, the more that we begin to think that we are so special that God owes us a good life and answers to all our prayers. And then we inevitably get angry and bitter when he doesn't come through the way we think he should, and we pout like a toddler, accusing God of being unloving. But when we realize that we were going hungry in the marketplace until the landowner chose us, that we were sinners headed for eternal death before God saved us, then we realize that all is grace, everything good is a gift, and that it is the highest privilege to be called by the God of the universe into relationship with Him, even to be an unworthy servant in His kingdom. All we have deserved is death, but God has given us eternal life.

To quote J.I. Packer:

"In the New Testament, grace means God's love in action toward people who merited the opposite of love. Grace means God moving heaven and earth to save sinners who could not lift a finger to save themselves. Grace means God sending his only Son to the cross to descend into hell so that we guilty ones might be reconciled to God and received into heaven."

Or as Paul put it:

Romans 11:33-36 - *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

This parable may have a simple lesson – that it doesn't matter when in life that you are saved, that each one receives eternal life – but the way Jesus tells it accomplishes so much more than just instruction. The parable of the workers in the vineyard acts like a mirror held up to our heart, revealing our attitudes towards salvation, the life of faith, and God.

Are you a worker to whom God owes blessing and reward? Or are you one who was separated from God, in need and with nothing to offer, but nevertheless chosen by the God of the universe and blessed even though you did not deserve it?

Is your service to God a chore, while you envy those who do not follow Him? Or is knowing and serving God the highest joy and privilege of your life?

And lastly, is God a boss who owes you results for your labor, or is He a loving and merciful Father who has saved you, chosen you, adopted you, died for you, and to whom you owe everything and will joyfully give everything you have in service to Him?

Let us worship our great God and live a life of gratitude to the one who chose us and saved us by His grace.