

You can find a digital copy of this lesson plan and a co-teaching variation of the plan at myfairviewbaptist.org/small-groups

April 19, 2026

GRACE: MATTHEW 20:1-16

Introduction: The concepts of “fairness” and “justice” are common talking points in our world. We are accustomed to hearing children say, “That’s not fair.” We also hear about fairness and justice in education or in the broader economic system. We also hear about and sometimes have feelings about “fairness” or “justice” in our own lives.

Many companies have policies that forbid employees from discussing their pay with one another. This prohibition exists to prevent feelings related to fairness, or more precisely, “unfairness.” The higher-ups do not want employees who do similar work to discuss pay because one employee might earn more money than another. If an employee earning less money finds out that a peer earns more, he might demand a higher salary or become disgruntled and slack off at work. Sometimes these feelings arise when the employee making less money perceives the higher-paid employee to be underperforming, working fewer hours, or simply not as good at their job.

Discuss: Imagine you work in a company or a factory. How would you feel if you found out a peer hired on the same day as you who works fewer hours, produces less, and is simply not as good at his job made more money than you?

Explain: Now, you might be a better person than I, but I would not be pleased. I would seek a pay raise or a new place of employment. While we might sometimes tell kids that life isn’t always fair or roll our eyes at adults who are always going on about fairness, if we found ourselves in the situation we just discussed, we might declare the situation to be unfair. When it comes to our personal experience with pay and the workforce, we take things personally. That is why Jesus is going to tell the parable in today’s lesson. He tells it because it hits close to home.

Summarize and Transition: We ended last week’s lesson with Jesus’ pronouncement in Matthew 19:30: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” In the context of Matthew 19, we might stand up and cheer. Remember, the disciples had been shocked because Jesus declared that the rich would find it difficult to enter the Kingdom. This was shocking to the disciples because they viewed wealth as a blessing bestowed by God on the righteous. By flipping the script, Jesus was declaring that earthly success does not equal spiritual success. More importantly, only through following Jesus can someone enter the Kingdom. We cheer at that because we know that salvation comes only by the grace of God, not our good works.

Today, we are going to look at a parable commonly called “The Workers in the Vineyard.” Jesus gives this parable to reveal that the principle given in

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

“Jews believed that God gave greater blessings to the one He was more please with. Receiving a smaller blessing meant He was less please with that person.” (ETBC, 75)

Grace: Matthew 20:1-16

Matthew 19:30 might be a little more difficult to swallow in practice. As we study the passage, let's remember that Jesus is talking to His followers, and the people in the parable represent His followers.

(TEACHER'S NOTE: WE ARE GOING TO QUICKLY REVIEW THE CONTENT OF THE PARABLE WITH THE GROUP. ONLY AT THE END ARE WE GOING TO LOOK AT WHAT IT MEANS. THE CONTENT SHOULD BE PRETTY STRAIGHTFORWARD. THAT WILL LEAVE US PLENTY OF TIME AT THE END TO APPLY ITS MESSAGE.)

1. WORKERS HIRED (MATT. 20:1-7)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 20:1-7.

Explain: Scholars tell us, "In the study of parables there is something called 'the law of end stress,' which teaches that what is said at the end is most important." (Preaching, 557) So let's quickly review what the parable *tells* us and then spend time at the end to see what the parable *teaches* us.

Explain: Verse 1 tells us that the landowner went out very early to hire his laborers for the day. The typical workday would be from 6 am to 6 pm, so he arrived before 6 to find men to work his vineyard. When he gets to the city center, he selects some of those waiting to be hired for the day and sends them to work in his field.

Ask: Place yourself in the shoes of the landowner at 5:45 am. You know you have a lot of hard work that needs doing. Who do you select?

Explain: You select the best. You want the ones who have experience. You want the fit. You want the ones who seem most hardworking. These are the ones you select for the day's work. The landowner selects these hardworking men, and they all agree to work for one denarius. The KJV says they agreed to work for one penny. We should not be confused, though. One denarius is the normal day's wage for a person in first-century Israel. The men are happy to work for the money, and the landowner is happy to pay it. All are agreed.

The parable goes on and tells us that the landowner came back four more times. When he comes at 9 am, he finds men who were "doing nothing." This does not mean they are unwilling to work. The Greek here literally means "without work." They had simply failed to land a job. The landowner hires them, and they agree that he will pay them "whatever is right." Jesus tells us that he did the same thing at noon and three. Now we can assume the men all expect a prorated salary. If the men hired at 6 am were getting 1 denarius. The men hired at 9 would expect $\frac{3}{4}$'s of that. Those hired at noon, $\frac{1}{2}$. Those hired at 3, $\frac{1}{4}$. The landowner goes out one last time at 5 pm and hires even more men. This group would expect to get paid for one hour of work in the 12-hour workday. They would expect to get paid $\frac{1}{12}$ of that regular day's wage of 1 denarius.

Summarize Transition: So far, so good. Let's see what happens next.

Notes:

2. EQUALLY PAID (MATT. 20:8-12)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 20:8-12.

Explain: When the end of the day arrives, the men come in from the vineyard to get paid. Some of them are dirty and hot from 12 hours of hard work. Others barely had time to get their hands dirty. It was customary for men to be paid at the end of each workday. Deuteronomy 24:15 actually says, “¹⁵You are to pay him his wages each day before the sun sets, because he is poor and depends on them. Otherwise he will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be held guilty.” So, the foreman gets ready to pay them. Now, you would think he would pay the men who had been working since 6 am first. However, the landowner told him to pay them in reverse order, starting with the ones who began work at 5 pm. We don’t know why a landowner would do this, but it fits well with Jesus’ point in this story.

When the men who had worked one hour came forward to receive their expected meager earnings, they received a full day’s pay, one denarius. We can bet they were confused and then overjoyed by their “luck.” The story does not reveal what happened with those hired at 3, 12, and 9, but we can assume they, too, received one day’s pay in reverse order. Verse 10 tells us, “So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more.” Just imagine these tired men watching the others get paid a full day’s wage when some of them had only worked for one hour. The guys hired at 5 pm got 12 times more than they expected. “Their expectations were through the roof. They were also about to receive twelve times their normal pay.” (ETBC, 79) Or, so they thought. But the story tells us, “They also received a denarius each.”

Discuss: Now, let’s just stop for a moment. Put aside the spiritual application we are going to learn, or that you might already be guessing. Let’s put aside the good Sunday School answer. How would you be feeling and what would you be saying if you were one of these guys who just put in 12 hours of work and received the same pay as the guys who showed up one hour before quitting time?

Explain: On the radio program “A Way with Words,” they explain a phrase that describes this moment. If I were one of these men, “I would be fit to be tied.” This expression dates back over 200 yrs. In the program they explain that to “be fit” means “to be in a position” for something, and “tied” literally means to be tied up or restrained.¹ In other words, “Somebody better hold me back or tie me up because me and this man are about to be swinging fists.” Now the men in the story can’t start a physical altercation with their “better.” But they do let him know what they think. Verses 11 and 12 tell us, “¹¹ When they received it, they began to complain

¹ www.waywardradio.org/fit-to-be-tied

Grace: Matthew 20:1-16

to the landowner: ¹² 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day's work and the burning heat.'

Explain: They began to complain or grumble (ESV). They were mad about the pay, but note their words. "You made them equal to us." G.B. Howell voices their complaints for us in the Explore the Bible Commentary. He writes, "Don't you see we are not equal? You should value us more. We have worked and suffered all day. They worked one hour right at dusk when it was getting cooler. This is not fair!" (ETBC, 80) One commentator writes, "The lord of this vineyard has broken the first rule of all economics: the more work, the more pay." (Preaching, 560)

Summarize and Transition: So, I think it's fair to say that all of us would be on the same page as these guys. But let's see how the landowner responds, and get ready because when we apply this spiritually we are going to see that we might be on the wrong page with Jesus.

3. GRACE EXEMPLIFIED (MATT. 20:13-16)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew **20:13-16**.

Explain: We are going to dig into the words of verse 13-16 in a moment, but let's continue to focus on the story itself. First, in verse 13, the landowner reminds them of their agreement. They *had* agreed to work for 1 denarius. He had not shortchanged them. Second, in verse 14, he reminds them of his prerogative to pay whomever whatever he decides. Third, in verse 15, he calls them out for their jealousy over his generosity shown to others.

Summarize and Transition: Before we move on to apply this parable, let's note that this parable is not about economics. Nor is it about the best way to run a business or retain highly skilled employees. Believe me, this man is going to have a hard time hiring people to work for him the next day. No, this parable is about the Kingdom of God, as Jesus said in verse 1. So, let's see what this all teaches us about the Kingdom.

APPLICATION

Having discussed what the parable tells us, let's take some time to discuss what it teaches us. There is a school of thought that says parables generally have one main point. We might find subpoints, but those flow from the main point itself. (c.f. Preaching, 556). So, what is the main point? Scholars differ on how they word it or what parts they stress, but I think David Platt put it most succinctly. He writes, "God's grace is surprising...He does what we would never expect according to what we could never earn." (Exalting, 269) This story is about God's amazing grace and our response to it. Let's see how the parable teaches us that.

We should begin with the denarius that the men received at the conclusion of the workday. The denarius represents entrance into the

Notes:

Side note, this was probably meant to draw our minds to grumbling nation of Israel in the wilderness.

Grace: Matthew 20:1-16

Notes:

eternal Kingdom of God at the end of the age. To put it simply, it represents “going to heaven.”

Next, let’s examine the characters in the story. The landowner represents the triune God. The workers all represent believers—they are workers in the Lord’s harvest. We should note that. This parable is a story about Christians. We might ask some questions about these workers to begin with.

Who are the early morning hirelings? Spurgeon views the 6 am, 9 am, 12 pm, 3 pm, and 5 pm workers as mirroring chronological age. Those saved early in life. Those saved in young adulthood. Those saved in midlife. Those saved later in life. And finally, those saved at the very end of life. Some have lived righteously and served faithfully for many years, while those saved late in life did not do so. Each receives the same reward. (Spurgeon, 273 and following)

O’Donnell’s view is more metaphorical as opposed to chronological. In his view, the 6 am hirelings are “the first” of verse 16.

Discuss: Who are “the first” in our world today?

O’Donnell explains, "'The first' are those believers... who due to their status, wealth, power, talent, beauty, success, fame, or any other trait deemed valuable to the world are much esteemed by the world and often also within the church." (Preaching, 557) Like the strong, capable workers standing in the market at 6 am they are the “most likely” to be chosen.

Who are the other hirelings? Well, as we saw in the parable, the 9, 12, and 3 o’clock workers are not important for Jesus’ point. He is contrasting the 6 am and the 5 pm workers.

So, who are the 5 pm hirelings? They are “the last” of verse 16.

Discuss: Who are “the last” in our world today?

The book of Matthew has presented us with several examples of the "last," or we might say the "least of these." "Most recently, [he presented us with] little children; before them, a leper, two blind men, a centurion ('the last' are not necessarily the poor or powerless), a paralytic, a Canaanite woman, and Matthew, the tax collector to name a few...No one else wants them, no one else thinks they are worth hiring or investing in." (Preaching, 257)

Now, we need to consider from whose perspective we read the story. Let’s be honest, many of us see ourselves as the 6 am workers. Partly that is because of the way Jesus tells the story. He wants us to identify with them because He wants to show the flaw in that kind of thinking. Another reason we identify with them is that we have the same gut reaction as the workers who feel defrauded by the landowner. More gut-wrenching is the fact that many of us see ourselves as “the first” not “the last.” We don’t admit it, but often we do. Either because of our pride, experience, success, wealth, or because of our long tenured service to the Lord and righteous living, we view ourselves as “the first.” To put it bluntly, we either place ourselves above others because of our worldly position or we place ourselves above others because of our holy living.

In the end, the landowner provides a lesson for the 6 am workers, “the first,” because they are the ones who need the lesson most. Let’s see how he teaches them.

Grace: Matthew 20:1-16

First, as we noted above, the landowner made a point of paying the 5 pm workers first. If he paid the 6 am workers first, they would not have known how much he gave the 5 pm workers. The landowner in our story is teaching a lesson and so is Jesus.

Second, note three things the landowner tells the 6 am workers.

Reread verse 15 (Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I'm generous?)

First, he says, "I have the right." The landowner had full legal ownership of the money he gave to the workers that day. He has the authority to do with it as he pleases. Since the landowner represents God, this points to God's authority to distribute salvation as He sees fit. We do not get to decide who is "good enough" to enter the Kingdom or serve in the Kingdom. In Romans 9, Paul is dealing with a similar situation, and he writes, "On the contrary, who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?" (v20a) Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's words and writes, "Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God? Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question?" (Romans 9:20 MSG) So, God has authority, but God also has intentions.

The landowner says, "I have the right *to do what I want*" (emphasis added). He called the men to his field at different times because he wanted to. He paid them what he wanted to pay them. Since he represents God, this points to God's intentions. God desires that all men be saved regardless of their station in life, regardless of their age, and regardless of their previous sin.

The landowner also says, "I'm generous." This points to God's character. (see ETBC, 81) You will note that in his explanation, the landowner points out that he *gave* the men their wages. His authority to fulfill his intentions allows him to choose what to give at the end of the day. The same is true of God. He generously decides to give all of His children the same reward at the end of life. And it is a very generous reward because, as Paul teaches us, the wages of our sin is eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). You see, in reality, none of us are 6 am workers. None of us are really "the first." Yet God rewards us each with the same reward. We do not deserve the gift of eternal life. "God's grace is surprising, for it surpasses our normal expectations... It's not fair; and that is the point" (Exalting, 269)

CONCLUDE

Remember how the 6 am workers responded to the landowner's actions. They said, "You made them equal to us." No, they were already equal to them. R.T. France says of distribution of pay, "No one receives less than they deserve, but some got far more." As 5 pm workers in the Kingdom of God, we all get more than we deserve. Daniel Doriani writes, "God's generosity actually takes two forms. He gives gifts we do not deserve, and he withholds punishments we do deserve. Sadly, many take God's generosity for granted, so that 'Amazing Grace' has become boring grace. It is boring because we no longer think of ourselves as sinners, or at least not as great sinners." (Preaching, 560) If we have toiled all our lives for the Kingdom of God, we are still unworthy of the great gift of eternal life. We cannot assume that we are better than anyone else called by God, regardless of their stage of life or station in life. D.A Carson puts it rather bluntly, "Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell." (Carson, *How Long, O Lord*, 161 in Exalting, 269) Because that is the *just* destination for all sinners. "4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, 5 made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!" (Eph 2:14)

Conclude the lesson by encouraging the group to pray that God will open their eyes this week and see others as God sees them—sinners in need of salvation, and that they thank the Lord for their salvation.