

Upside Down Kingdom *The Workers in the Vineyard*

Community Group Script...
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[a] 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.”

In the ancient world, and in much of America today, the workday is from sunrise to sunset. It was usually a 12 hour work day.

The life of a day laborer at that time was incredibly difficult. Unemployment was at an all time high and there were more workers than there was work to do. Workers were often hired, overworked and in many cases abused. In addition, the Roman tax rate made making ends meet nearly impossible. These people were being crushed on all sides.

The poverty level was so high that it was a Biblical law for the Jewish landowners to pay their people each day, just so they could survive. This is literally living hand to mouth.

What's interesting about this parable is that it illustrates that God's sense of justice is different than our own. His judgement is based upon something higher than our own. We, as humans, are constantly comparing ourselves to one another and are looking through the lens of our own self-centered perspectives, but God is different.

What's interesting in God's economy is that his goodness and mercy are not rewards based upon strict calculations, but a part of his very nature and character.

There are so many things that are interesting about this parable, for instance, "why do we think we always deserve more than others?" "Why are we not satisfied in God provisions for us, but always focus on what we don't have and what others do?"

As you explore this story, really think about the meaning behind verse 16 which says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." How does that apply to our lives today?

Discussion Questions:

1. What is unusual about the landowner's hiring practices, compensation program, and benefits package? What does this parable teach us about God?
2. Thinking about the church today, who would be the people in the first group? How are we tempted to overlook God's blessings because we are focused on what we think we deserve? Because we are focused on others? When have you seen a grumbling, complaining spirit hurt the health and life of a congregation?
3. Thinking about the church today, who would be the people in the later groups? The last group?
4. In what ways are people made to feel excluded or unwelcome in the church today? How might this impact their relationship with God?
5. Describe a time when you have experienced or been deeply aware of God's grace in your life.
6. Why do you think it is so easy for us to forget that we have all been shown grace equally?
7. What can we do to remind ourselves of God's grace and provision in our lives?