

# *Working in the Vineyard*

*Matthew 20: 1-16*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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When he spoke in parables, Jesus described real life situations common to the people of his day. Jesus showed that he had a keen understanding of the agricultural economy of his day. But in the midst of this everyday situations, Jesus would bring in news about a strange economy, about the economics of the Kingdom of heaven. Many of his stories centered on a king or landowner who had so much wealth that he was beyond the normal rules of supply and demand. In today's story we will hear of a landowner so generous that he overpaid his workers, and then consider what Jesus was telling us about his Father's kingdom.

There was a landowner who owned a large vineyard. The time had come for harvesting the grapes. Commentators tell us that a grape harvest occurs within a narrow window of time. A day or two late, and the grapes will have too high a sugar content to make premium wine. A year's work could be lost in a matter of hours. So when the harvest day came, it was essential to get all the grapes picked as quickly as possible. For this, a landowner needed additional workers. His usual, permanent staff was fine for most of the year, but at harvest time, a slew of temporary workers would be needed.

So the landowner followed a practice not unfamiliar even today. He went to town, to the marketplace. There, people looking for work would be gathered. We might have seen Brian Sleeth from the Christian Outreach Center gathering folks from the O'Brien house to do day labor. Or we might see people gather down at North Blvd and Foster, at Labor Finders to get jobs by the day. There's also a convenience store on Nicholson where a contractor can pick up some construction workers who have no permanent employment. In Jesus' time, someone seeking workers would know to go to the town square and to choose from the available hands for hire. The vineyard owner in the story went early in the morning, say around 6, to hire the most eager, motivated workers. He negotiated a good wage for a day's labor. This amount was a denarius—figure it today at about a hundred dollars. It was the amount a permanent worker would make, so a temp found it a good deal indeed. The men agreed readily to the price. They were happy for the work. There would be food on the table at home tonight.

The harvest was a big job, and about nine a.m., the landowner knew he needed more workers, so he went back to the marketplace to see who was there. He hired more workers, and though the day had already begun, he promised a fair price. They knew this might be less than a whole day's wage, but evidently the landowner had a reputation as a fair employer, and they agreed. The owner of the vineyard did the same thing at noon and at three p.m. He had to have the grapes picked, and he wanted more workers.

In fact, he even went back around 5 p.m., at what is called the eleventh hour, just before the work day ended at dark, around six o' clock. There were some men standing around the square. He asked them why they had been standing around all day doing nothing. Obviously, people who hadn't found work on harvest day at that late hour were not your prime workers. They either hadn't been acting very eager to be hired, or were known to be the kind of workers who would cost more to hire than they produced. They replied, "Because no one has hired us." The landowner took even these back to his vineyard and put them to work.

At the end of a long, intense day, when the harvest was finally in, the owner directed his foreman to pay out the wages of the day laborers. Surprisingly, he instructed the foreman to pay first the workers hired at the eleventh hour, and to give them a whole day's wage! This was extraordinary! The vineyard owner must have felt that the harvest was huge, and in his excitement decided to share his bounty with the workers. The men in line who had worked longer figured they would be getting a handsome tip if the people who only worked an hour got a whole day's wage. But as the foreman doled out the coins, the people who had worked since noon also got a day's wage. The people who started at nine got the same, and so did those who began right after dawn.

The men who had worked a whole day began to grumble. "You made the eleventh hour sluggards equal to us. We endured the heat of the day, and did most of the work, yet you pay us the same. That's not fair."

The landowner came over. "Friend, I'm not being unfair. Did you not agree to a day's wage for a day's work? Did that not seem fair in the morning, and did I not pay you what I promised? If I want to be generous to others, what is that to you? The money is mine to give as I see fit. Or are you envious because I am generous?"

In this way, Jesus said, the last will be first and the first last in the kingdom of heaven. The unlikely are being drawn in to receive the same blessing as the

more obviously worthy and prepared. We realize immediately that this is not a parable about how to run a vineyard profitably—the owner could never sustain his business if the practice continued. This is a parable about the kingdom and God’s economy in dealing with us. Who but an incredibly wealthy landowner could afford to pay out full wages for just a bit of work? The same person who could forgive a king’s ransom of debt in an earlier parable, the one with all resources and all authority, the Father himself. His bounty comes not by merit, heritage or rights but simply because the landowner is just, and he is gracious. It’s all about the landowner who calls us to work.

What pulls at me in this parable is this question, “Why would we think that it’s better to stand around the marketplace all day than to work in the vineyards of the kingdom?” Sometimes, perhaps, we get confused about the point of our labor. We mistakenly engage our lives as if we are working for ourselves, for our glory and advancement, and not for the glory of God. What’s more, is it possible that God’s people become envious of those who do not serve him because it seems they are spared much of the trial and toil of this world? We may mistakenly believe that leisure in the market square is a better life than hard toil in the sun for God’s kingdom.

Growing up in the suburbs of Miami, I did a bit of lawn mowing as a child, but never did a lot of heavy clearing. I never handled a chain saw or any heavy machinery. Early in our marriage, when I was just getting to know Rhonda’s family, we went to visit them in North Carolina. Rhonda’s dad loves to work outside, and the plan was to open the creek at the bottom of their property so the children could play in it. A jungle of rhododendrons covered it. So the men would be going down to chain saw and clear. I wondered if I couldn’t find some excuse. Wouldn’t it be more fun to watch sports up at the house? Or to take the kids into town? Or even go shopping with the moms? My hesitancy was borne of fear that I didn’t know what I was doing.

But all the men were going down to the creek. There was no avoiding it. So I went to work. I learned how to use the saw. I stood in cold waters and grabbed cut branches. I hauled. I sweated. I got cuts on my legs and arms. As the light faded, I was a dirty, stinky mess. Rhonda’s dad and I stood on a rock in the creek and looked down at the water flowing. The streambed was opened up, and it was beautiful. We stood there talking about the project. I realized, “I’m in the family. This place is my place. This is where I work, this is where my people live.”

That night a feast was spread. Now if you know Rhonda's parents, you know that no one ever goes away remotely hungry. And there is no condition on their hospitality. I'd partaken of many bounteous meals there in the past. But this night I entered into the joy of the landowner. The joy of the feast arose from participation in the work of the day.

Why would we ever think that standing around the square is better than the satisfaction of being part of the harvest? The landowner asked the men at the eleventh hour, "Why have you been standing here all day, doing nothing?" They replied, "Because no one hired us." No one claimed them. No one called them to something more, to a higher purpose, to a meaningful labor. What a lonely, lost, empty feeling that must have been. Elsewhere men were laboring and seeing a harvest rescued and realized. These men were blanks. Worth nothing. Would we really envy their lives as stray humans, discardable and usually unneeded?

I remember a guy that we finally got into our men's Bible study. He had lived a fast life. Always in high gear, he had achieved his goal of making \$100,000 in commissions by age 30. He drove a red Boxster sports car and it suited him. This guy was always on the move. He ran through a lot of alcohol and a lot of cash. He ran through one marriage and then very nearly another. Then Jesus got a hold of him. He found the inner peace that had eluded him. He released his quest to prove his own worth and let the worth of Christ be his. One day at our study, he said, "Man, I feel so behind! I was running so fast getting ahead that I didn't realize how far behind I got with God. I envy you guys that have known Jesus for years. I just want more and more of him now. I'm playing catch up, but at least I know where the real race is now." The goal is not the leisure and distraction of selfish living that comes from ambitious pursuit. The goal is to be at work in the Father's vineyard, getting to know the Father and the joy of his will. It was beautiful to see this guy get that.

One of the treasures of our Presbyterian heritage is the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Here we read that "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." How often I think my chief end is my comfort and ease. Too many times I try to get through my work so I can to my leisure, and call it real life. Too many times I labor for me and fail to see the big picture of the harvest. John Piper has said, "God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him." Finding our chief interest and purpose in Christ does not diminish us, as we so often fear—it satisfies us. To glorify God is to turn our eyes away from ourselves, yes, but fear not—turning our eyes on God fills us like no amount of self-focus ever can.

The client before you this week is, by one way of looking at it, someone who will give you money. If you handle him right, you gain. But by another way of looking at it, that client before you is your work for God. By the values you express, by your true valuing of him, by your integrity and your joy, you will glorify God by serving him. Yes, rewards will come, but they will be both less important and all the sweeter when your perspective is heavenly.

Those children may seem to be the obstacle in the way of your getting a moment's peace. That elderly one may seem to be interrupting your life by requiring your care. That neighbor who needs help with a project is keeping you from the big game. On one hand, they are barriers on the way to your leisure, a nuisance to be dispensed with. But seen another way, they are the very path for you to glorify God this week. They are the harvest in the vineyard that cannot wait. And the joy of working in the master's vineyard is so much deeper than standing around the square wasting your life on yourself.

Out on our mission fields this week will be those whose whole lives can be summed up, "Because no one hired me." They may be fabulously wealthy people who are yet shockingly empty—no one called them to a higher task. Seeming sophisticates may be haunted with fear that they are of no significance. Or, there may be children who have been treated as discards and annoyances all their brief years. No one has showed them that they are called to a higher joy of laboring among God's people. There are tons and tons of kids in your school, teenagers, who know only what music and movies tell them—they are living for themselves, for self-fulfillment and do not know that it only leads to emptiness. No one has yet hired them to a higher purpose. The world needs what we know. Do not assume that people you meet know the secret. Most are clueless. Many are desperate for hope and significance.

This week, let us hear the call of the vineyard owner to gather the harvest. We look up from ourselves to see that our lives are about glorifying God in all we do and say. He is the object of our labor and service, whether we keep shop or keep house, teach school or tend patients, arrange flowers or arrange stocks. Whatever we do in word or deed, we do it for God. And then our eyes open to those others who have not yet known the joy of working in the master's vineyard. The good news of this parable is it's not late. Their emptiness cries out, "No one has hired me!" The master sends us to them to say, "Come join the harvesting. Come work for the Lord and learn what real joy is. Your life matters eternally, and

God desires to use you for his glory. You come with me to work in his field.” This parable is no less than the mission of our church, even of our very lives.

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