Introduction

In Jesus’ parable about the workers in the vineyard, He is teaching us about God’s Grace, God’s greatness and what should be our service to God in return.

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

As with all His parables, Jesus teaches using scenes that the people would readily know and this story is about an employer and those who work for him.

Also, Jesus uses parables to answer questions that have been asked and in this case it comes from the previous chapter **SLIDE Matthew 19 verses** when Jesus was asked by a man described as having great wealth **‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ Matthew 19:16.**

It is the same question that was asked by the Scribe, which led Jesus to explain who we should treat as our neighbour. Given that this appears to be a completely different questioner, this must be a point that Jesus wants us to clearly understand – even if from two different perspectives.

People were searching to ensure that they had a secure place in the Kingdom of God – a good thing to do. However, as Jesus keeps explaining, that right to eternal life in heaven is not earned by works, riches, or how well you can keep the Mosaic law, it is actually not earned at all.

It is granted by God as part of His generous nature - because the listener has recognised that they are a sinner in God’s eyes, they have sought out Jesus as their Saviour and have asked Him for forgiveness, having said sorry for all the wrong things they have done.

That is the Gospel – it hasn’t changed in 2,000 years, because God is never changing.

Jesus answer to that wealthy man was to achieve perfection. In addition to keeping the Jewish law, he needed to **‘go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’**

Needless to say. This isn’t what he wanted to hear, he wanted the assurance of gain in God’s kingdom, without loss or cost in his earthly life.

Does that sound familiar? Are you living with a sense of denial? On the outside living as if you have God’s grace, but internally and when not with fellow believers, living in a way that you would not want Jesus to see you in?

The Greek word used for great wealth translates directly as possession of property, lands and estates. With that would have come a standing in the community, honour from people and a sense that he has been well blessed by God.

He has been blessed, but it is so he can use his wealth – as Jesus said, **‘go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’**

After this man leaves, Jesus says **‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’**

From that Jesus shows in His parable, how God will bring people to His Kingdom and we will see that God’s way of rewarding the faithful, may not fit into our human viewpoint of what is fair – **‘So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’**

**SLIDE Matthew 20:1-7**

The landowner went to the marketplace, which was the gathering place for day laborers. Men wanting work would wait there first thing in the morning, carrying his tools and waited until someone hired him.

Early in the morning means literally ‘at dawn,’ usually reckoned to be about 6am. These workers hired at the very beginning of the working day agreed to work for a denarius a day and were content with the level of pay. This was the common daily wage for a workingman.

But throughout the day, the landowner continues to hire workers, but note when negotiating the wages, he says he ‘**will pay… whatever is right’.** The point is, the landowner promised to pay all the later workers fairly.

Not known if this was common practice – but he returns to the marketplace at 9am, midday, then 5pm in order to get more workers. Maybe some of them have already had work for part of the day and now have nothing to do.

Maybe, the ones hired at the end of the day are those who get up late each day and are lazy, so no one wants to employ them. Maybe the ones employed first aren’t up to the job, so a fresh team is required.

Whatever the situation, it is the landowner’s freely made decision to take them on.

Harvest time for farmers can be a race against the clock and the weather, so although the landowner appears to have a never-ending source of work, it is possible that any worker was welcome, even if he was only available for an hour.

There is an element of surprise in what the landowner says – he is surprised to find people idle, because he had plenty of work to give them.

Spurgeon applied this to us spiritually: ‘Why is any one of us remaining idle towards God? Has nothing yet had the power to engage us to His sacred service? Can we dare to say in explanation that, ‘No man has hired us?’

Spurgeon is right – the Lord’s has given His people work to do and we should be doing that first as our priority for the day. What the Lord has given each of us is as individual as we are, but through prayer and study, we can find the abilities God has given us and put them to work for His Kingdom.

There is no excuse in a believer saying the equivalent of ‘no man has hired me’.

**SLIDE Matthew 20:8-10**

Finally, at 6pm, the workers stopped work and came for their wages, with those employed last being paid first – and they are paid for a full day’s work.

We all know probably know this parable well enough to know what is coming, so it is right to state that God is not ultimately going to reward us for the work we do, unless we are believers.

In terms of this parable, we could equate the acceptance of the landowner’s job offer with a believer’s acceptance of Jesus as His Saviour. Only after that point are the works we do of any value to our souls.

So back to those who have been paid and those still waiting…

Those who have been paid for a few hours would no doubt have been delighted with their pay – a full day’s pay for less than a day’s work.

In line and seeing their fellow workers were those who had been employed first. They supposed that they would receive more.

Spurgeon also considered that the order of payment was important. If the first workers had been paid first, they would not have had time to develop the expectation of more pay for themselves. He said, possibly the first group felt their vanity (their pride) wounded by being paid after the others, but they used their waiting time in considering their own superiority to the latecomers.

But we know that everyone received the same pay, one denarius, no matter how long they had worked.

**SLIDE Matthew 20:11-15**

These men then complained against the landowner. They were offended that the landowner had given hose who had worked less, the same as those who had **borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day**.

Who do we sympathise with – those who had worked all day, or those who were potentially idle all day, but quietly ducked in at the end to earn the same reward?

The landowner chooses one worker to direct his response to and says, …d**idn’t you agree to work for a denarius?**

The landowner reminded them that he had been completely fair to them. He did them no wrong, and had broken no promise.

**I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.** The landowner did nothing to explain why he did what he did, rather than to say ‘I wanted to do it’. The reasons for the landowner’s generosity were neither up for debate, nor were they to be disclosed.

He says, **don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?** The landowner rebuked them for their jealousy and resentment of the landowner’s generosity towards others. He also reminded the workers that it was his money to do with what he wanted.

Instead of using the word envious, some translations have the landowner accusing the men of having an **evil eye**, which takes envy to a different level.

Having an evil eye meant the person was envious and covetous – someone who loved his own money, yet resented his neighbour’s prosperity and would do nothing in the way of charity for God’s sake.

Jesus was deliberately using strong language here.

**SLIDE Matthew 20:16**

This is the point of the parable – it is all about the landowner’s generosity.

Jesus finally applies the parable, with the principle of God’s reward, saying, **…the last will be first and the first will be last**. , a remarkably similar statement to that in **Matthew 19:30**, when Jesus said **…many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.**

Jesus’ is responding to Peter’s question in **Matthew 19:27** when he said, **we have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?**

Peter and the disciples knew they had given up a great deal to follow Jesus and Peter was wanting to know what they would get in return.

Jesus answers for all believers through al time when he assures Peter and the disciples that they will be rewarded – however, the principle of the last will be first and the first will be last means God may not reward as man expects - as the parable illustrated.

God chooses to reward through His Sovereign Grace – even to the late-comer or the outsider.

As God’s disciples we should rightly have an expectation to be rewarded; but at the same time, we should not be surprised if, when rewards are distributed, God will reward others in unexpected ways.

That is what God’s Grace is all about - He rewards and blesses man according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what men deserve. That is good news for us.

The system of law is easy to figure out: you get what you deserve.

The system of grace is generally foreign to us: God rewards and blesses man according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what men deserve. That is good news for us.

The landowner was not unfair to anyone, but some were clearly treated more generously than others. God will never be unfair to us, though He may – for His own purpose and pleasure – bestow greater blessing on someone else who seems less deserving. That could be you!

God’s grace always operates righteously.

Spurgeon said about this verse, ‘what does it matter, after all, whether we are first or whether we are last? Do not let us dwell too much upon it, for we all share the honour given to each other.

If God shall bless your brother, and make him ten times more useful than you are, then you see that He is blessing you – for we all belong to the body of Christ’.

To repeat what I said before, entry into the Kingdom of God is through God’s Sovereign generosity to sinners – and our entry into the Kingdom then allows us to run the race that Paul described in **1 Corinthians 9:24**, to gain the prize on offer.

The entry fee to be a believer in Jesus is free, but the annual subscription will cost you everything.

We cannot enter the Kingdom on our own achievements, only by God’s generosity.

You and everybody else will be called on the Day of Judgement to account for themselves. You will be rewarded according to your response to God’s generosity.

Offer / Pray