

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

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[0 : 0 0] so if you have your bibles perhaps you can turn again to Matthew's gospel and this time Matthew chapter 20 so our focus is going to be this parable often known as the parable of the workers in the vineyard but I want to read beyond that as well to set it in its context so let's again hear God's word for the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard he agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard about nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing he told them you also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right so they went he went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing 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 because no one has hired us they answered he said to them you also go and work in my vineyard 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 the workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius so when those came who were hired first they expected to receive more but each one of them also received a denarius when they received it they began to grumble against the landowner 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 in the heat of the day but he answered one of them I'm not being unfair to you friend didn't you agree to work for a denarius take your pay and go I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money or are you envious because I am generous so the last will be first and the first will be last now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem on the way he took the 12 aside and said to them we are going up to Jerusalem and the son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law they will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified on the third day he will be raised to life then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to

Jesus with her sons and kneeling down asked a favor of him what is it you want he asked she said grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom you don't know what you're asking Jesus said to them can you drink the cup I am going to drink we can they answered Jesus said to them you will indeed drink from my cup but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant these places belong to those for whom they've been prepared by my father when the ten heard about this they were indignant with the two brothers Jesus called them together and said you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over them and their high officials exercise authority over them not so with you instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many amen this is God's word so this is our last parable from Matthew's gospel these stories with purpose that Jesus tells this one the parable of the workers in the vineyard perhaps the question that we can ask ourselves is how does Jesus turn our natural value system upside down because this is one of those parables where I think our instinct is to sympathize with those grumblers it offends our sense of justice it's very easy to read this parable and say that's not fair if you imagine in our own workplace setting if the new guy who's straight in the door is promoted to the same pay and benefits as someone with years of experience we would find ourselves probably saying that doesn't seem fair so so instinctively we get those first workers and I think in a sense that's the point this parable is meant to shock us here's our normal value system here's the values in the kingdom of heaven and they're so very very different the world applies rank and status in so many different ways so next weekend Scotland will be on their journey we hope towards the world cup when we get there if we get there we will be in not pot one two or three we will be in lowly pot four we apply rank status matters we know this the words of a colleague doesn't always hold the same weight as the words of our boss and we instinctively have that understanding that time served brings a measure of entitlement that's something that can even creep into our churches but Jesus story says it's not like that in his kingdom he invites us to reject what what kirkagar called the sin of comparison and leads to either pride or envy and to respond gladly to when someone else has success and has shown kindness it's an invitation indeed for us to reflect the mercy and goodness of God so let's dive into our text we've got four things to look at together the first we can say timing is everything in this parable so so all the way along when we'll be looking at the parables we said one way to understand what's going on is to look for the surprising parts and the two big surprises in this parable both have to do with timing at first to do with the hiring process and then the payment process so just to go back to the first couple of verses we have a very familiar scene from Jesus day we have a landowner going out early in the morning to the marketplace to hire day laborers for his vineyard and he agreed to pay them a denarius normal day's wage

everything is as we would expect but then surprise begins to emerge this owner makes multiple return visits and so we have two choices so either we can think well this is a very disorganized landowner this is someone who's failing to plan well or if we understand as Jesus teaches us this is about the kingdom of heaven this landowner represents a surprisingly generous and compassionate landowner who keeps going out in order to meet the needs of others so in verse four after three hours of the working day have already begun he meets some others standing in the marketplace doing nothing and he says you go and work and i'll pay you whatever is right and they trust him and that goes all the way until five in the afternoon so eleven hours of the working day have already been done but these guys are still here he asked the question why been standing here all day long doing nothing because no one has hired us and so he responds by inviting them to go and work in his vineyard these 11th hour workers you imagine standing desperately hoping against hope by this stage in the day that someone will take pity on them the sense of despair as they congregated as other people got hired it makes me think of i read an article a number of years ago but the japanese salaryman you know very famous japanese businessmen well um they did an article uh where it where it turns out there's a lot of these salary men who have lost their jobs but they're too ashamed to admit that to their family they have no prospects of finding future employment because of their age so what they they had been doing is they've been dressing up for work getting on the tube and then sitting in the park all day a hopeless situation makes me think of these these 5 p.m workers you know if the landowner doesn't come there's no bread on the table there's no dignity for them and work to do and so this mercy from the owner is good news so that's one surprise the surprise of the hirings the second surprise is to do with the payment process so we get to six o'clock we get to clocking off time verse eight and the owner calls the foreman call the workers and pay them their wages beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first so there's a bit that's normal you get to the end of the day old testament law says you must pay a day laborer at the end of their day's work so they will have bread to feed their family the usual order of course first one in would be the first one paid but our owner reverses that timing now why does he do that he does it to draw attention to his mercy his compassion and his generosity if he paid everyone an order everybody else wouldn't get to see this is a generous merciful owner and that's what he wants people to know but what happens and we see this is that the payment process produces tension you know how will the other workers feel about this how will they feel about this guy who's worked for less than an hour getting a full day's wage and what we see is grumbling what we see is jealousy but that's set against the delight of our owner it gives him joy it's what he wants to do to show mercy and kindness and he wants these other workers to see and to share in that joy i think there's a couple of lessons that we can draw as we think about the timings in the parable the

first lesson and we find all through the bible is that salvation is a free gift of god's grace we do not contribute to it we do not earn it one of the ways people go wrong when approaching christian faith is to approach it like work well if i do enough religion and if i do enough good living surely that's what i need to earn eternal life and the bible says said no it's not about earning rather we need to see ourselves in the story as these eleventh hour workers we're standing hopeless and helpless because of our sin we stand under the just judgment of god there's nothing that we can do to change that status what we need is that the free grace of god we need god to send his son and that's what he has done so salvation is a free gift and and and the second lesson that we can draw from from this parable i think is that god's mercy is right on time mercy god's mercy comes in a way that brings him glory and brings us joy paul spoke about that in galatians galatians chapter 4 verses 4 and 5 when the set time had fully come god's set time when the set time had fully come god sent his son born of a woman born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship the son of god entered history took our humanity went under the law at god's right time to redeem us and adopt us as an expression of his great mercy so this parable stands again as a reminder to us that the mercy of god is open to us all we hear that the words of of the gospel today is the day of salvation the time is right for any of us and all of us to enjoy god's grace in jesus if we will hear that invitation and respond in faith so timing is everything the second theme that we see in our parable and in the wider section is that of first and last the idea that jesus reverses our values and we can think in some ways of the parable being the meat in the sandwich and what's on either side of this parable chapter 19 verse 30 many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first verse 16 of chapter 20 so the last will be first and the first will be last jesus is driving home the point through all of his ministry and here now we see it again god's kingdom is not like the world it's not about competing and comparing and striving to get ahead wealth status time served achievement beauty power those are not what counts in god's kingdom and jesus is inviting us to recognize that we can expect surprises in his kingdom there will be these reversals that are unexpected now how does jesus show it in our parable well we saw it didn't we in verse 8 even the words of the story that jesus tells i had the payment policy begin with the last one's hired going on to the first so the last or first these last workers are deliberately honored publicly honored they don't receive performance related pay and that's good news that's grace that's goodness and generosity that's unexpected there was no discussion am i going to get a denarius nobody would be hoping at that stage to get a full

day's wage but they do so the payment policy shows reversal but you know we can also see it can't we in the character of the owner so think about how this man is presented he's obviously a landowner with significant wealth and resources he's able to hire many people he has standing in society but where's his heart his heart is for these poor guys that nobody else is going to hire he is for the down and out Jesus comes as good news to the poor this parable presents hope for the hopeless for those who have been pushed aside and marginalized Jesus says that's not how our kingdom works think about the words that the that the that Jesus uses for the landowner as well in response to the grumbling look at verse 14 when he talks about what he wants I want to give the one who was hired last the same as you and he talks about his rights don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money and to be generous with it that's where his heart is mercy generosity grace reversal of values in the kingdom of heaven but we see that same idea in the wider section that's why we read in chapter 19 and chapter 20 where do we see those reversals we see it with the the little children remember the disciples don't bother bringing the children to Jesus he's far too busy and important children were regarded as nobodies in society and the disciples had picked up on that and Jesus what does he do he welcomes them and blesses kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these those who depend those who trust straight after that we meet the rich man and again the disciples they're presuming well if God has blessed anyone he's certainly blessed this guy wealth is a sign of blessing so they thought but the way Matthew writes this story we're almost invited to imagine this man with his hands full of money he's coming to Jesus looking for life but he will not let go of that money so he can welcome Jesus everybody thought he was inside but he's outside the kingdom of heaven immediately after our parable we find Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem Jerusalem the place where you would expect God's king to be honored but there is reversal there too because Jesus knows he's going to Jerusalem to suffer to die and then we meet a mum and two sons these two disciples and the mum has the request that these two disciples get the seats of honor in the kingdom and Jesus talks about how different life is in the kingdom that true greatness isn't about power it's about service and of course the cross is the ultimate demonstration of that so again just to think about this theme of first and last one vital lesson for us to learn is that we should never we can never limit God's grace by applying a human ranking system and if we examine our hearts and if we're honest we probably recognize there are times when we do that God is not just for church types whatever a church type is

[18 : 41] there's also that constant a reminder in in the gospels let's not give up on our prodigals let's not imagine just because someone has wandered that they are lost and we are done with them i was so encouraged this week to hear the story of of a friend of mine i hadn't heard the story of how he came to faith in detail so i had the chance to talk to him and and he talked about a life of being a former drug dealer a life really just totally messed up and he had a really low point and recognized you know what i need to do i need to read my bible and as he read his bible he said you know what i need to do i need to go back home i need to speak to my my parents and those parents had been praying for him and those parents shared the gospel with him and he came to faith his life was transformed and he's serving god he was a prodigal we don't limit god's grace we don't apply rank and status and think well god likes those kind of people not those kind of people the second lesson to draw is that in god's kingdom the way up is always down the church does not and should not look like our workplace it shouldn't look like our sports club the way to greatness in jesus eyes is through humble service like john the baptist who was wise enough to say jesus must increase i must decrease moving on a third thing for us to think about is response of these first workers let's think about grace and grumbling in verse 15 we find the last phrase from the landowner are you envious because i am generous literally we could read that do you have a bad eye or do you have an evil eye in other words there is something wrong with your vision you know if i take off my glass instantly everybody becomes a blur there is something wrong with my vision i'm going to deal with that um what is jesus talking about here what's wrong with their vision in this story the problem is they do not see mercy as beautiful rather they see it as ugly they don't see mercy as being more precious than them getting more money so we see it in verse 11 as soon as they realize that those guys that worked for about an hour got a whole day's wages they're rubbing their hands thinking wow we're going to get a great bonus and they get the same and so they begin grumbling verse 12 those who were hired last worked only one hour and you've made them equal to us we worked harder we were more productive our conditions were far tougher how dare you make them equal to us does the owner say i'm not being unfair he reminds them that he's kept to his terms but he also wants them to focus on his mercy you are being envious to the fact that he is being generous and to supply the needs of others that should not be there should not be pride and envy and anger and frustration because of this man's goodness think about it surely they should be glad wouldn't we in our hearts

want to be glad here is more families that are going to be fed today here is a group of workers who have had dignity today but instead there's envy and there's grumbling again i wonder if we're honest is this something that at times at least we struggle with how do we deal with the happier circumstances of others what's our heart reaction to the success of others how do we handle the thriving churches of others when we should be singing sometimes we sigh when there should be gratitude sometimes our hearts grumble if you know the story of the Grinch sometimes our heart grows three sizes too small and we're not able to celebrate the grace of God what's happening there our eye is bad when we fail to celebrate God's grace our eye is bad when we fail to treasure God's mercy wherever we see it whether that's to our neighbour whether that's to the family down the road the church down the road whether we hear of what God is doing in other nations that should always make us glad and so one of the key lessons that the disciples needed to learn and we need to learn is to ask for grace to celebrate grace to deal with that instinct in our heart that says

I wish that was me that says do you know what that's just not fair whether we see that in our life in our church in the circumstances of other others ask for grace to celebrate grace now you and I know we all have different pressure points for that so I was at General Assembly this week for Christian ministers one of those pressure points like how do we handle it when we hear of growing churches how do we hear of it when there are dramatic conversations happening in other places dramatic conversions can I be glad at what God is doing where are the pressure points for you can we be glad to hear of someone's engagement and their marriage when we are single and we'd love to be married can we be glad when someone has a new child and we find ourselves longing for one can we be glad when someone has a new job and they're enjoying it and we're stuck in a terrible one can we celebrate with others the goodness of God in their life one of the wonderful things about Christian joy is that Christian joy isn't just tied to what's happening to me and my circumstances

Christian joy is so much bigger than that it's rooted to what's God's good work in his world where is he saving people where is he maturing faith in people where is he causing people to serve with joy when we see how big God's grace is that's when our heart begins to expand so the lesson from these grumblers is we need to learn to walk in the shoes of others don't we and we certainly need to celebrate God's grace at work last thing to say briefly is to think about what we can call the 11th hour gospel so I think one of the things that Jesus would cause by this parable is a tension in our hearts and a question how do we change so that we can celebrate grace where do we get the power to change to see the world differently how can we choose these different values of the kingdom of heaven the beginning of that answer at least is here in this parable you know with any story that Jesus tells we're always invited to think who do I identify with in this story where do I find myself in this parable

Jesus in the first instance says to the disciples and says to us watch out because we can so easily be like those first workers who grumble but he would also have us all to see that in a very real sense we are all those 11th hour workers 5pm days almost done standing without hope we cannot fix it our great need is not justice our need is God's goodness and grace that he would show us his mercy and his kindness and that's what we see in the sending of the Lord Jesus if anybody is first it's Jesus first in glory eternal son of God king of kings but what does Jesus say to his disciples he is ready and willing to become last to be rejected to suffer to be crucified to die he is ready to serve us to show us generous grace to forgive our sin to give us a new heart to give us the hope of eternal life the greatest man who ever lived the God man chose to serve sinners like us as Jesus said in verse 28 just as the son of man that's Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many and as we remember that as we remember

[29 : 10] Jesus the first being ready to become last for us as we remember all that he gives to us by his grace that's where we find the power for our grumbling to become gratitude that's where we'll find we're willing to give up the chase to be first and instead to be like Christ to be ready to serve others let's leave it there and let's pray together Lord our God we thank you for the Lord Jesus even as he told that parable he was also telling of his suffering and his death and he was telling us that he came to be a servant to set us free from sin by taking sin on himself and paying the price in full so we could be forgiven and have new life

Lord help us to see that in the kingdom of heaven it's about grace all the way down help us to be on the lookout and to celebrate every evidence of your goodness and mercy whether that's in our own life or in the life of others give us that capacity to rejoice with those who rejoice Lord will you guard our hearts and will you apply the truth of your word to our hearts and that you be changing us in line with its truth we pray in Jesus name Amen Now we're going to finish with what I guess to the world is an old hymn but for us it was something of a new hymn grace greater than all my sin we sang it last Sunday evening we're going to sing it again Kellen's going to sing through the verse and the chorus for us then we'll go back to the beginning join in obviously whenever you know it but let's stand and let's sing these wonderful words things to look forward to the victor
■■■s of my