

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

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- [0 : 0 0] I do have a slightly loud voice, I'm told. There's certain phrases you don't have to teach your kids, aren't there? Certain words, even. No. Mine.
- And what do you think this one is illustrating? Three words. It's not fair. And when we spoke about this parable on Friday, we used an illustration.
- And at the end of the illustration, the kid said, that's not fair. And we spoke about the parable, and they said, that's not fair. And I completely agree with them.
- But maybe not for the reason they did. And so today, as we look at this parable, I think it's really important that we try to look at it with fresh eyes.
- There are lots of ways in which you can interpret this parable. Preparing this, I didn't realize, but actually each of the party conferences we've just finished actually start, or in the first day, they have a church service.
- [1 : 0 3] And I read that this parable has been preached both at the Labour Party Conference and at the Conservative Party Conference. And you can imagine, at the Labour, you know, it was preached because Jesus was a good socialist.
- There's a minimum wage and a quality for all. And then the same parable was preached at the Conservative Party Conference because Jesus was a good free market capitalist.
- There's a boss who calls the shots. He can hire and fire at will. And there were no trade unions. But that's not really what this parable is about.
- It's not about how bosses should decide how to pay their staff, although Jesus does have some things to say about that. To understand it, we really need to look at the sort of specific context.
- So if you've got a Bible, maybe open it up in front of you or flip it out on your phone. I'm hoping... Wait a second, don't let me... If I do that. So it's a parable about a vineyard.
- [2 : 0 4] But it's set in a specific context. So it was written by Matthew. Or it's in the Gospel of Matthew. And actually it's only found in the Gospel of Matthew.
- And we need to think about the context. So if you look at the chapter before, Jesus has been asked questions by the Pharisees.
- And chapter 19 is all sort of about... It's about negotiation. The Pharisees start asking Jesus about divorce. When a man is or isn't allowed to divorce a woman.
- So they start to sort of negotiate, if you like. And then a rich young ruler comes, essentially almost haggling for eternal life.
- He says, what do I need to do in order to deserve or earn eternal life? And then if you look later on, he leaves disappointed.
- [3 : 0 4] And the disciples say, wow, it's really hard to get eternal life. What about us? We've given up this. So what do we get now? And Jesus surprises them.
- He gives them this amazing promise about ruling the 12 tribes of Israel when Jesus comes back. But then he says something else. He said, but actually so will anyone else who's given up essentially almost anything for me get a reward.

So it's a parable which is set in sort of an atmosphere of negotiation. And actually, if you look at verse 30 in chapter 19, you might sort of hear a bit of an echo.

Because that chapter finishes with, but many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first. And the parable that we have is bracketed by those two first and last statements.

And the parable is sort of explained by those statements. And Jesus tells it, I think, in response to these negotiations that are going on.

[4 : 19] And so something we often do in the youth group is we think about why things are written. And this parable, or how they're titled, and this parable, people have interpreted it lots of ways over the years.

In the first century, people often interpreted it as meaning that Gentiles are called as well as Jews. The people first, who were called first at 6 o'clock in the morning, they're the Jews and everybody else are Gentiles.

And that's one interpretation. Another one was in the, I feel a little bit intimidated standing up here now after the rap song, explained the parable to you. That's another interpretation.

That it doesn't matter when you accept Jesus, your reward is eternal life. And it will be, it's a gift given for all. And that's one interpretation.

But I think that Jesus' parables are brilliant. Because they have so many different layers. And today I want us to look at something different. Something we do in the youth group when we're thinking about what a passage can say to us is we actually tell the kids that it's all right if they cross out some bits of their Bible.

[5 : 33] Bits they maybe don't like. I can see you're looking a little bit nervous. Don't worry. Andrew Bartlett, KC, last week, suggested you might like to do this as well.

I'm just talking about the title at the top of the chapter. Because this says, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. But often when we look at parables, we like to think of them differently.

And I actually think that a little bit like Andrew last week suggested that the parable about the prodigal son might actually be better called the parable of the loving father.

The parable of the lost sheep could be called the parable of the faithful shepherd. The parable of the unforgiving servant could be called the parable of the forgiving ruler.

And actually, I want this morning to think about this as not being a parable primarily about workers, but being a parable about a gracious master.

[6 : 34] So if you hear nothing else, if you nod off during the next hour and a half, then just go back and look at that parable and see how gracious the master is.

In Sunday school, we always used to say, you know, what's the answer to every question? Jesus. The answer to this parable, what's it about? It tells us about God. It tells us about his nature.

And in Hebrews, it says, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.

And I love this last bit. It says, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And I think that as we look at how the laborers react to the master's grace and generosity, it can help us discern the thoughts and intentions in our heart.

So let's think about the parable of the gracious master. And I want us to think about three things that it tells us about the master. The first is the master's desire.

[7 : 48] The next is the master's choice. And the third is the master's reward. So let's start thinking about the master's desire.

Well, Jesus says in the beginning, he says, the kingdom of heaven is like. And at this point, I imagine the disciples might have started thinking, what is he going to say now?

Because is it a mustard seed? You know, what is it? Is it a sower? And he says, the kingdom of heaven is like.

A master who goes out looking for people to work. And I can sort of imagine Peter go, you know, we've got a good following now. Can't we just calm things down and say, the kingdom of heaven is like a sort of a country club with an exclusive membership.

Come in and have your needs met. Or the kingdom of heaven is like an all-inclusive resort. Maybe the kingdom of heaven is like a hospital, which is partially true.

[8 : 57] But actually, he chooses a vineyard as the setting of what the kingdom of heaven is like. And in the Old Testament, the vineyard was seen as being a picture of God's children, the people of Israel.

In Isaiah 5, it describes a vine being planted by God and tended by him. But Jesus paints a picture of a vineyard which may have been planted by God.

But it's a vineyard in which we are called and expected to work. God chose to demonstrate what his relationship with people would be like through that relationship with the children of Israel.

And when we studied Abraham, we thought about how Abraham was blessed to be a blessing, that the vineyard was there to bless many. And lots and lots of verses in the Old Testament refer to the spiritual blessing which will come to people from that relationship with God.

It came to the children of Israel. But it wasn't just to be kept for them. It was to be shared. There's a great sort of literal verse about the vineyards and sharing grapes in Deuteronomy 24 where it says, when you pick grapes from your vines, don't go over them a second time.

[10 : 25] Don't take everything because this relationship isn't just for you. It said, leave grapes for the widow, the orphan, and the alien.

And this principle of us being given fruit by God is an important one. The principle in the work in the kingdom of heaven is constant and it's sort of throughout all of Jesus's, it's throughout all of his teaching.

Being a member of the kingdom of heaven is hard work. It's meant to be. He sends his disciples out. He sends 12 out to work and spread the kingdom of heaven.

He sends 70 out. And embedded throughout his message of what it is like to be a member of the kingdom of heaven is this idea of work. Earlier on in Matthew, he said, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers out into his harvest field. Or earlier in Matthew as well, he said, when he describes what a relationship with him is like, he doesn't say, a relationship with me is like a comfortable deck chair in which we can sit side by side and I can chat to you.

[11 : 50] He said, take on my yoke. It's easy and the burden is light, but a yoke was there to help work to be done. God's desire right from the beginning was for us to get involved in his work.

He chose to do this not from afar, but he chooses his disciples and people. I like this phrase that I heard when people were talking about the fruit in the kingdom of heaven.

They said, God doesn't just offer punnets of pre-picked and washed grapes. He wants his people to be involved in farming them and distributing them.

And this restoration, this fruit, is only going to be complete when Jesus comes again. But the kingdom of heaven is meant to be something which we live in today as well.

It's not something that happens just out there. It's something that's meant to happen here today in our communities. That's why we just said the Lord's Prayer together.

[12 : 59] And what did it say about the Lord's will? Your will be done. Your kingdom come here as it is in heaven. I think the master's desire teaches us a lot about what God is like.

So the second thing, the master's choice. Well, if we look at this, sorry, we haven't got out of verse one yet. That's not good going, is it? It said, the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.

He went out early in the morning to hire workers. And the first thing to notice is that it's God who goes out and seeks workers.

Like in all of these parables that we've been thinking about, God is the instigator. He is the good shepherd who goes and looks for the sheep. Even in the parable of the running father or lost son, it says that he is there looking out.

And he is the first one to start running towards his son. So what about the workers in this story? Maybe a little bit of context would help.

[14 : 11] These were day laborers. They were not permanent staff. These were not skilled people. They were really quite poor men. They tended to be living hand to mouth.

And they went to the marketplace each day, hoping, desperately hoping to find work. A bit like, I don't know how many of you ever used the B&Q; on the old Kent Road.

There are often workers there waiting, just looking for some work. These were not super skilled people.

They were zero hour contract workers, if you will, of the ancient world. And it's a fascinating story and I often like asking questions.

Why doesn't he just hire everyone straight away? Surely he knows how big his farm is. Surely he knows how many grapes there are to be harvested.

[15 : 15] We're not told why he keeps going out. I don't think it's because he misunderstood the amount of work that needs to be done. I don't think he went to the farm and went, oh, we're never going to get all this finished by the end.

I think he kept going back because there were still people that needed a job. He went there to give them a job, to give them what they needed, not because he was in need.

and it says that when he asks those who he hires, he goes back at, you know, the ancient world started, I'm glad I didn't live then, started at 6 a.m.

the first hiring would have been and they worked a 12-hour day until 6 p.m. and he went out at 6 and at 9 and at noon and at 3 and then at 5 and when he asked the ones who he hired at 5, why are you still sitting there?

They said, because nobody has hired us, because no one wanted us, because no one will give us work. I used to feel a little bit like the kid on the right there when I was at school.

[16 : 35] I don't know if you remember that horrible feeling when you were sat there and they were picking teams for sports. I was, if you think I'm short now, I was very much shorter then. The head of year when I first went into secondary school, Mr. Powell his name was, said, sorry, it's a bit of therapy now, he looked at me and he said, what's your name, boy?

And I said, tree. And he looked at me and he said, you're not a tree, you're a sapling. That's what we're going to call it. And every sports team, I was all, I was the last one picked.

I know, I know that feeling of being the last one picked. But the master was gracious and he went and chose these people, these five o'clock workers.

The master was looking for attitude for attitude, not aptitude. I can only imagine that these five PM workers had not been picked by anybody else.

Maybe they were the least qualified, the least capable. But the master's way is not our way. They were there because they were desperate.

[17 : 53] They knew they needed a wage. That denarius was just enough to survive on for one day. And they knew that they needed help in order to get that.

And we saw this in the Old Testament series, didn't we? That God doesn't always pick people based on aptitude, but on availability. We saw him use Rahab.

We saw him use people like Abraham, who was flawed and continued to be flawed. And Jesus, when he chose his followers, did the same thing.

He chose fishermen and tax collectors. It doesn't say he went to the local rabbi school and picked the best pupils. Jesus chooses people based on our availability.

And being involved in his kingdom is about us making ourselves available. The rest of Jesus' followers were the same. If you read who is in this story and earlier on, then it tended to be tax collectors and the poor and prostitutes who ended up following him.

[19 : 15] The master's choice certainly teaches us, I think, a lot about God. Finally, what about the master's reward? Well, I've said they were all, actually, no, they weren't.

The first workers were offered a denarius. A denarius, as I said, is commonly thought of as a day's wage. It was actually quite a generous day's wage.

It's the wage that a Roman soldier, a sort of bog-standard Roman soldier would get. And day laborers actually would have thought that that was quite a generous offering for their day.

If you read about the 6am workers who were hired, you don't hear them saying, actually, I'm not sure. I'm going to wait and see if I get a better offer. They knew that that was a generous offer, even for them.

And it's interesting, I think, that he only agreed a wage with those 6am people. Everybody else was just told what? You need to trust me.

[20 : 19] I'm going to give you what's right. Not necessarily what you deserve, but what's right. And at the end of the day, each person got paid.

And, I mean, this is the bit that our youth group found just, you know, completely unfair. They said, it's not fair. You know, those people worked all day. They didn't get it.

And it's interesting. I understand that feeling. But I think we need to think it a different way. He gave everyone the same.

He gave everybody what they needed to live. We don't know why some people got picked first and why others were taken later.

But God is there to supply our needs. It says, there was a song which I was taught when I was at Sunday school and I'm not going to sing it or rap it. But it says, my God shall supply all my needs.

[21 : 23] My God shall supply all my, I'm going to start singing it, aren't I? Because it says so. Where in the book that came from heaven? Because it says so. Where? Anyone know? I don't know. Isaiah 58, 11.

Sorry, I just, it's a great thing and actually often I find myself singing that to remind me that God promises each one of us that he will give us, he will supply all of our needs, not necessarily all of our wants.

I can imagine those early workers thinking, because I came early and because I've done so much more, maybe I won't get one denarius, I'll get 12.

But God doesn't reward us based on what we do. He does us, he rewards us based on who he is. I think the master's generosity or the master's reward teaches us something about God's desire for us.

So those are some things that we can learn about the master, about his desire for us, about his choice of workers, and about his promised reward.

[22 : 34] But let's spend the last few minutes thinking about how we will respond. Will we respond better than the laborers did? And if we're to think about how we should respond, because I think we all agree, although we understand why the laborers behaved the way they did, I don't want God saying to me, are you envious because I'm generous?

So how can we have a better attitude than the laborers did? Well, I think the key is right at the beginning there. It's the kingdom of heaven.

So let's think about some principles of what it's like to live in a kingdom. When you fill in online your nationality and you click and you have to, you know, annoyingly scan all the way down under you, what do we normally put down?

We say we are from the United Kingdom. Perhaps the worst description of our nation. I don't think we're particularly united.

That's another thing to talk about maybe. But actually, we haven't been a kingdom for over a thousand years since the Magna Carta.

[23 : 55] Our king is a good figurehead. He might reign, but he doesn't rule in this country. Not truly. His role is largely ceremonial. My dad met Prince Charles when he was not king, but if you met the king now, you might briefly bow.

You might dress up specially for the... Even I might dress up specially for the day. But actually, I put it to you that Monday to Sunday, the king makes very little difference to your life.

And it's because we're not living in a kingdom. But that's not what the kingdom of heaven is like. The kingdom of heaven is where God rules.

It's where God's rule advances here on earth as it is in heaven. pushing out pain and brokenness, bringing healingness and wholeness between God and man.

[24 : 58] And in his kingdom, his subjects have to follow his rules, his decrees, and his example. The subject should behave the way the king does.

And in the kingdom of heaven, it's not a democracy. We don't get to vote on the bits that we like and the bits that we don't like.

Adam and Eve tried that, didn't they? Let's, you know, think about that one rule. We'll obey all the others, but not that one. They disobeyed one rule and it didn't go very well for them.

As subjects of the kingdom of heaven, we need to obey. And unlike human kingdoms where you are allowed to be, what's that person? A dual nationality.

If we're truly to be members of the kingdom of heaven, we don't have that choice. We have to subject ourselves to the king. And so, how will that then inform us and how we react?

[26 : 10] First of all, how do we react to God's desire that we take an active role in his kingdom? Often when people ask me, you know, what I've done on a Sunday and I sort of say, well, you know, I went to church, I did this, and they sort of, you know, being a Christian, isn't that all just about, you know, sort of floating and halos and angels?

angels. And that's not the picture that Jesus presents here. I love, there's a famous theologian and preacher, evangelist called Leonard Ravenhill said this, he said, the church used to be a lifeboat saving the perishing.

Now I fear it is a cruise ship recruiting the promising. And our call is to be a rescue vessel, but much more than just rescuing people.

I quite like this analogy, that actually being, sorry, it's a bit of a low res, that's a cruise ship at the front and a battleship at the back, that our job is to go into action.

Not just to fight, but I don't, have any of you seen that recent Royal Navy advert that's on where it shows all the amazing things that the armed services do, bringing relief to those in war zones, saving people, rescuing people, bringing healing.

[27 : 44] And as a people of God, bringing the kingdom of heaven here does not mean bombarding them with scriptures. It means bringing the love of God to them.

And in the kingdom of heaven, there are no sort of, you know, white-collar workers or, what do they call them? Flag officers. People who just get to wear that, you know, the white dress uniform.

We're all called to become involved. Sometimes we may think we're not the right people for the job. It's easy for us, and I feel this all the time, to feel completely unqualified for the things that God's calling us to do in his kingdom.

But in Ephesians, it tells us this, we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God's prepared in advance for us to do.

And that gives me great comfort to know that he's prepared things for me to do. And he's created me and equipped me and trained me to be able to do them.

[29 : 02] Sometimes maybe we think we're too experienced or too young to be involved in the kingdom of heaven. But remember earlier on in Matthew, Jesus, when he was trying to demonstrate what the kingdom of heaven was like, said you need to accept it and become part of it like a little child.

Or maybe we think we're too old, we're past it. But again, when we think back about stories of people like Abraham, we realize that, I heard someone say this, they said, God actually has a remarkable retirement plan for his workers.

It's better than even the NHS's retirement plan because it is literally out of this world. Meaning that if you're not dead, God is not done with what he wants you to do and how he wants you to be involved in spreading his kingdom.

But that isn't just here in church or even in things related to this church. We're called to be Christ's ambassadors. I love this verse from Corinthians where it says, we are Christ's ambassadors.

We're like, you know, the Royal Navy, if you like, sent off to other countries. It says, we're Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal to other people through us.

[30 : 25] Our God is to go, our job is to go and represent God wherever we are, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and bring that relief and truth wherever we are.

So God's desire should be followed if we're in his kingdom. What about God's choice? Well, the parable doesn't really tell us what the early workers thought throughout the day as those other people started coming in.

But we see at the end that they are called envious. The actual literal translation, and if you've got an earlier translation than the NIV, it will say, is your eye evil because I am generous?

And it was only when they started sort of spreading their eyes around to what other people were getting that they started to become unhappy. Comparison can kill contentment so easily.

And they shouldn't really have been comparing themselves to other people. They should have just been comparing themselves to what, or judging themselves to what God had called them to do.

[31 : 51] And it's so easy for us to do that as well, isn't it? Last Sunday, I drove my mum back home to Ipswich, and there's this bit where I have to come up to the Rotherhithe tunnel, and I often forget, and I'm accidentally in the right-hand lane, you know, coming up, and then I have to just, I'm very politely indicating, putting my hand up, and pulling in.

Now, there are some people who do that, but I know that they do it for different reasons. They don't just forget they're trying to get ahead of the queue. And sometimes, I put my hand up at them too, if you know what I mean.

It's funny, we always like to think the best of ourselves. There's always an excuse for why we do something, but not for others. And it's really easy for that, I think, to move into spiritual matters as well, isn't it?

We can judge one another. Look at how they're behaving. Why aren't they coming to this meeting? How can God be using them? Why aren't they serving like I am?

But judging others really reveals what we think about ourselves, and especially what we think about God. Throughout lots of the parables that we've looked at, Jesus contrasts people who have a wrong view of themselves and people who have a right view of themselves.

[33 : 22] There's the parable of the two men who go to the temple to pray. One of them spends a long time telling God about himself and how good he is.

And there's another man who just says, God have mercy on me, a sinner. Last week, downstairs, we actually looked at the parable of the lost sheep.

We actually asked the question, I'm not sure who the 99 really are. And when Jesus said, there's more rejoicing in heaven over one sheep who has strayed or needs to repent or needs to come back to him, the 99 righteous men who don't need it, I'm not sure the 99 exists.

I put it to you that if we think this story is unfair, then it's probably because we think we're the early workers. I think it's really easy for us to put ourselves in the 6 a.m.

worker slot. Well, maybe not 6 a.m., but I certainly didn't turn up in the afternoon. But I think the beauty of this parable is that we should realize that we're probably all 5 p.m.

[34 : 48] individuals, that we're only given what we have by the grace of God. God's invitation is indeed absolutely outrageous.

He says, anyone who calls on my name will be saved. And so, how do we as a church and as a Christian community and a kingdom treat those who are left in the marketplace at 5 p.m.?

Those who our society says are less valuable. I think we often say we'd love our church to be like a first century church, don't we?

Or I feel that sometimes. But I think we need to realize that that means that our church will be full of crooks and prostitutes. But those are the people that God wants in his kingdom and those are the people that God is calling us to go out and interact with.

So what does it tell us about God's reward? Well, I hope that realizing that we are maybe more like 5 p.m. workers and not those who turn up and earn a just, correct wage will change how we think of ourselves and how we use our hands.

[36 : 15] The laborers who got there at 6 a.m., if you like, I think their hands were out like that wanting more. I should get more. I deserve more. But I hope that unlike them, we will agree that what God does is completely unfair.

It is completely unjust. It is wonderfully unfair. It is beautifully unjust because this is a story of incredible generosity, of God giving you and me the things that we could never earn but do desperately need.

When we remember that, maybe we should be grateful for the chance to serve in his vineyard, not always thinking about what's in it for us.

I read a wonderful story about some grape pickers. I don't know if this is an apocryphal story, but I like to think it's true. That if you want to go and pick grapes, the champagne grapes that end up in Moët Chandon, actually, you have to pay for the privilege of going and picking those grapes.

forgiveness. And maybe we should think that serving in God's kingdom, anything that we have to give up, is a privilege to be involved in such a great kingdom.

[37 : 44] And so, how are we going to use this great reward that we've been given? We've been given something that's so amazing, forgiveness, a new life.

And I think Jesus was very clear in all of his teaching that this is something that we should share with others around us. He said, forgive us.

In the Lord's Prayer, we say, forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Well, right at the beginning of this series, we thought about the parable of the unforgiving servant, or actually the parable of the incredibly generous and forgiving master.

Ultimately, God wants us to share his grace. We might think we want justice, but we don't. Justice is getting what we deserve. We want God's mercy.

Mercy is not getting what we do deserve, but ultimately what we need is God's grace, and that's what I think we see in this psalm. Getting what we don't deserve can never earn, but so desperately need.

[38 : 57] And so let's finish here, and let's maybe just stop for a moment, close our eyes, and just think about what God might want us to take away from this psalm.

Maybe God wants to remind us of our true position, that we are all really five o'clock workers, being given a reward that we don't deserve.

Maybe God wants us to change how we look at people whose society thinks of as 5pm workers. Maybe for some of us we need to be prepared to pass on God's generous grace and forgiveness to others, not expecting them to deserve it.

So I'd just like to pray as we finish. Father, I pray that each one of us will have a personal experience of your grace. I pray that it will transform us and change not just our hearts, but change our hands.

And I pray that we will respond to your call and play our part in spreading your kingdom wherever you sent us to work.

[40 : 35] Because we pray this in the name of King Jesus and for his glory. Amen. Farm to rooster joy Welcome ladies and walk out and come away