

The Labourers in the Vineyard

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[0 : 00] we ask and pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Excuse me, because of a cold it would seem. So way back when, when I was young, when I was in what they call an England infant school, which is your equivalent to kind of primary one to three here in Scotland, there was something that always really bugged me.

And I am not an easy man to bug. I can count on one hand the amount of times I've truly lost my temper, and most of them have been since my son was born.

No, he's not that bad, really. But the school would always have an assembly at the end of the week, and there would always be a prize giving at that assembly. There would be certificates handed out to all the pupils for good behaviour, or for doing really well in class, or for being a really good friend to somebody, whatever it was.

There were all sorts of certificates being handed out. What always used to annoy me was, firstly, I never got one. But it was mostly because 99% of the time, these awards were given to the students who normally didn't do very well.

They were given to those who often misbehaved, the ones who were always naughty, the ones who were always in trouble, and yet maybe they'd had a good week, so they got a certificate at the end of the week.

[1 : 28] And there would be ones who maybe struggled in schoolwork, but maybe did really well on a particular test, or on a particular homework thing, so they would get one, and so on and so forth. Now, obviously, I can now, as an adult, I understand why they did this.

You know, it's all about positive reinforcement. Trying to encourage those who are struggling to do a little bit better, you know, and to keep working hard. But for those of us who consistently were good, or consistently did okay in classes, we did feel a little bit left out, not getting any recognition for that.

It was always the naughty kids who seemed to get all the good stuff in school. You can tell I don't hold this, do you? I mean, it was over 20 years ago, but never mind. Like, have me thinking, you know, that system that my school had back then, you know, is that fair?

Do you think that is fair? Do you think we were treated well by our teachers? Think of it another way, those of you who are a bit older. If you studied for a test, for uni or college or high school or whatever, you studied really, really hard, and you worked so hard that you came out at the end of that exam with an A, but everybody else in the class, while they're studying, didn't bother working hard.

And so instead of failing the class that didn't work hard, and instead of giving you your A, the teacher gave the entire class a C. Do you think that's fair? Do you think that is just?

[3 : 03] Do you think those who worked hard were robbed by not being given what they deserve? So these things we're talking about are examples of what we might call injustice.

And the parable we've read today is looking at the idea of justice. If you read through Matthew 19 and 20, Jesus gives us seven different judgments.

He talks about marriage, he talks about divorce, he talks about children, he talks about religion, he talks about riches, merit, greatness, and outcasts. And today we're looking at what Jesus has to say on merit and on justice.

Jesus says something very interesting at the end of chapter 19, the very last verse, when he says, but many who are first will be last, and the last who are first.

And if you're paying attention, you would notice that at the end of the passage we read, the same statement is written, but now it's written in reverse. It says, Matthew 20, verse 16, so the last will be first and the first will be last.

[4 : 18] We read the story of the rich young ruler. Again, another story you're probably very familiar with before we read the parable because it gives the background to it. It explains why Jesus is saying what he's saying.

People may be wondering about how the poor are able to come into the kingdom of heaven. If a rich man, if somebody who seems to have it all, if it's near enough impossible for him, then how do any of us have any hope?

How is it that some poor and lowly fishermen, the lowest of the low in our society, would be considered to be the first? And yet the wealthy, the prestigious, the powerful, the people we looked up to were instead counted among the last.

Comes down to merit. How does the amount and quality of our work affect what we receive? And this parable tells us about a reversal of fortunes.

The examples I said earlier are examples of injustice. But not this story. This story is not an example of injustice.

[5 : 32] This is a story of the wonderful grace of God who treats all his children equally. Even those who were brought into the fold at the very last minute.

The parable shows us not how stingy or unfair God is, but rather the exact opposite. It shows us how generous God is, how he loves his children, his generosity towards us.

And that is the theme of this parable. So we have three headings then to look at this morning. We have workers hired, workers paid, and then workers ready.

Then we have workers hired. Like so many others, this parable has many titles. Depending on your translation, and your edition of the Bible, the titles, the headings can change.

But the one that we've got here this morning, the labors in the vineyard, is probably the one that we're most familiar with. In recent times, however, biblical scholars have decided to take a different approach because they have to justify their jobs.

[6 : 45] That's a bit harsh. But I read one who calls it the parable of the owner of the vineyard. Another calls it the parable of unfair wages, or sorry, unequal wages for unequal work.

Another one calls it the parable of the eccentric employer. The question is raised, isn't it, by these different titles. Who is the central character in the parable?

Is it the owner of the vineyard? Is it the workers? Or maybe it's the vineyard itself. Have you ever considered that option before? Remember, of course, the headings, the titles in your Bible are not original.

They're not inspired by the Holy Spirit in the same way that the rest of the text is. But they can be helpful. They can be useful in outlining what the content of the text is.

Some may read this parable and think it's about workers' rights. You know, it's about equal employment for all. It doesn't matter how hard you work, everybody gets the same wages.

[7 : 53] Some think it's maybe about good employment practices. You know, the idea of making sure that everybody has a job no matter how lowly they may be. But again, I don't think that is the case here.

I think that those scholars who have retitled the parable to put the owner of the vineyard first are right because they're telling us something about this story.

They're telling us that this story tells us something about God, that he is the central character and it's telling us something about his character, not the laborers as such.

Remember too, Israel is often symbolized as a vineyard in the Old Testament, about God's vineyard. This story is clearly telling us something about God and about something about his kingdom.

Firstly, it's telling us that it is God who has hired his workers. We're told how the master of the house went out to go and hire his workers.

[9 : 03] We're told how it is God who has called people to be his servants. Looking for work was a lot different then than it is in our society today.

Nowadays, the person looking for work has to do 90% of the work in order to find employment. You have to write a CV, fill in forms, all this stuff, go to interviews, make yourself look good and then hope at the end of the day that they liked you enough to give you a job.

But back then, the custom was different. If you didn't have stable employment, then if you were unemployed, then you would have to go to a designated spot in the city, in the town, usually the marketplace, where business transactions were done, and you'd have to just hang around and wait

for somebody to come who was looking for work.

And often it would be day to day. You would maybe get a day's work and then the next day you'd be back in the marketplace again doing the same thing. You didn't really have things like permanent contracts or part-time contracts or zero-hours contracts.

You didn't really have those things in those days. Many people very often lived day to day. They just lived hand to mouth. So we're told that God is like one of these employers.

[10:21] He is going out to the marketplace to seek his labors. He is the one who is going after them. He is the one who is choosing them. This parable is showing us how God is exercising his free, sovereign, and unconditional grace as he sees fit.

It is God who calls his church to be. It is God who takes the first initiative. This doctrine of election of God's complete control and complete sovereignty over the church and all things is one of the most controversial I think in all of Reformed theology.

It's the one that people don't like the most because people don't like to relinquish control. We all like to think that we're our own little kings and queens of our own lives, that we are the ones who have the power.

We like to think that if I want to do something I can just do it. Or likewise if I don't want to do something you know I won't do it because I'm in charge. It's difficult.

Even people who have been Christians for many many years wrestle with this idea because it is hard, it's mysterious, and it is difficult. If you've read the Westminster Confession of Faith, and if you haven't you should go and read it because it's great.

[11:47] But one of the things about it I really like is when it's discussing this doctrine, this idea of election, something that's really difficult to understand, it gives it, it explains it in a really good way, and it teaches it to us in a way we can understand.

But it also tells us something. It tells us that God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

And it goes into more depth explaining this and teaching it to us and giving us scripture links to that too. But it's what it says at the end of the section that I really want to highlight to you this morning.

It tells us that this doctrine is a mystery, and that is to be handled with care, and handled with what it calls special prudence.

This wonderful doctrine that is so complicated, so confusing, so controversial, and yet so wonderful, should bring humility in us, not pride or arrogance.

[12:56] My favorite bit is this. It says, that men attending the will of God, revealed in his word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election, so that this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God.

This wonderful fact that it is God who takes the initiative, that it is his will and his power that saves us, should give us peace, because we can be assured of our salvation through it, because it doesn't depend on us, it doesn't depend on our deeds, or the strength of our faith, or the things we do or say, rather it depends on God, on him alone, and so it cannot fail.

It is of course a mystery, we cannot see the mind of God, we do not what chooses who he does, but we can be assured that once we are his, we will be his forever, and it should bring us to praise and worship of him and humility in ourselves, because if we look at that world today, this idea of individualism or the idea of individual autonomy is probably one of the biggest issues we are facing as a civilization today, the idea that each person is able to live out their lives as they see fit, even if it means trampling over someone else.

But this passage reminds us that if it were not for God, despite our best attempts, we'd still be there, standing at that marketplace, just waiting to be hired.

People with nothing cannot hire themselves. If you're dirt poor, if you're flat out broke, you cannot go and give yourself a job and pay yourself a wage.

[15:03] It's just not possible. If you have nothing, you're stuck with nothing until somebody gives you something. The truth is, friends, we are totally relying on God for everything, especially our salvation.

We need, therefore, God to take the initiative. We need God to come to the marketplace and hire us. We need God to give us our wage because otherwise we'd have nothing.

But God's criteria for choosing people is very different, I think, from what we might expect. So we have workers hired and secondly then we have workers paid.

Secondly, this passage tells us about how God is just. He says in verse 2, after agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going about in the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace and said to them, you go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right, I will give you.

When the owner of the vineyard hires his workers, what is it he promises them? Firstly, he tells the first group they'll get paid a denarius for their day's work, which was the standard day's wage back in the day.

[16 : 26] In the second group, they're not told they'll be given a denarius like the first, they're instead, they are told they will be given simply what is right.

Literally, they will be given what is just. They will be given what is righteous. It would seem the landowner for whatever reason needs more work workers.

He goes back to the marketplace. He does this several times to hire more laborers. He asks them to trust him that they will be properly compensated.

The first are told what their wages will be, but the others are simply being asked to trust their new boss. Naturally, we would assume and think that their wage would be the percentage of the work that they had done compared to the original few.

That is not what happens. There are five groups hired in total throughout the day, during the twelve hours that make up the usual working day in ancient Israel, from dawn to sundown.

[17 : 39] The first group would have started about six in the morning, when the day began, when the sun came up. two hours were hired, then at the third hour, which would be roughly nine a.m., another group is hired, and then about 12 p.m., and then 3 p.m., and then finally about 5 p.m., right before the day is about to finish, that's 6 p.m.

this last group really is the strangest and the most appealing of the bunch. Normally, you would have expected somebody who was waiting to get a job, hanging around in the marketplace, to have given up by then, to have gone home, to have said, you know what, there's only an hour left in the day to work, there's no point in me hanging around here, if I do get a job, I may as well just go home.

Because by the time you got there, if somebody did come and hire you, by the time you got there and you got organized and got stuck in and going, it would be nearly time to finish. You know, it would like there would just be no point.

Likewise, the boss himself, in normal situations, just wouldn't have seen the point, would he, of going out to the marketplace again, right before the day is about to finish, to hire more workers. Because again, he'd be paying them for basically doing nothing. Because by the time they got there, there would be barely any work they would be able to do. these last group of workers, they really were poor souls, if you think about it.

[19 : 04] They've been trying to get work all day and yet had not succeeded. There's something different about them than what you might expect. They, it seems, were desperate for work.

They were desperate to be hired, whatever the circumstances, and that is why, even at five in the evening, they were still there. They'd been waiting all day, maybe they'd been passed over before, but still they held out, still they were hopeful that one would come, and eventually he did come, and he hired them right at the eleventh hour.

And then what do we hear? We hear in verse eight of Matthew 20, when the evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the labourers, pay them their wages, beginning with the last, and up to the first.

So again, it's not like today, where you'd maybe get paid weekly or monthly on certain dates. When you work for somebody in those days, you get paid at the end of the day, so you'd be able to go to the marketplace and buy some food to feed your family on that particular day.

So the end of the day came, and the men were due to be paid. master instructs his foreman to pay them in order of the last to the first. In the Bibles we have here, in the ESV, the owner, it's just called the owner in the English language.

[20 : 35] But if you look at it in the Greek, the word used is kurios, which is the word for lord or the word for master. So here we have a very clear and a very present allusion to the owner of the vineyard representing God very clearly.

God is again in total control here, not only of the hiring of their workers, but also of the wages they receive. And there's a big shock coming to those who are about to be paid.

And when those hired at the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Every worker received their pay, none were missed out, and their pay was all the same. Each man received the wages for a full day's work. The one who had worked the full twelve-hour shift was given a denarius, and the one who worked just for an hour was also given a denarius. This shows us really, doesn't it, the generosity of the owner, of the master. It's incredibly plain for us all to see. Naturally, you would expect those who have worked the longest to have been given more.

[21 : 44] If he was to stick with his original sum, they would all receive their denarius, and everybody who worked after them would receive a little bit less and a little bit less, until the last group.

Everybody gets the same. But we hear not everyone was happy. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

And on receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, those who worked only one hour, these last, sorry, these last worked only one hour, and you've made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

One of them friends, you know wrong, did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? So in this parable, the first lot of workers were very annoyed, as you can imagine.

[22 : 47] They had endured the brunt of the work. They had toiled in the unbearable heat, and then seeing the generosity of their master towards these lowly workers who had just arrived, they obviously expected to get more, thinking, oh well, if they're getting just the full denarius, then surely we'll be getting more because we've done more work.

They were wanting to get more than they were promised. When they spoke to the master, look at the way he replied. He wasn't angry with them, he didn't rebuke them straight away, he wasn't harsh with them.

Instead, he was calm, he was gentle, and he just explained to them that they would get what they had earned as originally agreed. These workers were shown justice.

What they had earned, they were being paid. They weren't being treated unfairly, they weren't being cheated, they weren't being robbed, or they weren't victims of fraud. They were told they would be paid a denarius, and paid a denarius, they were.

But God was not just to the other workers. To be just would have meant he paid them what they had earned. But God is never unjust, never unjust.

[24 : 18] But to those workers, he showed them something else. He showed them what we call non-justice, which is a bit of a mouthful, so we like to instead call it grace.

grace. But remember, he also showed grace to the first workers, because he did not have to hire them. He could have walked on by in the marketplace that morning, he didn't even have to go to the marketplace, maybe, but he did.

He showed grace to them. Those whom he chooses, those whom he saves, receive his grace. Those who do not receive his grace, receive justice.

They receive exactly what they deserve. God wasn't being fair, but neither was he being unfair. He was being generous, and he was being gracious. In Romans chapter 9, Paul deals with this issue of God being unjust or being unfair, and he asks, is there any injustice in God's part?

By means, no, he says, for he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. God is sovereign over all.

[25 : 36] He alone has the right to be gracious in his mercy and his grace. He alone has the right to give what he will to those whom he chooses without any requirement to give it.

Nothing can force him to give him his grace. Nothing can earn it from him. You can't trick God into giving it to you or giving it to someone else.

He alone has the right to do what he will with what is his. In this parable, the workers who worked all day long got their justice.

They got what they were promised they would get. They were not wronged in any way. The master was perfectly just to them. But the other workers, however, received much more than they bargained for.

They received grace and they received mercy. This parable may seem familiar to you. Indeed, it's very familiar to the parable of the prodigal son.

[26 : 38] It has that same idea, that same theme that runs throughout it. the only person who was the owner of the vineyard himself.

Because when he showed his grace, when he showed his generosity, he was attacked for it. He was slandered for it. God is the owner, he is the boss, he is the king, he alone has the right to decide who he will show his grace to.

Read that right at the beginning in Exodus 33. The Lord said, I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

So we have workers hired, workers paid, and finally, briefly, we have workers ready. We must touch briefly on what the parable doesn't teach.

It doesn't teach that all who are saved will experience the same degree of glory. When we get there, you can look at other passages. For example, 1 Corinthians 3 teaches us that Christians who are all justified by the blood of Christ, and we all share together in his righteousness, however, we will not all share in the same way in heaven.

[27 : 56] We are told, he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. All get to heaven the same way.

There's no doubt about that. All of us are equal on that footing, and yet there is going to be some difference once we get there. We don't know what the difference is.

We don't know if we're not told, it's not explained to us. But what I am sure of, what I am positive of, is that even the lowest of the low in heaven, even for them, it will be so wonderful, so glorious, that they will be totally and fully fulfilled and wondered and amazed by it all.

Lots of difficult things we're looking at today. As we end, I just want to say that as Christians, we should be very careful never to be jealous or envious of how God treats other Christians.

It's easy to look at the church around the world and see parts of it that are being blessed greatly, their numbers are booming, they're well off financially, God seems to be doing great things there, they're reaching the people, people are being saved, you've got baptisms galore, it's wonderful.

[29 : 26] And yet we look at our own situation and we're struggling along, maybe we're limping a little bit, we're not doing so well. It can be easy to look at them and go, oh, I really want what they have, why do we not have that?

We should be very careful when one part of the church is blessed and another is not, because it's not for us to decide, it's not for us to say, God, God, why aren't you doing that here?

Where's our wages? We've been working longer, we've been here for hundreds of years, we've been serving you all this time, giving our lives to you and yet we seem to be so diminished and yet they who are new, the church has only been there a generation, they're thriving, they're blossoming, why can't we have some of that?

Don't get me wrong, we should pray for revival to come, it has come in the past, I'm sure it will again, we should be very careful not to be jealous of other parts of the church.

Both parts should be thankful to God, ultimately for his goodness, his mercy and his grace.

Likewise, we should always rejoice when a new brother or sister joins the family.

[30 : 45] It doesn't matter if they're a Christian just for five minutes before they die, if it's a deathbed confession, they should be welcomed and they should be loved.

Likewise, it doesn't matter if they serve the church faithfully for 90 years, they should be welcomed and they should be loved. But this truth, it doesn't matter if it's five minutes or 90 years, although it's true and it's wonderful and it's amazing, it shouldn't make us complacent.

we should not become too comfortable with just waiting to follow Jesus. Just because it is possible to be saved the 11th hour, it doesn't mean that that should be our goal.

Just because one thief was saved on the cross at the last minute, it doesn't mean we ourselves should be content with waiting until that last possible moment.

We are told that now is the day of salvation, so we should be ready for it. We read the story of the rich young ruler and it concludes with Jesus saying how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

[32 : 07] The apostles, the disciples ask, well if a rich man could only enter God's kingdom with great difficulty then who has a chance to be saved? Here in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, we're told that it is impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, rich or poor,

whatever, unless God himself intervenes.

We're told that it is God who makes entry into his kingdom possible for anyone, for all types of people, men, women, children, the old, the healthy, the sick, black, white, Asian, smart or not, rich or poor, it doesn't matter in the slightest.

God makes no distinction on any of these things. We are all in his image. We're told that becoming a member of the people of God, becoming one of his children, we're told that finding salvation all come through God's power alone, through his grace, that wonderful line in that good old hymn, nothing in my hands I bring simply.

Where salvation comes from, it comes from the cross, it comes from Jesus Christ alone, it comes from nothing that we bring, we can't bring anything. Because of this great wonderful truth, many who the world ignores, many who don't fit into the system of values that our world loves, those who are the lowest of the low, those who are rejected and scorned and despised by the world, we're told they will be the ones who will occupy the highest places when God fully establishes his rule.

This is the great, wonderful logic of the gospel, that the world is turned upside down. So the last will be first and the first will be last.

[34 : 17] So that's why we need to make sure, friends, that we are waiting in the marketplace ready to be hired. We need to make sure that if we're not already working for God, that we're asking for him to hire us.

We need to be waiting for him. We need to open our hearts to him. we need to make sure we don't give up and go home because we know that he who calls you is faithful and he will surely do it. God is faithful. So make today the day of salvation for you. Make today the day that Christ becomes your Lord. Make today the day that you go and work in his vineyard so the great promises he's made will then be for you.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this wonderful parable that shows us of your goodness and your sovereignty over all things. It shows how you chose those who the world would never expect.

It shows how you're generous to all of your children. No matter how long they may give their lives to you, you are generous to them all. So help us, Lord, today, if we've been working in that vineyard for a long time, if we've been working through the heat and the labor and the unbearable toil, help us not to be envious of those who come at the last minute and still enjoy the same blessings that we do.

[35 : 57] Instead, let us welcome them, let us embrace them as brothers and sisters and be thankful for the goodness of God who has hired them and promised them great things as he has also promised us.

And if we are unyet sure of where we stand, if we do not know, Lord, where we are with you, if we're waiting in that marketplace, wondering whether or not we should go home and give up or if we should keep waiting, help us to persevere, knowing and trusting that you will come, that you will hire us, that you will give us not what we deserve, but what your grace has decided you want to give us. Thank you, oh Lord, for this grace without which none of us could ever have any hope, without which none of us could be saved. Be with us, Lord, and bless us and we give thanks to the children who receive their books soon.

What a wonderful blessing they are to this church and we pray they would grow in the knowledge and love of you all the days of their lives. Help us to be good laborers, be good workers and to be loving to all.

In Jesus' name we humbly ask it. Amen. So as we conclude we're going to sing together Psalms.