

19.2.23 Matthew 20: 1-16 Romans 5:1-11

We continue our series on the Parables of Jesus, with the help Kenneth Bailey's book 'Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes', we will consider different perspectives of these well known parables.

Our parable today has traditionally had the title "the workers in the Vineyard'. This seems to assume that the workers are the focus of the parable.

However, the focus, appears to be more about the amazing compassion and grace of the employer. Ken Bailey therefore prefers to call this story, '**The parable of the compassionate employer.**'

So, let's take a look at the parable - for there are many surprises and challenges within it.

The first surprise in this parable is that we see a vineyard owner behaving rather oddly.

In middle eastern culture, the vineyard owner would have had **regular** employees and when needed, say at harvest time, he would send his **manager** out to hire casual workers for the day. And they would have known how many extra workers they needed and picked them up at the beginning of the day.

So why did the owner go to pick up workers?

And why did he keep going back for more and more workers?

Let me give you a bit of background about how the system of hiring casual workers operated back then, and indeed still does in some middle eastern countries today.

Those workers who didn't have regular employment, would stand at a specific place, perhaps by the side of a road, or in the market square, hoping that they would be hired and gain some well needed money to feed their families. By standing there, it would be obvious to everyone passing by, that they didn't have regular jobs and may well have been struggling. Employers who needed extra help would then arrange for workers to be collected.

Those who were chosen at the beginning of the day were guaranteed a days wage.

Those who weren't chosen may not get any work at all, that day but some would wait just in case. And, of course, the longer they waited the less chance there was of earning anything. What's more there was an increasing sense of shame and humiliation in the waiting as people passing by would know their predicament. That sense that they were not wanted and the shame of going home empty handed. No work, meant no wages, and no food for their families that day.

And so, we see in this parable that the Vineyard owner, rather than the manager, goes out for extra workers. He goes at the beginning of the day, the usual time for picking up workers but then again at 9am and 12, then again at 3pm and finally at 5pm when the working day would have been nearly over.

Was he **really** not sure how many workers he would need that day?

Did he really **need** all those extra workers?

Why **did** he go himself?

What's really going on here?

We read that, to the first workers, he makes a contract with them – 1 denarius for 1 day's work. And they accept and happily go to work. They will earn a days wage for a day's work. They can stand tall in the community, knowing they were worth hiring and their families would not go hungry or live on handouts. To the others, that were hired later in the day, they were just happy to have some work. He didn't say how much they would get, he just says I will pay you whatever is right – and they go, trusting the owner will be fair and just.

At 5 o'clock, the owner returns one last time. He asks the remaining workers – why are you still here? He would have understood the humiliation of standing in that place the entire day, for all to see. But despite

their humiliation the reply showed that they were ready and keen to work. And the owner did **the best** thing he could have done – he employed them. They wouldn't achieve much in the last hour of work, he could have just given them a small hand out to buy food for their families, but he gave them dignity, showed them that he valued them, and he employed them. He didn't say how much he would pay them, but they trusted he would be just.

So, the owner behaved oddly.

And then, at the end of the day, the manager enters the story as he is called to hand out the wages. And this scene is rather intriguing too.

See who he pays first – Rather than giving those who had been there all day their wages and sent them on their way, he pays those who were there last, first. If he had paid the workers in the expected order, everyone would have gone away happy, and indeed, with an increasing sense of gratitude.

Those who earned a day's wage for a day's work got what they expected and would have been happy. Those who earned a day's wage for just half a days work would have been very pleased and then the workers who had done just an hour or so who received a whole days wage would have been delighted. No one would have known what the others had received and everyone would have gone away happy.

So why did the owner insist on paying the wage to the last, first? He must have known it would provoke a reaction...

Well, it's a parable, a story with a challenge, a story with a point to make.

So what is Jesus trying to say?

There have been many interpretations of this parable. Yes, it is a rebuke to those who think more highly of themselves. Some see it as Jesus saying people will get to heaven even if they turn to Jesus at the very last moment... but how does the parable start? What were the first words of this parable?

The kingdom of God is like a landowner who...Jesus is describing the kingdom of God. The landowner is Jesus, and Jesus is illustrating how his kingdom operates.

And here he is talking about a kingdom where compassion and justice is for all, for everyone.

Even in today's culture, we expect a fair day's wage for a fair day's work.

That's justice, isn't it? And people strike to get a fair wage.

But this is not the issue here. Jesus is calling for justice for all. Yes, justice for those who put in a day's work, but also justice for those, who through no fault of their own, are unable to work.

The story focuses on an equation filled justice and also filled with amazing grace..

No one is underpaid in this parable. The complaint is from the justly paid who cannot tolerate grace.

They complain...'You have made them equal to us...the unemployed scum – who no-one else would hireyou have made them equal to us. That's the cry. How dare you give so much, to those who clearly don't deserve it?

Ouch, we would never think this way, would we?

And the reply from the master is this – Why should my generosity irritate you? Why should me showing grace to these who are less fortunate than you bother you?. You don't seem to care whether these others can preserve their self worth or feed their families. You have a fair days wage - It is me who end the day poorer, not you.

God's compassion, God's generosity, God's grace, God's sacrifice. This is how God's kingdom operates.

What does the Kingdom of God look like here on earth? The workers in the market sought employment using the only method available to them. And the master's response is a model for all.

He finds a way to respect their dignity. He offers a hand up rather than a hand out.

Let us not judge why people are in the predicament they are. Those children that we sponsor through Compassion – don't deserve to be poor. But by sponsoring them they are given a chance in life. They are given a hand-up not a hand-out.

Also, in our parable, against the expectations of his class, the master does not remain aloof. His compassion leads him to show costly love for the poor.

Jesus did not stay as an aloof God but, as it says in Philippians 2 we are to have the same mindset as Jesus Christ,

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.'

We are called to be humble, to roll up our sleeves and be the hands and feet of Jesus now and that includes showing costly love to those in need. Getting down from any moral high ground we may have and getting stuck in, even if it means giving up some personal position or pleasures.

In the kingdom of God, justice is more than equal application of the law. Justice includes respect for the dignity of those in need and a deep concern for their welfare.

As the master went 5 times to the market to find the poor and the needy, and show them the respect everyone deserves. We too must constantly ask God to show us who **we** need to help, and constantly challenge ourselves about our attitude towards others; reminding ourselves of the enormous grace Jesus has shown to us, to each one of us as he died for us on the cross.

As it says in Romans 5:1-2

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access, by faith, into this grace in which we now stand.

None of us deserve God's grace, and yet it is freely given.

None of us can earn this grace, it's free to all who turn to Jesus.

Free to us— but so costly to God.

And we are no more deserving of God's grace than any others, it is the Father's to give and he gives it freely.

Praise the Lord. Amen