

## Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-14-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### Matthew 20:1-16

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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### **1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.**

Jesus' beginning this parable with "For..." lets us know that whatever he is saying here is said to explain or illustrate what has come before this parable. Right before this teaching, Peter asks Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Peter is seeking reassurance that his and the other disciples' sacrifices for the sake of the gospel will not be in vain. Jesus explains to him that they will receive even more in the age to come than what they have given up in this age. He then states, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." At this point, he uses this parable to explain what it means for disciples to sacrifice and work hard in the kingdom, as well as to explain that God's mercy and justice do not work in the same way as our human notions of right and wrong. In human terms, after all, we would say, "Those who are first are first and those who are last are last." Not so in the Kingdom of Heaven. This parable will exemplify God's ways of calling and rewarding servants. These ways may confound or even anger us, as we may see.

### **2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.**

This parable starts with a situation so common that all of Jesus' hearers would have been able to relate to it. Even if they were not day laborers themselves, they certainly would have seen this practice being done in their own towns. A wealthy landowner would go out (or send an emissary out) early in the day—about 6:00 AM—to hire workers for

a daily or seasonal task. All those who wanted to labor would be out early and seek a verbal contract for employment—in this case, “the usual daily wage” (probably a denarius) for a day’s work.

**3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."**

This is where the parable begins to sound less like a real-world story and more fanciful. No explanation is given to account for the unusual features of this story. Why does the owner go out repeatedly throughout the day? Why were the later laborers not hired earlier in the day? We might speculate, for instance, that they were too lazy or sleepy to go out at 6:00 AM and showed up later in the day themselves, hoping for work. Perhaps they were less skilled or less strong or less trustworthy and therefore nobody hired them. In any case, the owner goes out over and over again, hiring more workers each time and promising them “whatever is right.” That word “right” (*dikaios* in Greek) can also be translated as righteous or just. This is a key word—perhaps *the* key word—in this parable because the impact of this parable depends on our human notions of what is “just” or “right” or “fair” failing to line up with God’s ways. The last group is called to work at 5:00 PM—literally “the eleventh hour.” They worked one hour rather than the twelve hours the first ones had worked.

**8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."**

The owner’s decision to pay the last first makes no sense and serves no practical purpose. Jesus has him do this only to illustrate Jesus’ point about the first being last and the last being first. Rhetorically in this passage this detail sets expectations for those who were hired earlier in the day. They received what we would, in earthly terms, call “fair” or “just” payment. Why? Because they agreed to do a day’s work for a day’s pay. They received what they agreed to. Their contract was fulfilled. But by their logic, if those who worked only one hour (who agreed only to receive what the landowner thought was right) received a whole day’s wages, certainly those who worked a full day would receive similar abundance on top of what was agreed to. Yet the landowner’s sense of paying “what is right” is based on generosity and grace—unearned favor—rather than on paying more money for more work or less money for less work.

The landowner calls one of the laborers “friend,” but this term is somewhat misleading. This is not the word for a personal friend or someone you feel close to or fondness toward. It is, rather, a term used by a person of higher status to correct a person of lower status who is at fault or mistaken. In our own day and age we might say, “Listen here, mister...” or “Look, buddy...”

This parable is often interpreted as an allegory in which the landowner represents God, the first workers represent the people of Israel, and the late-coming workers represent gentile converts to Christianity. While this works on some level, there are other ways to interpret this parable. Given Peter’s question right before this parable about receiving a reward for his sacrifice as a follower of Jesus, we might look at the parable as a reminder that one’s reward from God doesn’t depend on toil or sacrifice, but rather on God’s goodness, generosity, and call.

**Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

- 1. Which character do you most relate to in this parable? Why do you think this is the case?**
- 2. Why do you think the tenants who were called later in the day were not called earlier?**
- 3. What does Jesus' phrase, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" mean to you?**