Laborers in God’s Vineyard
Scripture Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction

This is Labor Day weekend. It is typically a time for families and friends to get together to enjoy food, fun and football. It is also a holiday that is observed to celebrate those who “labor”. Many employees look forward to this day as another paid day off from work. Labor Day was first recognized nationally in the United States in 1894 following a massive railroad strike. The workers of a railroad car manufacturing company began the strike because they thought they were not treated fairly. The strike and a boycott shut down much of the nation’s freight and passenger traffic west of Detroit, Michigan. In order to appease the union workers, the government recognized Labor Day. By the time it became a federal holiday, thirty states had already officially celebrated Labor Day. It is now generally viewed as a time for barbecues and the end of summer, but it was originally observed to acknowledge the contribution workers make to our society.

Probably everyone feels that a person ought to be compensated fairly for his or her work. If you put in a certain amount of time and effort it only seems right to be fairly compensated for it. Thus, this parable flies at the heart of that assumption. In this parable we encounter a situation that just does not seem right. The story includes a master, his vineyard, and some workers. We find that the master of the vineyard has a rather strange way of rewarding his workers. The parable shocks us when the “eleventh hour” workers receive as much pay for the one hour they worked as those who had worked all day. We expect that those who work harder and longer will receive a greater reward than those who do not. It appears that this master, however, does not share that expectation. All things being equal, we expect businesses would not pay workers the same wage who worked less than others. In that respect, this parable is not based on reality.

The parable occurs between two very similar statements in Matthew: The first will be last, and the last first. The parable provides an illustration of this statement. After Jesus spoke to a young rich ruler and said to the disciples that “all things are possible with God”, Peter responded to Jesus:

Matthew 19:26-30 “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Therefore, while Jesus acknowledged that His followers, particularly the Twelve Disciples, would receive a “hundredfold” reward and will inherit eternal life, He
goes on to explain the nature of God’s reward. You see, Peter asked Jesus what the disciples would receive because they had “left everything to follow Him.” We might ask that, too, if it were us. If you left everything - family, friends, a good job, material possessions - in order to follow Jesus, you might expect something more from Jesus. You might expect a greater reward than those who did not make the same sacrifice. That is the main issue with this parable. Jesus told the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard to illustrate the point that no one deserves God’s grace and each of us should joyfully serve Him with the time we are given. There are at least four truths this parable teaches us:

1. God owns the vineyard
2. God is indebted to no one
3. God cares more for people than for things
4. We are His laborers working for His Harvest

**God Owns the Vineyard**

The first thing we ought to realize about this parable is that the master owns the vineyard. He is the boss in charge. He employs the workers and not the other way around. He decides who does what and who receives what from working in his vineyard. In making claims of unfairness, we forget who the boss is...and it is not us! That is also true for God. God owns His vineyard. He owns everything. He sovereignly rules over all of creation and none of us have a legitimate claim on it. Thus, the parable is not about us, but about Him.

Many people have a problem with this. Many “church people” take issue with this. They mistakenly believe that they have earned whatever they have. They mistakenly believe that they own whatever they possess. They mistakenly believe that they are the one’s in charge and can call the shots in God’s Kingdom. They are mistaken! We are only stewards of what God has graciously allowed us to use. All that we have, including all that the church receives and has belongs to Him. We are laborers in His vineyard and He is calling the shots.

Again, He is the Master of the vineyard, not us. Aside from the first group of workers who were hired at sun up, the master promises to pay the workers “what is right.” These workers might have expected to receive a fraction of a day’s wage, but the master of the vineyard never specifies what he will pay. They are most likely stunned to receive a full day’s pay for only small amount of work. The point here is that it is the master’s money and he can pay as much or as little as he wants. The same is true for God. God graciously gives according to His will, as He so chooses. None of us get to dictate to God what we will receive. It is His vineyard and He chooses to do with it as He sees fit. God owns the vineyard!

**God is Indebted to No One**
When we read this parable we are probably struck by the perceived unfairness of the master toward those who had worked the longest. Your heart may go out to those workers who labored the whole day only to receive the same wage as those who worked for only one hour. You may believe that the master of the vineyard owes those workers more. The truth is that the master gave them exactly what they had contracted to receive. Recall, verse two of the passage:

**Matthew 20:2** After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

The denarius was a standard minimum day’s wage at that time and the workers had agreed to it. The master’s promise was entirely fair; however, since the master of the vineyard gave the others who worked less than a full day the same wage as those who had “borne the burden of the day”, those first workers believed that they deserved something more. We believe they deserved more. The point is that God owes us nothing. He does not even owe us a denarius. We do not deserve anything from Him. This is somewhat counter cultural as the world seems fixated on entitlements. Some people think the world owes them something - a particular standard of living, health care, mobile phones, or other stuff. However, we are not entitled to anything, especially from God.

The late evangelist pastor, and writer, R. A. Torrey had an interesting perspective on this. He received a note one day during a meeting that said the following:

“Dear Dr. Torrey, I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God’s will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian Church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all the time. I have been the superintendent of the Sunday school for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years; and yet God does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?”

Dr. Torrey said it was easy to explain. He responded, “This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for thirty years, a faithful Sunday school superintendent for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach Him in that way. We must, if we would have God answer our prayers, give up any thought that we have any claim upon God. Not one of us deserves anything from God.”

That is a hard lesson to learn, because oftentimes when we go to God in prayer thinking we deserve something from Him. We believe He owes us something. We think of God as some sort of vending machine where we can deposit a prayer or two and get a specific result. The fact of the matter is that God does not work that way. This parable is about the master’s generosity - His grace. No matter how
long or how much you have served God, you do not deserve His grace. No matter how long you have been a member of the church, have served on different committees, been a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, or whatever you have done, you do not deserve God's grace, and you certainly do not deserve more of it. If He gives you a denarius for a day's worth of work, then you ought to be grateful for that. What we receive from God is a gift and undeserved. In fact, if God were to give us exactly what we do deserve, we would receive condemnation. Is that what we really want? I suspect not!

**God Cares More for People than Things**

Another principle to this parable is what people focus on as being unfair. Many will read this parable and remark about how unfair it was for the last group of workers, those who only worked for about an hour, to receive the same compensation as those who worked all day. Another way to state this and illustrate the unfairness is that those who worked the whole day received the same compensation - that they agreed to receive - as those who worked for only one hour. Those who focus on that are really focusing on the material reward for their efforts - what's in it for them. But what about the other four groups of workers? Should we not celebrate the grace extended to them? Should we not focus on the other four groups of workers? Was it unfair for them to receive what they received from the master of the vineyard?

If we focus on the material reward of working in the vineyard, we miss the master's generosity to the majority of his workers. If we focus on the rewards of working in God's vineyard, we miss the pleasure of serving the Master. We trade the Giver for His gifts. Do you love God for Who He is, or do you love Him for the benefits He gives you? Probably at the time Jesus spoke this parable, the latecomers to God's vineyard, to God's Kingdom, were the “tax collectors and sinners.” In a broader context the Gentiles would be the “eleventh hour” workers who heard God's Word later than Jews. We could see this as people coming to faith in Jesus Christ during different periods of church history or at different ages in life. Would we really begrudge God’s grace on the latecomers, including ourselves? Would we demand fairness for the first group, for the first Christians?

**We are His Laborers Working for His Harvest**

The last point is that we are the laborers in the Master's vineyard. The laborers in this parable were hired to do a work for the master of the vineyard. In the story, the master went several times to hire workers in his vineyard. Several times, he found people “standing idle” in the marketplace, which may just mean that were unemployed, not that they were lazy. There is a spiritual principle here. The parable is about a master calling people to work for Him. God does not need us to do anything for Him - He is completely sufficient on His own; however, God desires to employ us to work in His vineyard. God calls each of us to work in His vineyard while we have time. We are to each be sowing seed in His field. We are
to each be working to make more disciples of Jesus Christ while we have time. There will be a harvest and we need to work until that time.

Also, there is much work to be done. For the master of the vineyard, there must have been a lot of work to be done for him to hire so many workers so many times during the day. He may have been eager to make sure people had work. Maybe the master was trying to keep the unemployment rate low during that time. But it is conceivable that the master had a lot of work to do and wanted all the workers he could find to do it. So it is with the church: we need all the workers we can get to accomplish all that God has called us to do. Why should it matter when and where God “ hires” these workers, or how much they receive, as long as we are united in Christ and focused on the mission of making disciples? It is not about us, but about the Master, His vineyard and His harvest that He is reaping. Let us work together while there is time and much work to do.

Conclusion

In closing, the principle of this parable is that it is foolish to demand fairness from God. We would be foolish to appeal to God for justice rather than grace, for if we really received justice, we would all be condemned. None of us deserve God’s grace. If we did, then it would not be grace. The good news is that God does bestow grace on us, the eleventh hour workers, and we receive the same reward of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal glory as the earliest workers. God is gracious to us, calling us from our idle state and placing us in His vineyard to work for His harvest. If you do not know the Master of the vineyard, Jesus Christ, you can know Him today. He will call you into the fold and pay you more than you ever deserve. Just come to Him and place your trust in Jesus Christ. For those who have accepted Christ and may at times cry foul when life seems unfair, remember that the truly desirable thing is to be called by the Master and work with all our might not for the reward but out of love for the Master. May our attitude be as Jesus said:

Luke 17:10 So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

That should be our attitude. Amen!