

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16

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“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner  
who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.  
After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius—the usual daily wage—  
he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o’clock,  
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;  
and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard,  
and I will pay you whatever is right.’  
So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same.  
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?’

They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’  
He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

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.’  
When those hired about five o’clock came,  
each of them received a denarius.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more;  
but each of them also received a denarius.  
And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.’

But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong.  
Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’

Take what belongs to you and go.  
I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?  
Or are you envious because I am generous?’  
So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This is one of my favorite parables. It is a clear instance of a parable where Jesus tells a story that is directly connected with the everyday experience of his listeners and yet at the same time is clearly something that would never happen. This is the cue that it is a parable about the kingdom of God. No landowner would ever do what the guy in this story did. The exaggeration makes it a parable of the kingdom of God, not a story about something that happened at the vineyard down the road from where Jesus was teaching.

The structure of the parable is very clear. The first episodes follow the hours of the landowner's hirings: early in the morning (first episode); nine o'clock in the morning (second episode); noon, three, and "about five" (third episode); argument with the five o'clock workers (fourth episode). Sometimes there is an expansion of an earlier pattern, sometimes a condensation. In the case of the five o'clock recruitment, Jesus expands the pattern in order to give the mouthy landowner more of a chance to mock and deride the laborers he is hiring.

The last section of the parable is about the payment. The guys who were hired at five o'clock are the subjects of the first episode of the payment section. The climax is the anger of the first who had worked all day and yet had received the same amount as those who had only worked one hour. The parable concludes with the landowners' three-fold response: "I am doing you no wrong," "Take what belongs to you and go," and "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Learning this story will be easy if you focus on the structure of this story: early, nine o'clock, noon and three and five, the argument with those hired at five and, in the evening, the payment.

The verbal threads in this are the times throughout the day. "The usual daily wage" or "denarius" (see comments below about translation) is a verbal thread that runs throughout. The primary verbal thread is "they were standing idle in the market place" in the second episode and in the third, "why are you standing here idle all day." That becomes a theme.

There are significant translation issues in this parable to notice. The first is whether to translate the Greek transliteration of the Latin word *denarius* into a phrase such as "the usual daily wage." In the NRSV this word has been translated as "the usual daily wage" because people don't know what a denarius is. However, this makes the telling a little wooden and adds a lot more words, so you might want to just stick with denarius. As is reflected in the English translation above, I recommend that the first time money is named you use the word *denarius* and add an appositive explanation: "After agreeing with the laborer's for a denarius—the working man's usual daily wage—he sent them into his vineyard." Thereafter, keep it simple and just say "denarius." It's less wordy and has more aural force; plus it's the original word.

The other translation issue is more difficult. The last statement of the landowner is literally "Do you have an evil eye because I am good?" or "Do you have the evil eye?" The sense of the question is, "Do you look at this from a hostile perspective because I am good?" This is really hard to translate. It has never been translated literally because "the

evil eye" is not a familiar concept to most of us, therefore it doesn't carry the meaning that it had in its original context. However, "Are you envious because I am generous?" doesn't really do it either. Envy is not the issue. The issue is that the early laborers are looking at the landowner from a hostile point-of-view and are reading into his actions evil that isn't there. An earlier translation is "Do you begrudge me my generosity?" That's a possibility which may come closer to communicating the original meaning in a way that makes sense to us today. You can make your own decision about what carries the impact of the story best for you.

The parable presents a completely unlikely scenario. That is, it is very improbable that an first century owner of Galilean vineyards would have paid guys who had only worked one hour the same as those who had worked all day. More likely he would have paid them a tenth of what the ones who had been paid a denarius received; that is, to pay them by the hour, as would happen now. Hence, a shock component which makes this story a parable. Why did he do that? Why did he pay those who worked so much longer than others the same amount? No owner would do that.

Clearly, this isn't a story about a vineyard down the road; rather, it is a parable about the kingdom of God and about God's attitude toward God's workforce. It is irrelevant how long they have worked for God; the issue is that they contributed to God's vineyard. The parable is about a landowner, the point of comparison with God, who is generous to everybody and who gives to everybody abundantly and who then has to deal with the anger and the jealousy that gets created by those who believe they deserve more than anybody else.

The most important thing in telling this story is not to hesitate to make the landowner caustic with the usual derisive attitude of landowners toward laborers. In his view they are idle, lazy, and mouthy. That was the normative view of landowners in Jesus' day and Jesus presents him that way. This would have struck home because Jesus' audiences were primarily working men like those who were hired to work in the vineyard in his parable. They were the peasants of Galilee and they could identify with those who worked all day for a denarius.

The relationship between peasants and landowners was generally hostile then, as they often are now between the working class and the upper class owners/managers. The key to making this parable interesting is to convey a negative attitude on the part of the landowner toward the laborers, as well as the hostility of the laborers toward him when he doesn't pay them what they think they ought to get. That burr under the saddle is what drives listeners of this story to think about themselves in relation to the kingdom of God, what they deserve, what others deserve, and how rewards work in the kingdom of God. Then as now, the unconscious assumption of Jesus' listeners was that God was like the powerful men of the society who rewarded workers in proportion to their work.

The theme of this parable is similar to Paul's emphasis on justification by grace through faith. An approximate translation of justification is "payment." A more literal translation

of Paul's term for justification is "to be made righteous." In the case of the parable, the question of righteousness is in relation to the landowner. Contrary to our worldly economy, in the economy of the kingdom of God the landowner is doing the right thing by paying everyone the same regardless of how long or how hard they had worked. This is the economy of the kingdom of God. Unlike normal landowners, God does not pay or justify us—make us right—on the basis of how long or how much we have worked. God pays everybody who works for the kingdom the same amount: overabundant grace.