

WEEK 9: THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1–16



The Place of the Passage

After Jesus taught the parable of the unmerciful servant, “He went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (Matt. 19:1). Nearing Jerusalem, he continued his healing and preaching ministry. His preaching included a final parable (20:1–16) before he made his final passion prediction (20:17–19) and entered Jerusalem (21:10).

The Big Picture

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard has also been called the parable of the “injustice” of a generous God because God’s grace is so shockingly generous that it might seem unfair to some.

some supposed rule of fair labor? Or is it because of some other reason? If so, what?

How did many pious religious people feel when Jesus extended grace to Zacchaeus (Luke 19:7) and the sinful woman (7:36–50)?

Think about Simeon and Anna, who patiently and obediently waited their whole lives for the coming Messiah, in contrast to the thief on the cross, who received the gift of salvation a moment before he died. Does such grace seem fair to you? Why or why not?

Is it fair that a criminal on death row who trusts in Christ the moment before his execution should receive the same eternal inheritance in heaven as someone who never experienced a day in which he or she did not know and love and seek to follow the Lord? Why or why not?

When do you find yourself begrudging and grumbling about God's generosity? What is an antidote for such a wrong attitude and action?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

UNDESERVING. According to Scripture, everyone deserves damnation; no one deserves salvation. With this in mind, we should be thankful that God is “not fair”—that is, he does not give us what we deserve. We undeserving sinners are given more than we deserve. Moreover, who is the subject of most of this parable's clauses? Who is talking? Acting? Taking the initiative? Calling and paying the workers? It is the owner of the vineyard—God, who will both do “whatever is right” (Matt. 20:4; he will do “no wrong,” v. 13) and will also do beyond what is expected by calling those who have nothing, giving them work, and rewarding them for their labors on his behalf. Oh, the grace and goodness and love of God!

GRACE AND LABOR. As a theological undercurrent, Jesus teaches here that God's shockingly generous grace is not antithetical to kingdom labor. Notice that Jesus calls those in the kingdom of heaven “laborers” (Matt. 20:1, 2, 8; see also “worker” in v. 14) on earth who “worked” (v. 12). The one thing every hired laborer in this parable does is work, even if only for an hour. Jesus does not teach that God's grace takes idle people, lets them stay idle, and still rewards them with eternal life. Neither does he advocate salvation by good works, or hard work. Rather, he advocates that no one earns salvation or is owed salvation based on good works or hard work or much work, but those who are chosen by grace are given work to do, do that work, and are rewarded for it.

Whole-Bible Connections

GRUMBLING. The word “grumbled” (Matt. 20:11) should remind us of Israel’s grumbings in the wilderness, and Jesus uses the word to make an important thematic connection (and correction!): we must not be like the exodus generation, which was saved from slavery, from the rule of Pharaoh, and from the Red Sea, only to die without inheriting the promise. Those people died because they never got past their grumbling. They were never grateful for grace. If we look at all of the references to grumbling in the Bible, we **will** realize that, to God, grumbling is as deadly a sin as adultery or murder. The grumblers’ camp is not a good camp in which to be, as is made clear by various admonitions in the New Testament (see Phil. 2:14; James 5:9; 1 Pet. 4:9).

LABORING IN THE VINEYARD. The laborers of the vineyard are members of the kingdom of heaven. The work of the vineyard then represents Christian work, either more broadly (the specific work the Lord has given us to do) or more specifically as gospel work (harvesting those people God has saved through the message of his gospel). Due to the harvest/laborer language in Matthew 9:37–38 (the only other place in which the terms “laborers” and “harvest” are used together), the latter interpretation is more likely, especially as the parable is addressed to Peter and his question regarding reward for his sacrificial service as an apostle (19:27). The vineyard, or specifically the harvest of that vineyard, initially represents the people of Israel (see Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 12) but then expands to include *new tenants*—believing Jews and Gentiles—from “all nations” (Matt. 28:19; see also Acts 1:8 and the entire book of Acts!).

Theological Soundings

THE EVIL EYE. The question “Do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matt. 20:15) can be rendered literally “Is your eye bad because I am good?” The focus is on the eye, the “evil eye.” These workers give God the *evil eye*. They are not seeing him as good or generous. This is their problem, which is too often our problem as well. Self-interest, a lack of compassion for others, or a misunderstanding of the nature of grace distorts clear vision. We see what is good as evil, what is compassionate as cruel, what is generous as tightfisted.

ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT. The denarius (Matt. 20:2) represents the gift of final salvation (the “eternal life” the rich ruler desired; see Luke 18:18). Put differently, it represents the eschatological judgment of the just. The money is given at the end of the day. This fits Old Testament labor laws (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14–15) and also fits New Testament eschatology. Christians are saved now—the moment they trust in Christ—but will be saved also in the future, on the day of reckoning, when Christ’s work will be accounted as payment in full on behalf of all those who believe.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Matthew 20:1–16 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 20:1–16

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus' parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Eleventh hour** – Term used twice by Jesus in this parable (Matt. 20:6, 9) to indicate "the latest possible time" (Merriam-Webster) before it is too late. The Gospel writers used the typical Jewish time divisions of the first century (e.g., the third hour is roughly our 9:00 AM; the sixth hour is midday; the ninth is roughly our 3:00 PM; etc.). The eleventh hour would therefore be nearly the end of the workday.