

## Working the Vineyard

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Matthew 20: 1-16

Theme: "*God's intention is that we should be working in his vineyard*"

Introduction. If you were here last week you may remember that Allan said that the one thing we are all equally gifted in is time – we all are given 24 hours a day, no more, no less. Regardless of who you are, you get 24 hours a day. It is not so with talents. Some have more than others, and we have different talents. For example, I'm quite good at singing, where some of you aren't. But some of you may find you are good at striking up a conversation with a stranger during tea after church – something I'm really bad at. So, we have different gifts and talents.

Our reading from Corinthians this morning (1 Corinthians 12:1-13) is clear that we are all gifted with or talented in at least something. None of us here this morning is not good at at least *something*. When I was preparing for today it was tempting to preach on the Corinthians reading, because it is so beautiful and rich. But I think God has something else he wants us to think about today – not about whether or not we have talents, but rather about what we do with those talents, how we use them in service in the Kingdom of God. And to guide us in this, I'd like us to look closely at our Gospel reading – Matthew 20:1-16. Let's look together at this parable of Jesus and break it open together.

I'd like us to ask three questions of the text. Firstly, why is it that the landowner in this story goes out five times to recruit workers – why so often? Secondly, why does everyone get paid the same, regardless of how long they have worked? And thirdly, what does Jesus mean when he says the last shall be first and the first last?

Expectation. So our first question is why the landowner goes out five times. He goes out at daybreak – around 6am. Then in verse 3, he goes out again at the third hour, about 9am. Then in verse 5, he goes out again at noon and at 3 in the afternoon. And finally, in verse 6, he goes out again at the eleventh hour, that is at about 5pm, just an hour before sunset.

Why does he do this? Why go out five times to recruit workers? Perhaps it's because his grapes were ready to be harvested. There is a sense of urgency in the landowner. There is work to be done and it must be done quickly, be done now. And so he repeatedly goes out to recruit more and more workers. He recruits workers because he needs workers.

But there is a bit more than just his need. The landowner seems to have an *expectation* that people should work. The text implies that he would have hired labourers even if he did not need them. Compare verse 1 with verses 3 and 6. In verse 1 we read that he went out at daybreak with the purpose of hiring men to work in his vineyard. Here he recruits because he has a need for workers.

But verse 3 just says that he went out and saw people standing there doing nothing and told them to go work. Also in verse 6 – he went out and found still others standing around. We do not get the sense here that he recruits these people because he has a need for more workers, but rather because he sees people without work. In fact, he is not meeting his own need at all, but rather he's meeting *their* need to have work. This is confirmed in the interaction in verses 6 and 7. He asks them why they have been standing around all day long doing nothing, and they answer that no one has hired them. They are indicating that they have not had the opportunity to work – not that they were not interested in or desiring to work. And the landowner meets their need, saying, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

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<sup>1</sup> This was part of a series of sermons on stewardship. The previous week was on Time, and the following week on Treasures – this week was on Talents.

The landowner clearly believes that it is *good* for people to work. And he has an expectation that people *should* work. He therefore goes out five times to give people the opportunity to work.

The landowner, of course, is God. And the vineyard is the Kingdom of God. We are the men and women standing in the marketplace. So God's expectation is that we should be working in his Kingdom. This Kingdom is the world – we should be doing God's work in the world. And the Kingdom is also the church – we should be doing God's work in the church. If you are not doing God's work in God's Kingdom, God is saying to you today, "Why have you been standing around all this time doing nothing?" There's no room to hide here, friends. God is quite clear in his expectation – we ought to be working. He needs us to work and we ourselves need to work. Working in God's Kingdom is good for us. And God says, "You also go and work in my Kingdom."

So the answer to our first question, why the landowner goes out so often, is that God's plan for us is that we should work, that work is good for us, and that he wants to give us the opportunities to work in the Kingdom.

Rewards. The second question we need to address is why everyone got paid the same amount at the end of the day – one denarius, a fair wage for a day's work. Verses 9-10 say, "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius."

It seems that for God, the amount of time worked is less important than the fact that we work. Let me say that again. It is not amount of time that we worked that is important, as much as the fact that we work. Some people worked 12 hours in the vineyard – they got a day's wage for a day's work. Others worked only one hour – they also got a day's wage. No-one was underpaid – no-one got *less* than they deserved; some got *more*. Why? Because the landowner was generous and *wanted* to give everyone a day's wage.

Let me use a practical example from our own parish. There are a dozen or so people who sing in the choir at the 9am service. They come to choir practice every Thursday evening and serve the congregation every Sunday. This is quite a substantial commitment of time and energy, isn't it? They are like the workers who started at daybreak and worked until sundown. By contrast, some members of the congregation read the scriptures on Sunday. Their turns for reading come around about once a quarter. There are no rehearsals – you just go through the reading at home and then read. It takes no more than half an hour four times a year. That's not a very big commitment is it? They are like workers who started at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, just before knock off time.

Now it is tempting to think that choir members deserve a much bigger reward than scripture readers. But in fact, this parable says that God esteems the service of the chorister as much as the service of the reader. God is simply pleased that we are working in his vineyard. And we all, chorister or reader, receive a full reward – eternal life.

This is the grace of God at work. God rewards us as God chooses to reward us. The parable is quite clear that payment is contingent on the landowner, not the effort of the workers. God rewards as God chooses. No-one is underpaid, no-one who works will go unrecognized by God. Indeed, we all receive more than we deserve, even if we feel that we do a lot in God's kingdom.

The implication of this is not that we should do as little as possible because God doesn't care how much or how little we do. No! Rather, the implication is that it is never too late to start working in God's kingdom. And there is no work that is too small or unimportant that God does not value it. God desires that we should work. And even if we start late and even if only do a little bit, that is better than doing nothing at all.

Motivation. Our final question is what Jesus means by the first shall be last and last first. Look at the last verse of chapter 19 – Jesus says, “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” Then he tells the parable and ends off with, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Obviously this is an important point, and in fact it is the crux of the parable. To understand it, we need to contrast those who were hired first with those who were hired last, so we can see what the difference is and why Jesus says the last will end up being first.

we look closely at the text we notice that the landowner in the parable contracts differently for different groups of laborers. Look at verse 2 – the first group of people are contracted to work for a day for one denarius. It is very specific, and the denarius is offered to them not as a gift, but as payment for services rendered. These workers undertook the work on the explicit understanding that they would receive a denarius for their efforts.

In verse 4, we find that those recruited at 9am, 12 noon and 3pm are not offered such an explicit contract. The landowner says to these workers, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right”. He does indicate that he will pay them, but he does not clearly agree to an amount – just that he’ll pay what is right. Presumably these workers knew they would be paid and that they’d get less than a denarius. But they had no guarantee of how much they’d get.

But the last group, those hired at 5pm, were given no offer at all. The landowner simply says, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” They agreed to work without any offer of payment at all! Jesus’ conclusion to the parable – that the last will be first – indicates that it is this group of workers, those recruited last, that we should emulate. They are the last ones hired, and they shall be first. What is it that we should be emulating about them?

What distinguishes this group is that they worked because the landowner gave them the opportunity to work. They were simply happy for the opportunity to work. They were not working *in order to obtain a reward*. The fact that they were rewarded is incidental and after the fact. What is important is that they were willing to work without any offer of reward.

And so it should be with us. We should be so grateful that we have the opportunity to work in God’s Kingdom that we do so for the sheer joy and privilege of working for God. What a great honour, that the creator of the universe should invite us to participate with him in his work in the world. Isn’t that amazing? God could surely do it all himself – he could bring in the harvest all by himself. But he invites us to partner with him in the work of the vineyard. Do we really need any reward? Do we need any motivation other than gratitude for the opportunity to work? Is it really possible that we can say to God, “Thanks for the offer of partnering with you, but no thanks, I don’t think I’ll take you up on that offer”? Surely not!

Conclusion. So let me summarise. We see in this parable that God expects that we should all be workers in the Kingdom of God. We see that he is more concerned with the fact that we work than with how much we work or how soon we start working. And we see that our motivation for working is not to build up a credit of rewards, but rather simply because the God of the universe offers us the opportunity to work.

What will you do with this teaching? How will you respond?

Today you will go home with a Dedicated Giving pack. Inside it you will find, among other things, a Times and Talents sheet. This is the place where you have the opportunity to indicate how you will serve God in this corner of his Kingdom, the corner we call St Martins. What will you do with this sheet? Will you file it or throw it away? Or will you look at it? Will you take up the opportunity to serve God in his Kingdom by marking off at least one block?