

5. The Laborers and the Vineyard

(Matt. 20: 1 - 16)

As we make our way through Christ's parables, we see that so far, all of the parables have begun with the same phrase: "*For the kingdom of heaven is like...*" It is nearly impossible to truly describe the Kingdom of heaven using regular words, so Jesus uses stories to help us understand.

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Peter is asking Jesus what the apostles will receive from God; they have left their homes and their families to follow Him and serve Him, and he wonders what they will receive in return. Jesus promises that they will receive much more than they have lost and they shall have eternal life! But then He says: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." (Matt. 19:30). The chapter ends there.

The first will be last and the last will be first.

That's an interesting thing to say, and Jesus actually says it several times in the Scriptures. In the next chapter, He goes on to tell a parable that helps us to understand what He means by this mysterious saying:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'

"So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received

each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’

But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

(Matt. 20: 1-16)

The landowner hires many people -- some early in the morning, and then more as the day goes on. As he hires them, he promises them one denarius, which is a small amount of money, and then at the end of the day, he pays everyone the same amount.

Some of the workers find this very unfair, because they are thinking that they should be paid more money, because they worked more hours than the other workers. Usually that is how it is -- if you work ten hours, you earn more pay than someone who only worked one or two hours. But this boss is thinking about things in a different way. When he hired each person, he offered one denarius and they accepted one denarius. He is keeping his promise, so they shouldn't complain.

And then Jesus says that phrase again: *the last will be first, and the first last*. What does Jesus mean by that?

Remember that the parable began, “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a landowner...” This landowner, this boss, is meant to be like God. The workers have an idea of how things should work: people should be paid more if they arrived first. The later you come along, the less you work, so the less you should be paid. In this world, the *first* person should make the most money, and the *last* person should make just a little. But God sees things very differently than we do! What we people might judge to be *first* and *last* is different from God's judgement!

We shouldn't be surprised that God's ways of thinking are different from ours. After all, God is different from us! He is all-knowing and all-powerful, and we don't really understand everything. We see things from our small human perspective, but God sees all things, through all time and history, and He sees our hearts. He knows a lot more than we know!

This parable is about how God rewards us. Remember that Peter had asked Jesus what he and the others would receive from Him, after having given up their families and their homes to

follow Him. What kind of payment is there for Christians? If we follow Christ and His commandments, what is our reward?

Simply put, the reward is eternal life. God has promised us a place in His Kingdom; He offered us salvation, and He will give us salvation, just like the landowner offered those workers one denarius and then paid them exactly what He promised.

So no matter how many hours we have worked as Christians, we all get paid the same, we are all rewarded with salvation.

That's interesting. If you remember, the whole first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, is full of people who love God and follow Him. Will Abraham and Moses and Noah be given more because they got to know God before we did -- they were first! But the salvation God offers is the same for us today.

And in the Old Testament stories, we remember how God chose His people, the Israelites, and He loved them and He tried to work with them. They were His first chosen people -- but God loves everyone equally. So even if they were first, God won't reward them more than He will reward the other peoples, the Greeks and the Russians and the Africans and everyone else who would not have been part of the Chosen People, the Israelites who came first. Those other peoples who come later are just as important to God, and will be paid just the same reward.

Some of us were born Orthodox. We will spend our entire lives as Christians, loving God and being faithful to Him. But other people might not have known about Christ yet. When the landowner asked why the people were not working that day, they said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' If no one has come and told them about Jesus, about God and His wonderful Kingdom, then they haven't shown up yet. But when they find out, they will love God, and they'll be baptized and follow Him for the rest of their lives. And even though they showed up later than you did, God will still love them the same, and He will give them the same beautiful salvation He gives to you!

God doesn't want us to be jealous of each other, or to feel like we should be rewarded more than other people. We might think we know who is first and who is last here on earth, but to God, everything looks different. The first shall be last and the last shall be first; all of our earthly numbering and ranking and counting doesn't matter. There is plenty of God's love to go around in the Kingdom, and He loves all of us just the same!

QUESTIONS:

When Peter asks Jesus about what the apostles will receive from God (since they left their homes and families to follow and serve Him), how does Jesus answer him?

- *Jesus promises that His followers will receive much more than they lost, and then He says: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." To help Peter understand, Jesus tells him a story: this parable!*

In the parable, the landowner goes out many times in a day to find workers. Do the workers agree to work for the price he tells them he will pay them? Does he pay that price? Why are people unhappy about this?

- *Yes! Every time he hires another group of workers, he promises them a denarius at the end of the day. It is not a lot of money, but all of the workers agree to receive that pay. At the end of the day, he pays them like he promised. But the ones who worked the longest think they should receive more than they agreed to work for, since everyone got a denarius.*

This parable shows us something about how the kingdom of God is very different from the world. How is it very different?

- *In this world, the first person should make the most money, and the last person should make just a little. But God sees things very differently than we do! In God's Kingdom, the last will be first and the first will be last. What we people might judge to be first and last is different from God's judgement!*

FOR DISCUSSION:

Coming in first and last is not always fair. It doesn't always work out right, does it? Sometimes you do a wonderful job, but someone else gets the prize or reward. Sometimes you just have bad luck and though you try really hard, you lose anyway -- and then other times when we don't try hard at all, but we get lucky and come in first anyway! Have you ever come in last even though you really should have been first? How does that feel? Does this help us understand how the first workers in the parable must feel?

God shows us that His Kingdom is kind of upside-down: the last will be first, and the first will be last! He loves everyone who puts in the effort; He loves us all equally. God sees your efforts and He will definitely reward those good things that you do; He rewards your effort and doesn't worry about whether you won or lost. He'll also reward other people, and you won't always know why. Can you think of some of the ways that you see people coming in 'first' and 'last' in this world, but who might be judged differently in God's Kingdom?