

Kingdom Parables

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

XXI. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard - Matthew 20:1-16

A. The Central Point of the Parable

Although people enter the Kingdom at different times, serve for different lengths of time, and suffer different levels of hardship, all inherit the same eternal life and the same benefits in the realization of the Kingdom.

B. Significant Elements of the Parable

1. The Householder

The term used to describe this householder is the same as the term used in the Parable of the Wise Householder. It is the Greek word *oikodespotes* and refers to the owner or manager of a house.

This householder happened to be somewhat wealthy as he employed other men to care for his vineyard.

2. The Vineyard

Although Christ used the picture of a vineyard in this parable, he just as well could have used field. The point is that this man was the overseer, or owner, of a large vineyard, and as such he needed men to help care for it since he obviously could not do that himself.

3. The Laborers

These men belonged to the class of the common day-laborer. This class of men can be most likened to our modern migrant farm worker. These men would contract out for one day at a time to whomever would hire them.

It was the custom in those days for these men to congregate in the market place of the city. Those who had need for labor would come to the market place and would hire some of these men. Since their livelihood depended on them being hired, it was most important for them to find work.

4. The Wage

The laborers in this parable were hired at what we would consider a very modest wage today. Because they were highly dependent on the necessity of being hired, they were often taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. If they did not work, they did not eat. As a result, they would often work for less than desired wages just so they could live.

The “penny” referred to in this parable is the “denarius.” It was the standard rate of pay for a Roman soldier for one day.

Note that those who were hired at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours were not told what their wage would be. Instead, they were told that whatever was right they would receive. From this we can infer that the householder was a just and honest man since they did not question his integrity.

5. The Work

The laborers were contracted to cultivate and care for the vineyard. For this labor, they were to receive the agreed upon wage.

6. The Time of Payment

At the end of the day, each laborer was given their wage starting with those hired last and preceding to those hired first.

It is important to note at this point that since these laborers depended upon them being paid, it was against the Mosaic law to withhold payment. Since they had no savings or stored up wealth, their survival depended on immediate payment.

C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

1. The Steward

The mention of the steward in verse 8 serves to aid in the contextual background of the parable. When we get to the interpretation, we will have all kinds of problems if we try to understand what the steward represent.

The important fact to note is that the laborers were each paid in accordance with the wishes of the householder. It is not important as to who actually gave them the money.

D. Interpretation of the Parable

In order to fully understand this parable, we must back up into chapter 19 and see the events that prompted our Lord to relate it.

In Matthew 19:16-26 we find the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked him what he must do to be saved. Christ's answer was somewhat surprising since he told the ruler to go and sell all of his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow Christ. His unwillingness to do this showed that the ruler was not willing to pay the necessary price to follow Christ.

Peter, having seen this encounter, then asks Christ what they will receive since they had indeed left everything to follow Christ. In verse 28, we find Christ's immediate answer to the disciples, that being rulership with him in the Kingdom. In verse 29, the scope widens to include anyone who has forsaken this world's goods to follow Christ. Here we find that anyone who does this will inherit eternal life.

It is here, at this point, that Christ tells this parable. He does this to show that although each person will give up different things to enter the Kingdom, in the final analysis everyone will fully share in the Kingdom. In other words, the blessings of the Kingdom are the same for all participants, although the degrees of

responsibility vary depending on the faithfulness of this life (see the Parable of the Pounds in Luke 19:11-27, and the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30).

As an aside, we need to note that everyone inherits eternal life in the same measure. However, not everyone receives the same amount of reward.

1. The Householder

It should be obvious that the householder mentioned in the parable refers to God himself. The following are offered as reasons:

- It is the householder who has the authority to hire the laborers. In the same way, God calls those who are to be partakers of his kingdom.
- It is the householder that provides the wages. In the same way, it is God who passes out the rewards of the Kingdom and eternal life.
- It is the householder who owns the vineyard in the same way as it is God who owns the Kingdom. (We are asserting that the vineyard is the Kingdom although we will show that in the next section).
- This interpretation fits in with the other parables in which God is likened to a householder. See the Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30), the Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24), the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13), the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27), and the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12, and Luke 20:9-19).
- No other interpretation makes sense.

2. The Vineyard

The vineyard is a picture of the Kingdom. This interpretation is supported by the following:

- The intent of this parable is to teach the disciples that although awards differ, everyone receives the same eternal life.
- It is the only interpretation that fits the context of Matthew 20:1 in which the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a householder hiring laborers for his vineyard.
- It fits the idea that men serve in the Kingdom of Heaven for different amounts of time. Some serve God fifty years while others become believers shortly before their deaths.
- No other interpretation makes sense.

3. The Laborers

From an analysis of the above, we come to the conclusion that the laborers refer to those who labor in the Kingdom. This is the only interpretation that will fit the context of this parable.

Note that just as the laborers were dependent on someone hiring them, so we are dependent on God calling us to be a member of his Kingdom.

Note also that the fact that these laborers were hired at different times in the day show that we all serve God for different lengths of time in the Kingdom.

4. The Wage

From Matthew 19:29 we infer that the wage Christ is speaking of here refers to eternal life. Arguments in favor of this are:

- It cannot refer to reward since that would contradict many other passages in the New Testament.
- If it referred to reward, then it would conflict with Matthew 19:28 in which the disciples were told that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Obviously that specific promise cannot refer to everyone.
- It does fit the context given in Matthew 19:29 in which everyone who has given up earthly treasures for the Kingdom will inherit eternal life.
- It fits the proverbial phrase “The first shall be last and the last shall be first” which refers to the fact that everyone finishes at the same time and in the same place. There are no winners, and there are no losers.
- It fits in with the rest of the New Testament in which we find that all true believers inherit eternal life in equal proportions. One is either eternally alive or eternally dead, there are no graduations.

Note that the wage each man received was identical. If the wage would refer to reward, then each man would have received a different wage. Since they received the same wage, we must infer that all believers receive the same proportion of eternal life.

5. The Work

With the above interpretations, it is easy to see that the work refers to the labor each of us does for the Kingdom.

As we have already mentioned, each person who is a true believer will pay a price to be a part of the Kingdom. For some people, that price is very small. For others, that price may be their life. However, no matter what the price, we must all be willing to forsake all and follow Christ.

6. The Time of Payment

The time of payment obviously refers to the time of reward for the believer.

Note, however, that rewards differ, however, each believer will fully share in the fullness of eternal life.

Also note that it is God's prerogative to give each man what he sees fit. We should not think it unfair that God gives a full measure of eternal life to someone who has been a Christian for only a short period of time. In fact, we should rejoice in the fact that God is gracious in doing just that.

E. Application of the Parable

1. Although each man enters the Kingdom at a different time, and serves for a different length of time, we all receive the same eternal life.
2. God is gracious in the fact that he freely bestows eternal life on all the members of the Kingdom. Instead of envying those who do not have to pay the price we pay, we should rejoice in the magnanimity of God.
3. As far as eternal life is concerned, we are all winners. No one finishes first, and no one finishes last.