

Bible Studies

The Parable of the Workers



Read Matthew 20v1-16

The question we have to answer in this study is , what aspect of the kingdom of heaven did Jesus want us to understand? Why were the last to be hired who did almost not work given the same as those who worked hard? How is this parable relevant to us? Jesus intended this story to be disturbing. It still elicits strong reactions.

How do you feel about this story? Who do you identify with?

The scene is self explanatory. There is an employer with work to be done and a market place where casual labourers gather waiting for work and a chance to feed their families. At dawn (first hour) he hires a group of workers. At three hour intervals, the land owner returns and finds another group of workers and invited them to come to his vineyard to work.

Who is the landowner? What is the vineyard?

The landowner is obviously God. Frequently in the Scriptures, Israel is represented by a vineyard. Isaiah 5v7. Here it seems to be a broader idea, there are several things it could be. Living as a Christian seems the most obvious. It can also be doing God's will or His work. It represents salvation.



**Who are the workers?
What does the hour they started work represent?
What did evening and settling of accounts represent?**

The workers are us. People who get saved. The hour at which they are employed is the time when they got saved. The evening is judgement day.



**How many groups of workers were employed?
How long did the last group work?
How long was the working day?**

A standard working day would have been about ten hours, at harvest time it would be longer.

What agreement did the landowner make with the first group?

A denarius was the standard rate of pay for a days work.

What agreement did he make with the second group?

What agreement did he make with the third & subsequent groups?

The first group had a clear bargain struck, a denarius for a days work. The second were told that they would be paid 'what was right', the groups after that had were not given any expectation. They had to trust the landowner.

Can you see a parallel here?



What is the denarius?

This is an important question, how you answer it changes the way to interpret the parable. The passage preceding this one, (19v16-30) deals with how you get saved and what reward their will be for those who sacrifice for the kingdom.

The Bible tells us that we will be rewarded for our labours for God. If the denarius is our reward, then all receive the same reward no matter what they have done for God, or not done for Him. Other passages in scripture suggest there will be degrees of reward. 1 Cor 3v15, Rev 22v12. However...

Alternatively the denarius can be taken as God's gift of eternal life, our inheritance, our final salvation. It seems this is the meaning Jesus wanted us to understand.

If this is so then what is the meaning of the parable?

The basic meaning is that it is not the amount of work you do or how long you have been saved, that gets you into heaven, it is the fact that God called you to work in his vineyard. It is by grace and not works.

At the end of the day what happened?

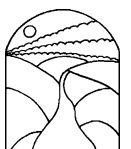
What did the first group expect when they saw the last get a denarius?

Why did the first workers get angry? What was their grievance?

Would they have felt aggrieved if the latter workers had got less?

What characteristics did they show? Was this fair?

Yes and no. It was fair, in that they got what was the day's rates, they got what they agreed to. If the others had not received the same they would have been happy with it. They got greedy and wanted more. This parable portrays human nature very well, when we have we



always want more. They based their claim not on the rate for the job. But as a comparison to what the others got.

On the other hand, the point of this parable is that it's not fair! They had worked harder, they had born the heat of the day. God does not treat us according to what we deserve but according to His generosity.



What argument does the land owner use to justify himself?

Did the last lot of workers deserve the full denarius?

Why did the land owner give them the same wages?

The landowner paid them according to his generosity not according to what they deserved or the requirements placed upon him.

Those who had waited all day in the market wanted to work, but no one hired them.

Were their needs any the less for the fact that they could not find work?

They had the same size mouths to feed. The land owner paid them according to their needs not their work.

How do these two facts apply to us?



The application

Jesus spoke this parable for the benefit of the Pharisees. They were those who had 'worked hard all day'. They had kept the Law of Moses to the best of their ability.

As a result they thought they deserved eternal life. Then along comes Jesus and starts offering this same reward to sinners, not because they were good, or deserving or had kept the law, but by grace through faith. A salvation that depends not on how hard they had worked but upon the generosity of God and the fact that God called them and they responded.

Things got even worse in the early Church when this same reward is offered to heathen gentiles, who did not know God or the law, and who did not deserve anything. This is a salvation based *not by works but by him who calls-Romans 9v12*. The Pharisees were offended they thought they deserved better.

How are we like the last group of workers in this parable?

What attitude should the first group of workers in this parable have taken?

Read Romans 9v30-33

How does this passage connect with the parable?

In what way is Jesus a stumbling stone?

Does this attitude find it's way into the Church?

Jesus is still a stumbling stone for many. The cross tells us that we can do nothing to achieve our own salvation, it is all dependent on God. We have to admit our need and our inability to help ourselves. Calvary is a very humbling place.

What two roles does Jesus fulfill? 1 Peter 2v6-8

This parable also applies to us today.



Read Luke 23v39-43

What did this man do to deserve eternal life?

What did the man do to receive eternal life?

This man had sinned his whole life long. His execution was a fitting end to the way he had lived. With his last breath he asked for mercy and he received it in full.

How does this express God's generosity? Is this fair?

You probably said yes. But it is not fair! It is just, it is right and it is wonderful. Parables are stories that convey a meaning. They are not always perfect similes. The truth is that no matter how hard we work or how long we have been believers, neither the Pharisees or us can earn eternal life, it is always God's gift. We never deserve it. If salvation was based on God being fair, none of us would attain it.

If a serial killer, who has done horrendous, inhumane things, repents just before he dies how will God treat him?

Lots of people find this hard to accept, it is offensive to them. **Why do you think this is?**



Read Romans 3v21-24

What does 'there is no difference', mean? (between who?)

In God's sight are we any better than the serial killer?

Does this mean you can safely wait till the end of your life to accept Christ?

The Bible does indicate that there are degrees of reward for the service we render Christ. But, if you got to heaven and found someone who had been a total failure as a Christian, got the same reward as you, (having worked incredibly hard.) **How would you feel?**
How do you feel when God blesses someone who does not deserve it?