

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 09/24/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, September 24<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 20:1-16**

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### **The Kingdom does not operate as a labor union!**

This week's Gospel lection features the final parable in Matthew before Jesus enters Jerusalem. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Like the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which was the focus of last week's Gospel lection, this week's text also results from a question by Peter in response to Jesus' dialogue with the rich young man and subsequent explanation given to His disciples (19:16-30). The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard expounds upon what it means when Jesus talks about the first being the last and the last first (19:30; 20:16). God's generosity transcends human ideas of fairness and justice. God's standards are not those of reward for services rendered. God can sometimes appear to be unfairly generous. How we react to this parable reveals we may have more of a "law mindset" than a "grace mindset" than we perhaps realize.

#### Matthew 20:1-16 Commentary

As context, the parable results from a question by Peter a few verses earlier after Jesus' explanation of the sad encounter with the rich young man who loved his earthly possessions more than God (19:16-30). Peter points out to Jesus that the disciples had given up everything to follow Him and asks, "*What will we then have?*" (19:27b) After an explanation of the new order when the Kingdom is fully consummated and the rewards His followers can expect, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard follows. After the parable, demonstrating how the disciples still have a worldly understanding of the Kingdom, the mother of James and John (with her sons present) attempts to secure the highest status for her sons in Jesus' Kingdom.

*<sup>1</sup> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.*

The parable opens with a scene familiar to the original audience. As grapes ripened towards the end of September, there was only a short window to harvest the grapes before the rains came and the harvest was ruined. At this time of year, any laborer was welcome, even if just for a few hours. In v.2, the owner of the vineyard hires day laborers to work for the whole day at the agreed normal daily rate of one denarius. Such day laborers were the lowest class of laborers. They were totally dependent upon others for chance employment. These laborers would have been glad for the offer of a full day's work.

<sup>3</sup> And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' <sup>5</sup> So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

The owner of the vineyard goes back at 9:00 a.m. to find more workers. The description "standing idle in the marketplace" is not meant as a judgment but simply reflecting available day laborers not yet hired for work. The master offers to pay them "whatever is right." The assumption is this would be the appropriate fraction of a denarius. The master goes back to the marketplace to hire more laborers at noon and at 3:00 p.m.

<sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

The master goes back to the marketplace again at 5:00 p.m. and finds others who have been waiting for work all day and hired them too. Presumably, the expectation of pay is the appropriate fraction of a denarius for the fraction of a day they work.

<sup>8</sup> And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' <sup>9</sup> And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

As was customary, when the workday was over, the day laborers were paid their wages. Those that worked only an hour or so received a denarius – the rate for the full day. This is exceedingly generous by the norms. Not surprisingly, those that were hired first and had worked around 12 hours in the heat of the day expected more. Yet they also received a denarius. They were incredulous.

<sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last."

In the closing verses to this parable the owner of the vineyard provides his rationale. First, he emphasizes he is doing no wrong to the first laborers he hired since a rate of a denarius was negotiated. He tells one of them to take his money and be gone. There are allusions here to judgment. Second, the owner claims the right to dispose of his property as he deems fit. Finally, the owner accuses the grumbler of literally having an evil eye – an expression of jealousy.

### Reflection & Action

The modern reader of this text is at a disadvantage. We have a completely different economic system that is far removed from the agricultural setting that would have been completely familiar to the original audience. We also live in an economy where time equals money and most of us understand the notion of an hourly wage. A key issue of our time continues to be the notion of equal pay for equal work. The concept of day laborers is also vastly different in our society. Rather than the norm, day laborers today are often associated with a means of exploitation of the underprivileged. Not surprisingly, some have sought to make this parable about the minimum wage of service workers and the injustices of an economic system that results in migrant workers being exploited by the economically privileged. We must resist the urge to read into the text our own worldview and instead

attempt to read out of the text the understanding with which the original audience would have had. Only then can we seek to apply the meaning of this text to our own lives in our unique time and place.

At both bookends of this parable are examples of Jesus' disciples behaving like the first laborers chosen by the owner of the vineyard in the parable (Peter in 19:27 and to some extent James and John in 20:20-21). In this parable, Jesus is essentially saying that His disciples received great privilege in being chosen for the Kingdom early. Others will be chosen later but His disciples should not expect to have any special honor or status purely because of seniority! All those chosen by God are equally precious in His eyes.

There are many layers to this parable. Matthew's audience was predominantly Jewish and would have understood the symbolism of the vineyard representing Israel and the owner of the vineyard representing God. Some therefore see the first workers as an allusion to the scribes and the Pharisees. The evening perhaps had eschatological implications as wages were dispensed. The first workers were under the law (they agreed upon a rate) and the later workers under grace (trusting the owner to do whatever is right). Regardless, the selection and reward of all the workers, no matter if under law or grace, was all a matter of grace. In this parable, nobody received less than they were led to expect, many received much more than they deserved.

The first laborers chosen in the parable were upset not because the owner of the vineyard paid them less than they agreed, but because he was more generous to others. If generosity is earned, then the first laborers were not treated fairly. If this is our mindset, then we are still holding a view that at the core still thinks we must earn our salvation. If grace is earned it is not grace. Grace is radical and it often confronts our worldly norms. We may accept the theological underpinnings of this parable yet the behavior of many in the church may sometimes betray otherwise. The complaint of the first laborers in v.12 is literally, *"...you have made them equal to us..."* In the Gospel story, God's graciousness to humankind with a focus on the "least of these" causes jealousy and violence among the established religious elites. When we are blinded by self-interest, we lack compassion for others in a similar or worse state than ourselves. Just like the first laborers, there is no shortage of opinion in our day of where God should or should not dispense His grace.

There are no hierarchies in God's Kingdom, but we certainly find status-seeking behaviors within churches. It is not uncommon to find churches that seem to be operating predominantly for the benefit of the first laborers (or those with "seniority") based on how later laborers are treated. On the other hand, a church may appear welcoming, at least on the surface, until the privileged position of the first laborers is threatened with change. Such is often plainly evident in a church going through a merger or when faced with a large influx of new members from other communities. If a church were only for the perfect and virtuous, where would sinners go? In God's Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last first. We do well to remember that the owner of the vineyard chose the laborers, not the other way around. As Christ says, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you..."* (John 15:16).

