

The parable of the workers * Matthew 20:1-16
October 15, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The parable that we're going to look at today raises an interesting question:

Is it ever too late to enter the Kingdom of God?

Many of you have friends in their seventies-eighties-nineties; is it ever too late for them to enter the Kingdom if they're not already in?

Admittedly, there was a time when I thought that God would just kind of let old people into Heaven on the basis of their being old. I guess I thought that once you were like seventy you got all of your sinning out of your system and you'd be good to go – but that's not in the Bible anywhere.

Jesus calls each and every one of us to deny ourselves, take up our Cross and follow Him; do we ever get too old for that? Is there a point at which it's too late for that?

Or to take it from another angle, are we ever too sinful to make it into the Kingdom of God? Is it possible to do such bad things that we can never be forgiven and welcomed into the Kingdom?

Our parable today helps us to think about these things, so let's look together at Matthew 20, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Matthew 20, starting in verse 1.

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.

'So this is what the Kingdom is like,' Jesus says. 'It operates like a man who went out early in the morning, probably 6am, to hire men to work in his vineyard.

2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

A denarius was the going rate for a day's labour in those days so nothing out of the ordinary there. They agreed to do a day's work for a day's wage.

3 "About the third hour (9am) he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.

4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'

[Now generally, that's not good hiring practice; don't take a job without knowing what they'll pay you. But for the purposes of the story, we'll go with it].

5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour (noon and 3pm) and did the same thing.

6 About the eleventh hour [5pm] he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

[CUT? I don't think he NEEDS these workers; I think that this is just foreshadowing this guy's tremendous generosity. He sees guys who haven't worked all day, realizes that they'll need money to feed their families and figures 'I don't need the help but they need the money, so I'll bring 'em in for an hour.']

8 "When [quitting time] evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.

They did one hour of work and got paid for twelve! Have you ever had that?

I remember once when I was in university doing a day labour kind of thing through the job office and a guy hired me to do some work in his gardens. The posting said he'd pay me like \$12 an hour but in the end he paid me like \$20; turns out he said he'd pay less just in case the worker he got did a shoddy job.

But still – twelve hours' pay for one hours' work? That's incredible.

10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more.

If they've spent their time in the heat of the day, slaving away in the sun, and these latecomers come in and get paid what they were promised for a day's work, surely they'll make a ton more, right?

But each one of them also received a denarius.

11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

In a way, you can understand where these guys are coming from. They're going home with sunburnt skin and aching feet and yet they're only taking home what the guys who worked an hour made.

And yet, the owner answered them:

13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? [They did. And the owner paid them accordingly. They did a fair day's work and they were paid a fair day's wages. A denarius was reasonable pay for a day].

And so the owner continued:

14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.

15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? [Yeah, sure! If he wants to pay outrageous wages to some, he can do it if he wants!] Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Here is the key to the whole parable. 'I want to give' he says. 'Are you envious BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS?' This is the key that unlocks the whole thing.

Because if you bring this parable directly into our world, it would seem to be saying something about working for wages. Many of us have heard this parable before so we know where it's going but technically speaking, everyone in this parable worked to receive their pay.

But the point of this parable is not the worker's work, but the owner's generosity. It's like the parable in Luke of the persistent lady who kept nagging the stubborn judge to give her justice; the point is not that God doesn't listen to prayer unless you ask enough, the point is 'keep on praying and don't give up' (Luke 18:1-8).

Same here: the point here is not the workers' work but the owner's generosity.

And here, we can start to make some connections to the real world.

Let me give you three.

1. God treats all His people equally.

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard treated all of his workers equally. The first hour workers recognized that right away. Verse 12, 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

The last hour workers did only a fraction of the work that the first hour workers did and yet the owner of the vineyard treated them all exactly the same way.

To the first hour workers, this was a great injustice, but to us, this is a great blessing. This means that when God brings us into His vineyard, ie., His Kingdom Community, He treats us all with generosity, no matter when or how we enter the Kingdom.

This means that it is never too late to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is never too late to experience relationship with Jesus.

You might come to faith early in life, you might come to faith in your twenties like me, you might come to truly believe only when you have kids or retire; God treats us all the same. When we stop living for ourselves and start living for Him, He welcomes us with open arms, regardless of how long it's taken to get there.

Actually, let's look at this. Who here would say they came to faith as children? As teenagers? As young adults? As older adults?

When it comes to salvation, God treats each and every one of us equally, with the same gracious generosity that He shows to every other believer.

God treats us of us equally.

Because: connection 2: He is generous. God treats all of His people equally because His love for us is based not on our works but His generosity.

That's what happened in the parable.

The last people hired received the same pay as the first people hired but that had nothing to do with the work they did, did it? It had everything to do with the owner's generosity. Verse 14: 'I want to give the

man who was hired last the same as I gave you' (Mat 20:14 NIV). It was His generous will and not their actions that led to their generous treatment.

Same with us. God treats each of us equally because His view of us does not depend on what we've done but on His generosity.

Without Him, none of us would be saved. All of us would be lost, never able to enter His Kingdom in the first place. And yet God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, sent His Son to live a righteous life, to die a sacrificial death, to rise again to eternal life, so that He could justly treat all of us as Jesus' perfection deserved.

It's not our good works that get us into the Kingdom; it's not our bad ones that keep us out. It's all grace, all the time. God's generosity is what welcomes us into the Kingdom.

That's why we can say "It's never too late to enter the Kingdom." It's never too late to enter the Kingdom because entering the Kingdom is not based on our works but God's generosity.

So if you have friends in the 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's, it's never too late for them. Alternatively, if you've got friends who have lived such profligate lives that you might think 'God would never embrace them,' let me remind you that God is like a guy who pays twelve hours' wages for one hours' work. It's not because of their work, it's because of His generosity.

So: 1. God treats all of His children equally 2. Because of His generosity and not our works. So 3. We should treasure, not resent, His generosity.

This is the point that the owner makes in verse 15 of the parable:

15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' (Mat 20:15 NIV).

The first people hired see how generously the owner has treated the last people hired and they resent him for his generosity. Who does that? What kind of person begrudges someone else because they're being generous? I guess some people need that reminder though because Jesus says it here.

Now look: I think that this is something that we get as a congregation; I can't imagine a person unexpectedly coming to our church and coming to faith and having our congregation turn up their noses at him. I mean, that's what you did when Drew came to faith in the hospice eight years ago. I think that we would celebrate the generosity of God in bringing somebody like that to faith, just as we need to treasure the generosity of God in bringing somebody like me to faith.

Just think – as far as salvation goes, God is going to treat you just as equally and as generously as He's going to treat Billy Graham and Martin Luther and the apostle Paul. He is going to treat me with the same indiscriminate grace with which He treats the thousands of men and women who have been martyred for His name.

For me to begrudge His generosity to someone in my day and age would be to miss the point entirely. We are all equally dependent upon His generosity and so we all need to celebrate His grace.

So: 1. God treats all of His children equally 2. Because of His generosity and not our works. So 3. We should treasure, not resent, His generosity.

And that's why I'm giving you this as our big idea today:

It's never too late to enter the Kingdom because entry is based not on our works but on God's generosity.

There is no expiration date on Jesus' offer of grace because that offer is not based on what we do but on what He's done on the Cross. The work is done, we have only to receive it and live in it.

If you know people who are older, who have lived all their lives in rebellion from God, it's not too late for them. God is just as eager to receive them as He is the teenager living next door. A lot of churches these days want to cater to youth and young people only, but the harvest is just as ripe in the nursing home as in the high school.

It's never too late to enter the Kingdom because entry is based not on our works but on God's generosity.

I want to encourage you to pray for your friends and family who are in this boat. Get them connected to our Zoom meetings. Invite them to take part in our community. Alternatively, if you know people who the world may think 'they're well beyond redemption,' invite them too. Because God's generosity does not depend on what we do, it all rides on what He's done.

It's never too late to enter the Kingdom because entry is based not on our works but on God's generosity.

Whenever I read this passage, I think of Lucille Schoenfelder. Remember Lucille? One of the earliest memories I have of her is her saying 'I never opened a Bible until I was 75 but I'm so glad I did.' She is one of the final hour workers that this parable describes. And she's gone on to the same glorious reward that we will what that time comes.

Don't give up on people who want nothing to do with the Lord. Keep bringing them to Him in prayer because it's never too late to enter the Kingdom.

Communion Devotional

As we prepare our hearts for Communion, I'd like to look at our parable again from a different angle.

I think that instinctively, when we read this parable, we read it as though we were the ones hired early in the day. I do. I get this sense that I'm one of the earlier hires and I can think of other people who came to the Kingdom later in life. That's why Jesus has to remind me not to begrudge His generosity.

But I think it's just as wise for us to see ourselves as the last people hired and to think about that means for us as we read this parable.

Because it's true. We are all the last people hired. We are all, as followers of Jesus, recipients of God's extravagant generosity. As I've heard Ray Wingfield often say "I am blessed beyond what I deserve."

Because really, forget about a day's wages. What about eternity's wages? Will I ever in my lifetime do enough good deeds to earn my way into favour with a God who created me, whom I spurned? God gave me everything and I said 'yoink, thanks for this,' went off and lived my own way and then found myself alone eating pig food (that's a prodigal son reference).

And yet, just like the prodigal son, God has welcomed me home. And not because of what I've done but because He is generous. He has given me more than I deserve because He is generous. Because He wants to.

Just listen to 2 Timothy 1:9: [God] has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

In the language of the parable, God says 'I want give you what you can never earn because I am generous.'

We are here because God has generously forgiven our sin and restored us to Him. If you are walking with Jesus, then God has freely given you eternity's wages simply because You depend on Him.

As we receive Communion this morning, I want you to hear in Jesus' words that it is what He has done that welcomes us home, not what we have done. I want you to realize that God embraces you not because you impress Him but because He is generous and He wants to. We are the workers who come at the last minute and yet receive everything. Let us give thanks for that extravagant grace.

An alternate reading

Preparing for this sermon, it struck me that there is another (perhaps more accurate!) way to interpret this passage. Other commentators hint at it but many actually disagree on a key detail. For that reason and the fact that I didn't have the time to give this study the attention I would have liked, I opted for a more traditional interpretation of the parable. But here's what I think the parable means in context.

1. The set up for this parable actually begins in Matthew 19:16-22. A rich young man comes to Jesus, asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life and then goes away sad because Jesus tells him to give it all up and follow Him.

2. This leads the disciples to ask 'how then can ANYONE be saved?' They assume that if you're rich, God's blessing is on you, so you're obviously going to be saved. 'Nope' Jesus says. 'Being saved depends on following Me.'

3. This prompts Peter to say 'We've left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?' (v 27).

4. Jesus replies 'Anyone who has given up everything will get it all back plus eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first' (vss. 39-30).

5. A lot of commentators take Jesus' statement 'the first will be last etc.' as a rebuke of Peter's question 'what will there be for us?' He's warning them not to begrudge people who come to faith after them and tells the parable likening them to the first people hired and new believers to the last. In this interpretation, 'everyone who has left houses etc... will inherit eternal life' refers to new disciples while 'many who are first' would refer to the earliest disciples – Peter, James, John, et al – those who have been with Jesus longest and presumably worked the hardest.

6. It seems to me just as likely (more likely even!) that the distinction that Jesus is drawing in the parable is not between disciples but between people like the rich young man (whom the world considers 'first') and people who give up everything to follow Jesus., ie., disciples, regardless of when they believe (who the world considers 'last'). In this interpretation, 'everyone who has left houses etc./the last' refers to all disciples while 'many who are first' are people of status, like the rich young man.

7. In that case, Jesus then tells the parable to illustrate the point that the first will be last and the last first, ie., that those who have status and wealth in this life will be last in the Kingdom of God and that those who have left everything to follow Jesus will be first in the Kingdom. (Notice that the 'first will be last and vice versa' statement forms a bookend around the parable – both immediately before and after it. This ties the meaning of the parable directly to what happened just before it).

8. In a sense then, this passage answers the question 'Why should I follow Jesus and not status?' We naturally want to be 'impressive' in the eyes of the world but Jesus says here (and illustrates with the parable) that those who work hard to be impressive in the eyes of the world will be last in the Kingdom and those who surrender all to rely on the generosity of God will be first. Status makes you work; Jesus gives you grace.

9. The purpose a sermon developing this idea would be to encourage people to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost to their social standing and to forgo becoming 'great' in the world's eyes, since 'the great' will be last in the Kingdom while the lowly Jesus' followers will be first.